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# Self-Objectification as Enslavement: the Crisis of the Self Portrait in the Digital Age

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In the early 2000s self portraiture started to become a central component in defining youth subcultures, with the increased manufacturing of cell phone cameras and escalating popularity of online social networking. People have been making self portraits forever, but before digital photography became such an effortless and widely accessible tool, the self portrait was more of a niche form of art reserved for traditionally skilled artists and photographers. Now it's omnipresent...

Self portraiture (aka the "selfie") is an inherent aspect of youth culture and the contemporary identity. Alongside new digital technologies, it has redefined how we view intimacy in our generation, altering the mechanics of relationships, business, and how we spread information. In the act of creating a self portrait we objectify ourselves; as you become an image you become a commodity. The way that girls & women specifically are sexually objectified in society makes this complicated as a form of self expression / socialization. When we find ourselves constantly experiencing self-objectification on a mass level, that is more than a social phenomenon; it becomes an issue of gender politics.



*Bratz #Selfie Stick with Doll Jade*. Digital Image. Pinterest.com.

THE MIRROR OF VENUS / POWER

On one hand the act of photographing oneself contains a certain element of vanity. There's an intrinsic self-centeredness in this habit of creating multiple copies of the image of the self—with the mirror historically serving as an important symbol of feminine narcissism.



Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones, *The Mirror of Venus*, oil on canvas, 1875, Calouste Gulbenkian Museum.

In regards to the concept of the mirror as it relates to woman's identity, we can observe Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones' *The Mirror of Venus*. In this painting:

"we encounter woman—Venus—in her undifferentiated multiplicity [...] She stares at her manifold reflection in a pool of water, "the first mirror," that dangerous "mirror of Venus," the archetypal pool of her identity, circling in profound silence along the interlacing limbs of women's interdependence. The women, who are symbolic of Woman, are perfectly, absolutely reflected in the virginal, unbroken surface of this pool. As they look at themselves they are filled with the wonder of their existence, yet they remain wistfully aware that as soon as the surface of the pond is violated, as soon as the mirror is broken, they will lose their reflection, their interlacing, collective identity, and will, in effect, die."[1]

Seen as a mirror of nature, woman was believed to reflect the world surrounding her. To see herself/her reflection was her reality, and water the origin of her being. Like Venus, she was born from it, and like Ophelia she was fated to return.[2] At its base, the mirror symbolizes self-awareness, its image—existence...

In addition to the selfie's inherent vanity, portraying oneself through photography and sharing that with the world can also be uplifting, and bring people together over common interests and political goals. But why is this notion of empowerment that's so often associated with presenting the body skewed in predominantly applying to women? Historically, the female body has been so sexually exploited in the name of capital, that now it's so normalized that we're consciously objectifying ourselves as a capitalist survival strategy.

**SPEED / PRESSURE / VALIDATION**

The speed at which digital content circulates is dependent largely on the content itself; its attractive potential, its desirability. The more attractive the image, the faster its circulation. Since self portraiture has morphed during this millennium from an under accessible artform into the mainstream, it has become so popular in its frequency that virtually everyone is expected to participate. If you don't then you are the minority / the tables have turned. We are deep in this simulation, and your digital image is your identity. We are required to submit to new technologies of power if we want to stay relevant, if we want to stay in touch with the outside world. We live in a cyberculture where many young women gauge their value on the amount of validation they receive from others. Rather than learning to harness positive energy from within, we are socialized to seek solidarity in our peers by mimicking their aesthetics and behavior. The social pressure to comply with current trends leads us into this weird, unhealthy obsession with our bodies, as they are often being judged and compared with others'.

**THE GAZE / VIRGIN-WHORE POLARITY**

Regardless of its intent, the self portrait is always sexualized by the gaze. As soon as it's made available, the body-image is appropriated by the voyeur for their own fantasy—to fetishize and covet. At this stage the hyper-sexualized femme image is so normalized and circulates in such density that it requires a conscious effort *not* to become desensitized to it. With the rise of globalization and online marketing, the self portrait has become less about artistry and more about profit. Women have to sell their bodies to sell their brands. At the same time there are specific rules regarding what defines "obscenity"; a constant authoritative censorship by both media & the people regulating what aspects of our art and sexuality are considered "appropriate" to display in the public sphere, and when to do so.

The policing of women's bodies & behavior can be analyzed in relation to the virgin/whore complex in the sense that we are presented with the challenge of simultaneously portraying an alluring aura of sensuality, while also maintaining an illusion of "purity". In other words, "Rather than being "two sides of the same coin," the harlot-submissive elements are more like the elements in an hourglass: always the same, always present, yet the proportions shift relative to each other, the shifts being manipulated by the one who manipulates the hourglass."[3]



*Hello Kitty Angel and Devil Car Window Decals.* Digital Image. ebay.com

Judging women for their sexuality while simultaneously oversexualizing their whole existence is a capitalist ploy to keep women under control, and distracted from more important issues—to keep them obsessed with their insecurities so they will buy more products to enhance themselves in order to keep up with society's demand for total aesthetic perfection. Social media further exacerbates this cultural obsession with worshiping women's bodies for their cosmetic properties, rather than advocating toward the improvement of our health, well-being, and political and social power.

Moreover, it's not the specifics of the selfie content we are expressing through social media that is problematic, but rather the ideology behind *why* it is repeatedly being produced—perpetuating a parasitic culture that thrives on our learned obsession with our bodies & social status. The problem with this manic society of images is how we are constantly being judged so much more on our appearances than we are on our professional and intellectual achievements, and how this consequently alters the formation of our identities and the way in which we perceive ourselves. Girls and women are socially conditioned to live in a state of hyper-awareness regarding the perception of our physical appearance that is detrimental to forming a healthy sense of identity and self worth.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF OVERSATURATION / SEXUAL OBJECTIFICATION OF GIRLS & WOMEN

The issue with being pressured to present an online persona made up of various images—including selfies, is how fused these images become with our perception of our actual self. For many, one's online persona is a huge part of their identity and social life; the photos you share represent you, and subsequently your value, your desirability. For women specifically, the images we choose to display are subject to added critique, and judgment is reflected in the amount of validation we receive or don't receive in return. This has led to a huge surge in the production of highly sexualized content, and a constant looming pressure to present our physicality & sexuality while we are fed through a cycling schizophrenic machine.

Beginning in childhood, mass media images of the female form as a glorified sexual object are forced on us constantly. We're instructed how to appeal to men's desires by portraying infantilized & watered-down versions of ourselves.

Marissa Jezak

Immense exposure to mass media among young people enables our susceptibility to portrayals that sexualize girls and women and teach us that we are destined to become sexual objects.[4]  The process of self-objectification is described as follows:

"Girls sexualize themselves when they think of themselves […] in sexual terms and when they equate their sexiness with a narrow standard of physical attractiveness. They also sexualize themselves when they think of themselves in objectified terms. Psychological researchers have identified self-objectification […] as a key process whereby girls learn to think of and treat their own bodies as objects of others' desires. In self-objectification, girls internalize an observer's perspective on their physical selves and learn to treat themselves as objects to be looked at and evaluated for their appearance. Though portraying oneself solely as a sexual object to be looked at is sometimes viewed by girls and women as exercising control over their sexuality (e.g., at some social networking Web sites), presentation of the self in this way can be viewed as a form of self-objectification […] Self-objectification involves adopting a third-person perspective on the physical self and constantly assessing one's own body in an effort to conform to the culture's standards of attractiveness."[5]

No matter what accomplishments you achieve, our culture is constantly recalculating our worth—taking into consideration the sexualized body and its relation to capital & social status. How this constant ranking fragments our consciousness is disruptive to our cognitive and physical functioning, and leads to issues like eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression.[6] The body positivity movement is problematic in the way that it puts our appearance at the forefront of our identity, reinforcing the concept that our bodies define our value. Moreover, women being valued primarily for their bodies and the supposed "empowerment" that self-objectification brings them is not a step forward for feminism. It's

not empowering, but rather debilitating.[7]

The new norm for how women are encouraged to constantly masquerade ourselves on the internet is harmful to our psychological well-being, and siphons energy away from our art, politics, and intellectual pursuits. Of course there are artists and workers who use the game to their advantage and profit from that, but if we are being coerced into participating in social networks in a way that objectifies and degrades us in order to be recognized for our achievements, who is that really *empowering*?

**REPRODUCTIVE LABOR & DIGITAL MEDIA**

Traditionally women are expected to perform a lifetime of unpaid services, serving as the life support  to the capitalist regime. This reproductive labor, in its various forms (emotional, domestic, sexual, etc.) is essential to the success of capitalism. This endless work—often rendered invisible, is a necessary component in maintaining gendered class structures. Consumer labor functions in the same way in digital media, as a form of social reproduction. The consumer is responsible for the creation & maintenance of interpersonal online relationships, communicating and coordinating social activities, and for the production and sharing of content that allows for meaningful engagement with these sites. "A single consumer engaged in this work may not contribute enough content, nor generate enough stickiness to sustain an entire website or ensure its continued dominance on the market. En masse, however, these users become invaluable to the economics of the industry […] consumers receive little or no direct financial compensation for their contributions to the revenue-generating mechanisms of digital media sites so that all of their labour produces surplus-value for the website provider."[8] Furthermore, like unwaged domestic work, there is a strong tension between exploitation and agency in the immaterial labor of digital media—in addition to creating content & data, consumer labor also produces pleasure and

social solidarity. Nonetheless, when we present ourselves repetitively and compulsively as objectified representations of the self, not only are we being commodified, but so is our data, which is used against our own self-actualizing interests for the purpose of surveillance and advertising.[9] Regarding images, social media is the apex, *the* site of consumption.

How we conceptualize our own digital labor is integral to the progression of feminist politics as a whole. In acting as participants in our own oppression, in a never ending cycle of watching and consuming, women fall in love with their symbolic values. In some sort of warped bonding complex, we fantasize to be fetishized as doll-like objects—we idealize to become a glorified sex symbol in the eyes of the voyeur, selling them an illusion of love. The female body is exploited as a means to generate maximum profit; it is constantly commodified, and rated not only on its aesthetic qualities, but on its ability to cheerfully perform the unpaid reproductive labor that is endlessly demanded of it.

**CONCLUSION**

Often in our culture, the concept of "body positivity" is used as a mask for self-objectification. The body positivity movement contradicts itself in the sense that it plays into the exact same mind games that it supposedly seeks to transcend. To respond to society's pathological fixation with the female body by saturating it *even more* with images of the body is not a form of resistance. Even if we like our bodies, we can still be preoccupied with them in a way that's very unhealthy. Ideally we could all be self-aware of our appearance, but not hyper-aware to the point of internalized paranoia and obsession. The negative psychological effects of this incessant pressure to share & actively participate in a society of images are in excess. For example, the prevalence of issues like body dysmorphia, depression, and appearance anxiety[10] has become normal. Many people use facial-contouring, face tuning apps, and plastic surgery to alter their appearances and

please their online audiences. Instead of prioritizing girls' and women's physical appearances so much, we should instead focus that energy on increasing their access to resources like healthcare, education, and economic & professional opportunities, so that we don't have to continually rely on appealing to the primitive desires of a dysfunctional dystopia where our sex-appeal is considered our most valuable asset.

To really assert agency of our bodies in this hyper-sexualized cyberspace would entail restructuring power as a form of self-sufficiency that isn't based on exterior validation, trends, or physical appearance at all. We need self-efficacy. We need to be able to recognize when we're self-objectifying & to maintain resilience in our body-image,[11] and to allow space for personal privacy & self expression without judging or outcasting others because their behavior doesn't fall under the umbrella of what "confidence" looks like in a contemporary context—in a society of images. Self-actualization is possible when we can resist the social pressure to submit to trends that normalize toxic behaviors & thought patterns. Empowerment is realized where we can obtain a position of respect in society that isn't dependent on our physical looks or gender performance, no matter how much our celebrity idols render these traits as significant.

Marissa Jezak

1  Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-De-Siecle Culture,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 133.

2 Ibid, 132.

3 Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women,* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1981), 148.

4 American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls*, (Washington, D.C: American Psychological Association, 2007), 5.

5 Ibid, 17-23.

6 See note 5 above.

7 Megan Murphy, *Feminist Current: Empowerment and Body Positivity in the Selfie Age*, podcast audio, March 17,  2016, https://www.feministcurrent.com/2016/03/17/empowerment-and-body-positivity-in-the-selfie-age/.

8 Kylie Jarrett, *Feminism, Labour and Digital Media: The Digital Housewife,* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 3-11.

9 Ibid, 93-98.

10 American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, *Report of the APA Task Force on the  Sexualization of Girls,* (Washington, D.C: American Psychological Association, 2007), 22. On appearance anxiety:  "A second emotional consequence of self-objectification is appearance anxiety, which is manifested by checking and adjusting one's appearance. Not knowing exactly when or how one's body will be looked at and evaluated creates anxiety about exposure [...] numerous studies have shown stronger appearance anxiety in those young women who internalize a sexualizing gaze as their primary view of self".

11 See note 7 above.