

The Sociology of the Selfie: The Intersection and Intertexts of Bourdieu, Art, and Digital Documentation

Word of the Year. The Selfie Song. The term "selfie" has become ubiquitous, notorious, or rather a massive in-joke. On one hand, there's really no harm to uploading a photo one took of oneself to a photo-sharing site. On the other, there's something violently self-serving about the act, to upload photos of oneself with some regularity for a perceived audience.

If anything, the selfie has become aesthetically and sociologically relevant, now more so than ever. It is a specimen of the post-digital. Never actually novel – until ironically coined – but rather familiar and ordinary. Commonplace. A norm.

There is nothing particularly shocking about the selfie, but rather something strangely charming. A celebration of our youth and our digital age. A cause worth championing as performance, rebellion, and cultural capital. We study selfies in this course on account of their dynamism and potential for interdisciplinary study – selfies are the intersection at which art history, philosophy, sociology, and design all meet.

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FOR STUDENTS INTERESTED IN: Art Criticism, Art History, Youth Culture, Sociology, American Studies, Critical Race Theory, Feminist Theory, Anthropology, Visual Studies, Photography, Fine Arts, Literary Criticism, Philosophy, etc.

TOPIC 1: Defining "The Selfie"

SESSION A: What are the differences between self-portraits – as we know them – and selfies, if any? Is the selfie exclusively digital or can the selfie also be Frida Kahlo's *Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird* or Van Gogh's *Self-Portrait with a Grey Felt Hat*? Does the digital selfie also qualify as being art? What is art? Do selfies meet expressionist, mimetic, formalist, instrumentalist, linguistic, and/or institutionalist qualifications?

TOPIC 1 MATERIALS:

- Handout titled "Aesthetic Theories and Philosophical Questions" pg. 17-31 from book *Thinking Through Aesthetics* by Marilyn G. Stewart.

TOPIC 2: The Selfie Demographic

SESSION A: Why do we often characterize selfies as appearing vain? Is it that selfies are only vain and/or poorly received by adults? Why are selfies enthusiastically received by youth? Are selfies exclusively a youth phenomenon? Are

adult selfies, therefore, ironic? How do we define "youth" in this scenario, and how do we define "adult"?

SESSION A: What has been the relationship between adults and youth throughout history? Why do adults seem "above" youth activities? By extension, what makes the selfie seemingly "low-brow"? Are selfies "low-brow" on account of their affiliated demographic? How can we apply Bourdieu's concepts of capital, spheres, and habitus to internet culture?

TOPIC 3: The Selfie as Rebellion

SESSION A: Who in society decides what is worthy of appreciation and what is not? How would we characterize this demographic? What else has this demographic, historically, "put-down"? Consider the young-adult novel, and how these texts are often considered "low-brow" – what are their redeeming qualities?

SESSION A: How do adults oppress young people? How do youth rebel? Further, is there something rebellious about celebrating selfies? Is the selfie a

TOPIC 2 MATERIALS:

- Essay titled *Deconstructing the Popular* by Stuart Hall in *Cultural Resistance Reader* edited by Stephen Duncombe (pg. 185-193)
- PBS *Merchants of Cool* Documentary

While watching Merchants of Cool think about: are selfies "cool"? What is the nature of "cool"? How is "cool" constructed? Is coolness a socially-informed truth?

means of "sticking it to the man"? Is it perhaps an act of rebellion to like an item effusively when it would be considered only appropriate to like said item ironically?

TOPIC 3 MATERIALS:

- K-Hole Essay titled *Youth Mode: A Report on Freedom*

While reading Youth Mode, consider the neologism "normcore", how selfies are potentially "normcore", and if we celebrate selfies ironically or genuinely

- Essay titled *A Young Adult's Crusade to Defend Literature's Most Maligned Genre* by Kathleen Hale

effusively, or is there really no distinction? What about *deliberate* selfie performances – selfies as *literal* performance art? Are these celebrations ironic/satirical or effusive in their appreciation?

TOPIC 4 MATERIALS:

- Essay titled *Post-Digital Awareness: An Insight into New Immersion Practices in Installation Art* by James P. Werner
- Petra Collins interview with performance artist Alexandra Marzella in *Dazed and Confused* magazine
- Deconstructing Lucas Regazzi's gallery show "Mindlessness: Documentation of Our Obsession with Filling Invented Space"

Are these examples of ironic appreciations of the selfie? Or are they genuine celebrations? Alternatively, are these mere examples of something otherwise low-brow appropriated into something high-brow and worthy of attention?

dichotomy even? Of people who take selfies as deliberate performance vs. people who take selfies as documentation? Are these the two main reasons why people take selfies? Are these reasons mutually exclusive, or are both possible simultaneously?

TOPIC 5 SAMPLE MATERIALS:

- Essay titled *Bourdieu, Cultural Intermediaries and Good Housekeeping's George Marek: A case study of middlebrow musical taste* by Randal Doane
- pg. 87-105 of *Celine Dion's Let's Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste* by Carl Wilson (Chapter 8: Let's Talk About Who's Got Bad Taste).

Collins, and her series "*Selfie*" in answering this question. Are selfies an act of rebellion against the male-gaze? Are selfies empowering? An expression of self-love?

TOPIC 4: The Selfie as Performance

SESSION B: Is there not a performative aspect to taking selfies? When we take selfies, who is their intended audience? When we make artwork of our selfies, e.g. "selfie collages", are we being deliberately ironic? Or are these genuine celebrations of selfies and their affiliated cultures?

SESSION B: So do we like selfies ironically, effusively, or is there really no distinction? What about *deliberate* selfie performances – selfies as *literal* performance art? Are these celebrations ironic/satirical or effusive in their appreciation?

TOPIC 5: The Selfie as an Expression of Cultural Capital

SESSION C: Is it possible to get judged for a selfie? Is the type of selfie one takes an indication of the sphere of people one belongs to? For example, are people who take smiley-selfies not likely be friends with people who take selfies where they deliberately never smile? How is the selfie an expression of habitus, field, capital? Can a selfie ever be in "poor taste"? Consider selfies on applications like Instagram, Tinder, and Snapchat among others.

SESSION C: Can we categorize selfies into distinct groups? Can we create a selfie

TOPIC 6: The Selfie as a Proponent of Equity

SESSION D: Thinking about the selfie as an intersectional feminist tool: are selfies termed "immature" not because they are primarily taken by youth but because they are primarily taken by women? Consider the artist Petra

TOPIC 6 MATERIALS:

- Essay titled *Censorship and the Female Body* by Petra Collins
- Examining Petra Collins' photographic series, *The Teenage Gaze*; and *Selfie*
- Examining Petra Collins' book, *Babe*

SESSION D: Do selfies promote certain gazes – e.g. a female gaze? Maybe even, a teenage gaze?

TOPIC 7: Selfies and Design

SESSION E: What is the larger appeal of selfies? Can *anyone*, really, take a selfie? Can your grandmother take a selfie?

SESSION E: Can we apply Le Corbusier and his architectural philosophy to the construction of the selfie? Can selfies be an architectural and/or design tool? Can selfies inform behavioral space? What is the function of a selfie? Are selfies an extension of ourselves?

SESSION E: Utilizing "design methodology" – how can we use selfies to aid in creating new materials?

SESSION E: Class Selfie – Ellen DeGeneres Style!

TOPIC 7 MATERIALS:

- *Designing Designs for Research* by Trochim, W. and Land, D.
- *Design School Wisdom* edited by Brooke Johnson and Jennifer Tolo Pierce (pg. 7-125)

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS:

1. *Finding the Self in a Selfie*, Adam Gopnik, The New Yorker, (29 October 2015)
2. *Closing the Loop*, Aria Dean, The New Inquiry (1 March 2016)

PROPOSED SPEAKERS

1. Petra Collins
 - a. Individual studied extensively in this seminar. Photographer, Filmmaker, Editor of text *Babe*, Essayist.
 - b. www.petracollins.com
 - c. [www.twitter.com/petracollins](https://twitter.com/petracollins)
 - d. www.instagram.com/petracollins
2. Tavi Gevinson
 - a. Individual who enabled and facilitated the works of Petra Collins. Petra Collins' closest collaborator and roommate. Editor-in-Chief and founder of *Rookie Magazine* – an arts and culture magazine both for and by young adults operating via an intersectional feminist lens. Essayist. Cultural critic. Teen culture expert.
 - b. www.twitter.com/tavitulle
 - c. www.instagram.com/tavitulle
 - d. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tAFIwRTVhSA>
3. Lucas Regazzi

- a. Young curator of gallery show studied in this seminar, "Mindlessness: Documentation of Our Obsession with Filling Invented Space." Digital curator of art blogs titled "1000scientists" and "lucasregazzi"
- b. <http://thewildmagazine.com/blog/the-young-mind-and-poet-behind-art-is-dad/>