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Selfies as a Universal Language

In 2012 when people began speaking about selfies, you could suppose that they were a mere fashion; but the Selfie stream on the social networks continues to grow by several millions a day. Cultural pessimists see an immoderate 'hyper-individualism' in this; they fear that in today's society people are becoming ever more self-obsessed. Studies already claim to prove 'that those, who spread self-portraits on social networks are more narcissistic than those who do not'.

However, other theorists see selfies as a legitimate part of a tradition of pop culture or recognize them even as a contemporary art-form. For example the well known US-American art critic Jerry Saltz stated, in spring 2015, that reality TV star Kim Kardashian was the successor to Andy Warhol with her book *Selfish* – a collection of selfies over a period of ten years. He argues that like Warhol she has succeeded in connecting 'grandiosity, sincerity, kitsch, irony, theatre, and ideas of spectacle, privacy, fact, and fiction' in a new manner, so as to create a unified totality: 'all that (has been) compressed into some new essence'.

One aspect of this phenomenon remains strangely not reflected upon, which is that selfies have been popular only for a few years, even though they would have been possible from the beginning of the history of photography. The speed of this development casts doubt on the suggestion that there has been a widespread change in human mentality, since such changes take place only slowly and over generations. Rather, the relevant difference between the earlier kinds of photography and the smartphone lies in the fact that it has now become possible not only to make pictures in an instant, but also to dispatch them in the same moment – to a friend or to the big community of the WWW.

These pictures and photographs have become means of communication – of live or instant communication! With a smartphone-photograph or selfie you can inform others where you are, how you are, what you are doing – and often you can do so quicker, wittier, with more subtlety, with more emotion than if you were to use words. Pictures might already have possessed the character of signals or messages in former times, and they could express or intensify a mood, but no one could communicate instantly with them.

Moreover a picture that was produced with a lot of effort should permanently fix the motive for creating it – otherwise it would have been senseless, too much work! A picture was a document, a souvenir, an occasion for reflection – κτεμα εις αι, a possession forever. By contrast, the new function of pictures consists in unfolding their meaning at just the moment when they are dispatched.

It is often noted, for the most part critically, that many people present themselves with distorted, grimace-like faces on selfies. Many intellectuals, especially, assume that this is a sign of superficiality, stupidity or lack of social competence. However, they are completely overlooking the fact that selfies almost always rise in a certain communicative situation, in which they have to be unequivocal, succinct and perhaps so impulsive that they inspire a direct reaction.

In this they can be compared with emoticons and emojis. Emoticons codify standard situations of communication, so that one can transmit a personal status faster than with words. In the same way the strong expressions of selfies are signs – like pictograms, they are a more and more codified way to express specific states of mind. The meanings of wide-open eyes, stuck out tongues or broadly smiling mouths are recognized immediately and act by contagion.

The fact that selfies possess a similar function to emoticons led in 2014 already to the development of the app 'Imoji', which enables the user to convert selfies in such a way that they look like personalized emoticons. Furthermore on Instagram you can find tableaux with selfies, on which the actors are to be seen not only in different – four, six or nine – poses, but on which also the corresponding emoticon is installed in the picture.

Emoticons apparently are the given reference; one tries to adapt oneself to them, there is an unspoken competition for the most concisely sharpened poses, most striking in their expression. The more similar selfies are to emoticons, the further apart they are from self-portraits in the history of art.

In the historical self-portrait it was a central motivation that the picture should be long-lasting and become a manifestation which could far outlast the time at which it originated. Today those who make a selfie have no thought of future generations or the overcoming of transitoriness. On the

contrary, they want to appear spontaneous and well linked up. The success of instant apps like Snapchat or Periscope, which do not store what is posted, shows how fascinating it is for people to use pictures just to emphasize the moment, as it were to press the moment into its time slot so that it stays there.

Pictures in the social media disappear immediately – like spoken words. They may live on in the memory of some people, but physically they are no longer existent. A large part of the material that remains visible on social media platforms like Facebook or Tumblr is never looked at again, but loses itself in the depths of the infinite scroll function. A selfie that has originated from a current mood has therefore, after the shortest time, as little importance as an old shopping list.

Nonetheless, selfies are, for those who are involved actively or passively with them, full of consequences. Their functional resemblance to emoticons means that they can change the body language and the facial expression. The more often you take a typical selfie pose to show others what's going on, and the more often you are confronted with countless selfies of your friends or other people, the more clearly certain gestures and grimaces fix themselves in your repertoire. As highly mimetic beings with always active mirror neurons we adopt the strongest and most suggestive forms of expression. Moreover, when we take selfies, we are more conscious and more concentrated with respect to our mimic expression than in most other situations of our social life

This becomes clear if you look at a publicity video with the title 'Things everybody does but doesn't talk about', which US-president Barack Obama published in February 2015. One sees here the putatively unobserved president while he prepares a speech before the mirror, but also horses around and smirks. Over and over again he presents facial features reminiscent of typical selfie poses, and which have at the same time an unequivocal prototype in emoticons. Thus Obama looks himself in the mirror in the codified pose 'face with stuck-out tongue and winking eye.' Finally, he grabs a selfie stick and makes selfies of himself. However, whether he is shown while taking a selfie or while preparing his speech, makes, in the end, no difference: the striking facial features of selfies – and emoticons – have already stamped his whole body language. Maybe that is why he was elected.

The US-American artist Jenna E. Garrett has begun in 2014 to collect some of the gestures and expressions that are particularly put in scene on selfies and can hence be estimated as codes valid for communication. She collects already established gestures like the victory sign, but also others which have their origin in selfies. The fact that such poses could prevail within a few years testifies to the formative power of selfies. And this power is even more impressive, if you consider that selfies are a global phenomenon. What is successful in one country or society, influences at the same time behaviour patterns across the world.

After many vain attempts of a universally valid form of communication a universal language is now being developed for the first time in the history of humanity – without anybody intending it! This language may still be rudimentary – but it creates bit by bit the base for more complicated manners of transcultural understanding.

If, on the one hand, selfies help to revive old utopias of a communication without any borders, they lead, on the other hand, to more standardized stamping of facial features and gesture. If one continued the work of Garrett strictly and tried to grasp all expressions propagated by means of selfies, there would arise – again on analogy to emoticons – a kind of alphabet of facial parts. This commemorates an interesting project of an artist from the 18th century: Franz Xaver Messerschmidt and his so called '*Charakterköpfe*'.

In the years after 1770 he developed about fifty sculptures and busts (by the way, derived from his own physiognomy) – to explore which different, and in the extreme cases caricature-like, facial features are possible. You see the similarities to facial patterns of selfies! Furthermore, Messerschmidt found combinations for which there is not yet a selfie counterpart. Selfies give Messerschmidt's often misunderstood work a new impact – they make clear what may have been his interest: to constitute a kind of language with physiognomy alone.