

# Through the Looking Glass: The Queer Narcissism of Selfies

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## Abstract

A number of scholars have recently argued that the selfie needs to be understood outside of the discourse of narcissism. Rather than leaving this discourse behind, this article focuses on the “hype” of selfies as narcissistic in order to identify and ultimately trouble the political unconscious of this diagnosis, and to ask, what is the problem of narcissism such that it can serve as a means of devaluing, and what kind of politics might we find in the behaviors, proclivities, or attributes identified as narcissistic? The article argues that the problem of narcissism is less an exaggerated focus on the self than it is a failure of responsibility for oneself, and/or an insufficient concern for the well-being of others to whom the narcissist ought to be responsible. Drawing from the antisocial thesis in queer theory, the article argues that this normative investment in responsible subjectivity is motivated, rather ironically, by a desire to annihilate difference. As a “solution” to this desire, the article offers queer theorist Leo Bersani’s notion of “impersonal narcissism,” which it understands in relation to the queerness of the myth from which narcissism takes its name. In short, the article does not aim to evaluate empirically attributions of selfie narcissism—whether to confirm or falsify—but rather to problematize the diagnosis of narcissism as rooted in a normative project that works to produce responsible subjects, and to suggest that this project is compromised by a queer indifference to difference, as critics fear.

## Keywords

selfie, narcissism, queer, image, relationality

When the sun goes down and the moon appears  
You go looking for love in the hall of mirrors

*Stephin Merritt (The 6ths)*

The proliferation of social media over the last decade has caused considerable debate. On one side of this debate, scholars and critics argue that social media are precisely antisocial, engendering a host of behaviors and attitudes that work to the detriment of communal, collective, and responsible forms of relationality. The problem is less that social media disconnect users from each other, though some have made this claim (e.g. Turkle, 2012), but rather that they connect users in the wrong ways, for the wrong reasons, and with potentially disastrous social, political, psychological, and neurological consequences (Goldberg, 2016). On the other side of this debate, scholars and critics maintain that social media are in fact pro-social, democratizing cultural production, invigorating the public sphere, bolstering civic participation, and engendering collective governance (e.g. Benkler, 2006).

In a recent iteration of this debate, some critics have suggested that the taking and sharing of digital self-portraits—selfies—has produced a toxic culture of narcissism, while

others have argued that this practice is empowering, particularly for populations historically denied access to public self-representation.<sup>1</sup> But as with the larger debate about social media, what appears to be a substantial disagreement is in fact only an empirical quibble, masking an underlying normative consensus. In short, if critics do not agree about whether the practice of taking and sharing selfies is narcissistic, they do agree that this would be a bad thing were it true; narcissism seems to be a self-evident wrong.<sup>2</sup>

This would appear to be an opportune moment to interrogate this consensus and its constitutive politics. However, many media scholars now seem eager to move beyond talk of narcissism. For example, Theresa M. Senft and Nancy K. Baym (2015) have argued that the practice of taking and sharing selfies is “caught in a stubborn and morally loaded hype cycle” (p. 1588). What is needed, they suggest, is “nuanced

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attention” to “break through this hype.” The nuanced attention to which Senft and Baym refer is the domain of empirical social science, with the promise that when one observes the actual practices of real people who take selfies, a far more complex picture of these practices and their social and cultural dimensions and implications emerges.

Senft and Baym (2015) write that they interact with journalists and students on a daily basis “who are frustrated by [Senft and Baym’s] resistance to explaining selfie culture through language that turns on notions such as self-esteem and narcissism” (p. 1590). The desire to move beyond pathologizing discourses is understandable, insofar as these may distract from or block other ways making sense of the selfie. Furthermore, as Anne Burns (2015) has argued, the ascription of narcissism to the selfie is “a means to an end, as it establishes selfies as not just problematic but as requiring regulation. Therefore, selfies are not simply devalued—they are devalued in order to cause something to happen as a result,” that is, the regulation of subjects identified as narcissists (p. 1727). Burns concludes, “Criticism of the selfie ultimately serves to legitimize the patriarchal ordering of society by integrating individuals into accepting being evaluated, governed, and situated discursively.” While Burns does not say so explicitly, her argument easily suggests a refusal of the discourse of narcissism insofar as it is the vehicle of this governance.

For scholars, the problem with characterizing selfies as narcissistic is thus not simply that this characterization is empirically inaccurate, but that it is a false *accusation*. Again, while the desire to move beyond talk of narcissism is understandable, this movement leaves unexamined and uncontested the normative investments that underlie narcissism as an accusation or diagnosis. In an effort to examine and ultimately contest these investments, in this article, I focus on the “hype” of selfies as narcissistic or empowering, beginning with a brief examination of a few exemplary texts—primarily popular—of criticism of the selfie as narcissistic and of defenses of the selfie as empowering. This review provides a foundation for the analysis that follows, in which I aim to identify the political unconscious of narcissism as a diagnosis, and to ask, what is the problem of narcissism such that it can serve as a means of devaluing, and what kind of politics might we find in the behaviors, proclivities, or attributes identified as narcissistic?<sup>3</sup>

At first glance, the problem of narcissism would appear to be an exaggerated focus on the self. However, this focus is only rendered problematic insofar as it is understood as either compromising self-sovereignty, or, more commonly, as distracting from particular kinds of valued relations with others—what we might simply call “the social”—built around care, concern, responsibility, accountability, and sacrifice, and constructed as the antithesis of narcissism. In other words, the problem of narcissism is less an exaggerated focus on the self than it is a failure of responsibility for oneself, and/or an insufficient concern for the well-being of others to whom the narcissist ought to be responsible. As Burns

suggests, this valuing works to discipline those behaviors, qualities, or ways of being that are identified as narcissistic, and thereby to encourage the formation of responsible subjects, the discursive foil to narcissists.

Drawing from the antisocial thesis in queer theory, particularly work by Leo Bersani, I will argue that this normative investment in responsible subjectivity is motivated, rather ironically, by a desire to annihilate difference—to “eat the other,” to use bell hooks’ (1992) phrasing. As a “solution” to this desire, I offer Bersani’s notion of “impersonal narcissism” (alongside sympathetic theorizations by Tim Dean and Jonathan Flatley), which I understand in relation to the queerness of the myth from which narcissism takes its name. Again, my overall aim is not to evaluate empirically attributions of selfie narcissism—whether to confirm or falsify—but rather to problematize the diagnosis of narcissism as rooted in a normative project that works to produce responsible subjects, and to suggest that this project is compromised by a queer indifference to difference, as critics fear.

## The Selfie in Popular Discourse

For cultural critics, there is no more potent expression of the narcissism engendered by social media than the selfie—a self-portrait typically taken with the front-facing camera of a smartphone, and shared through social media, effectively automating the social contact once required to procure efficiently a photograph of oneself. Some selfies have been made famous—Ellen DeGeneres’ selfie at the 2014 Oscars, the first few selfies taken with Pope Francis, selfies of astronauts in space—and others infamous—Obama’s selfie with David Cameron and Denmark’s Prime Minister Helle Thorning Schmidt at a memorial service for Nelson Mandela, selfies of celebrities in various states of undress, selfies collected on the Facebook page “With My Besties in Auschwitz” or the “Selfies at Funerals” tumblr. For the most part, however, selfies are unremarkable, ordinary, and quotidian.

Criticism of the selfie has been generally straightforward, proposing that selfies are both indicative of a toxic culture of narcissism, and work to reproduce that culture. For example, Andrew Keen (2015) writes,

These “Advertisements for Myself” are actually embarrassing commercials, both for ourselves and for our species. They represent the logical conclusion of a “Personal Revolution” over the last twenty-five years in which everything has degenerated into the immediate, the intimate, and, above all, the self-obsessed. *Hello this is us*, Instagram is saying about our species. And I, for one, don’t like what I’m seeing.

In an interview promoting the book in which this passage appears, Keen elaborates,

The ultimate cultural manifestation of the Internet is the “selfie.” The “selfie” as the quintessential, almost inevitable conclusion, where all we are left with is ourselves. We’re not able to see

anything in the world except ourselves. What the Internet has done has placed us at the center of the universe. It's a delusion. (Maddux, 2015)

Here, Keen suggests that "our species" has become too individualistic and ought to be less self-involved and self-centered, taking in the world outside ourselves, and de-centering our position in the world.

In a somewhat more sophisticated and psychologically attuned line of argument, some critics have proposed that the problem is not so much self-centeredness, but more precisely a kind of compensatory self-obsession that requires the approval of others and is thereby pathologically beholden to them. For example, in an interview promoting his book *The Road to Character*, David Brooks states,

[Social media] creates this broadcasting culture where you create a fake version or avatar of yourself. And you post a highlight reel of yourself on Instagram and make yourself look happier and more glamorous than you really are. And there's a danger that people will mistake the avatar for their real selves or develop an intense desire to get "likes" as you try to market your own personality. (Merritt, 2015)

While this might seem like a straightforward argument in favor of rugged individualism—that is, for developing a strong self in the absence of social influence—Brooks is getting at something else here: rather than establishing relations with others based on one's likeability, people ought to be establishing relations around what he calls "redemptive assistance." In a section of the book titled "The Age of the Selfie," Brooks (2015) writes, "If you humbly believe that you are not individually strong enough to defeat your own weaknesses, then you know you must be dependent on redemptive assistance from outside." In both these passages, the "you" to which Brooks refers is in need of others—in the first case for approval, and in the second for redemption—though the first kind of relation is pathologized while the second is valued, insofar as it yields a proper social attachment.

Similarly, Jonathan Franzen (2011) has argued that to "like" something or someone (in the Facebook sense of the word) is a poor substitute for loving. He writes, "If you . . . imagine a person defined by a desperation to be liked, what do you see? You see a person without integrity, without a center." In contrast, "love," Franzen writes, "is about bottomless empathy, born out of the heart's revelation that another person is every bit as real as you are," even or perhaps especially when that person is profoundly unlikable. To submit to love is to risk rejection and therefore to be vulnerable, whereas being disliked (or not "liked") stings less because it is only about one's "surface," not one's "whole self." The pain of rejection is the price one must pay to "[be] alive in a resistant world," rather being "anesthetized" through self-sufficiency.

In these passages, it becomes clear that understanding social media practices through the lens of narcissism is less about policing individualism per se—these critics are rather invested in a notion of a self with integrity, with a "center" (to use Franzen's term), even as this center is formed through social relations—than it is about policing forms of relationality. The forms of relationality valued here presuppose a kind of original sin in the subject. In order to be redeemed, one must give one's whole self over to another person. This baring of the soul becomes a condition for intimacy, which in turn can be read as a discursive metonym for the social; these arguments are less about identifying psychological roadblocks to intimacy than they are indictments of a culture of narcissism, which have at their end the restoration of the social, in part through the ascription of weaknesses that produce a desire for redemption in the first instance. One might even say that the identification of weakness as such—recognizing an interior that is ugly and more real than a likeable exterior—matters more than any eventual redemption. To put it another way, what may be ultimately so unsettling to critics about a culture of surfaces and likeability is less the refusal to be redeemed than the refusal to recognize those socially prescribed weaknesses (or the interiors in which they are situated) that would provide a warrant for redemption.

This call for redemption may seem less objectionable when the author implicates himself, declaring his own desire to be redeemed, rather than the classic imperial formulation in which the dominant legitimizes his power with the assertion that it is necessary for the redemption of the dominated. Nonetheless, this call works to enact the same valued form of relationality. Whether the reader is called on to redeem or to be redeemed matters little; one can assume that the reader is meant to occupy both positions variably, as recent converts are soon called on to proselytize.

In contrast to popular criticism of the selfie, apologies for the selfie are typically grounded in the assertion that selfies are about connecting with others in ways that reproduce, rather than diverge from, valued forms of relationality, though often with the caveat that selfies might sometimes express narcissistic tendencies. As James Franco (2013) writes in an op-ed for *The New York Times*, "Of course, the self-portrait is an easy target for charges of self-involvement, but, in a visual culture, the selfie quickly and easily shows, not tells, how you're feeling, where you are, what you're doing." He continues,

Selfies are tools of communication more than marks of vanity (but yes, they can be a little vain). We all have different reasons for posting them, but, in the end, selfies are avatars: Mini-Me's that we send out to give others a sense of who we are.

Here, a modicum of narcissism is permissible on the condition that it accompanies pro-social behavior.

In response to Michael Goodwin's (2013) assertion that president Obama's selfie with Cameron and Thorning Schmidt "symbolizes the greater global calamity of Western decline," art critic Jerry Saltz (2014) quips, "C'mon: the moral sky isn't falling." Saltz cites Franco as well as curator Marina Galperina: "It's less about narcissism—narcissism is so lonely!—and it's more about being your own digital avatar." (Unlike Brooks, both Saltz and Franco use "avatar" in a way that implies fidelity between the real and its representation; perhaps this is why they are less concerned about the prospect of false representation.) The remainder of Saltz's essay is largely dedicated to elevating the selfie as an art form—"a folk art"—with the caveat that "most selfies are silly, typical, boring." Perhaps most tellingly, Saltz ends the essay with a plea for a name change:

We will likely make great selfies—but not until we get rid of the stupid-sounding, juvenile, treacly name. It rankles and grates every time one reads, hears, or even thinks it. We can't have a Rembrandt of selfies with a word like *selfie*.

The word "selfie" bothers Saltz as a marker of immaturity—a discursive neighbor to narcissism insofar as children have not yet been fully socialized—as if the form (and its practitioners) need to mature.

In another *New York Times* article, Jenna Wortham (2013), like Franco, concedes that "at their most egregious [selfies] raise all sorts of questions about vanity, narcissism and our obsession with beauty and body image," before articulating a series of defenses. First, she suggests that what might appear to be vanity is actually other-oriented behavior. On this point, she quotes Clive Thomson:

People are wrestling with how they appear to the rest of the world. Taking a photograph is a way of trying to understand how people see you, who you are and what you look like, and there's nothing wrong with that.

Not only is there nothing wrong with that, according to Thompson, it is part and parcel of a "primal human urge to stand outside of ourselves and look at ourselves."

Like Franco, Wortham argues that selfies facilitate connection, restoring a "human element" lacking from text-based communication, in part because the brain is "hard-wired to respond to faces" (as she quotes Pamela Rutledge, director of the Media Psychology Research Center). In support of this argument, Wortham quotes Frédéric della Faille, founder of photo-sharing app Frontback, who says that the app is more about capturing moments and creating stories than it is about being "beautiful." Wortham elaborates,

In other words, it is about showing your friends and family your elation when you're having a good day or opening a dialogue or line of communication using an image the same way you might simply text "hi" or "what's up?"

On this point, she also quotes Dom Hoffman, a founder of video-sharing app Vine who was initially opposed to the idea of allowing users to create videos using their front-facing cameras, in part because he worried that these videos would be vain and, ultimately, uninteresting, but then changed his mind: "'It wasn't really about vanity at all', he said. 'It's not really about how you look. It's about you doing something else, or you in other places. It's a more personal way to share an experience'."

Wortham also suggests that selfies might work to encourage face-to-face interaction. She writes,

In fact, I've even noticed that the occasional selfie appears to nudge some friends who I haven't seen in a while to get in touch via e-mail or text to suggest that we meet for a drink to catch up, as if seeing my face on a screen reminds them it's been awhile since they've seen it in real life.

In conclusion, she writes,

Rather than dismissing the trend as a side effect of digital culture or a sad form of exhibitionism, maybe we're better off seeing selfies for what they are at their best—a kind of visual diary, a way to mark our short existence and hold it up to others as proof that we were here.

A final and generally more academic approach considers the selfie—particularly in the hands of disempowered groups—as a form of radical political agency, of speaking for oneself. For example, writing about young women's selfies, Derek Conrad Murray (2015) argues that "popular forms of female self-imaging may offer the opportunity for political engagement, radical forms of community building—and most importantly, a forum to produce counter-images that resist erasure and misrepresentation" (p. 2). Murray offers this argument to contest the notion that selfies are narcissistic. Similarly, Katrin Tiidenberg and Edgar Gómez Cruz (2015) argue that critics who dismiss selfies as frivolous or self-absorbed have failed to appreciate the ways that they allow female selfie-takers to reclaim their own bodies, contributing to a "body-positive visual discourse." They conclude,

For our participants, then, despite the occasional negative experience with feeling objectified, self-shooting has been in no way a trivial, vain pursuit, but a self-therapeutic and awareness-raising practice. It has allowed for a new kind of body to emerge—a powerful, sexual, female body. (Tiidenberg and Cruz, 2015, p. 19)

David Nemer and Guo Freeman (2015) reach a similar conclusion, arguing that for the favela-dwellers of Vitória, Brazil, "selfies are not a shallow way to show narcissism, fashion, and self-promotion and seek attention; selfies, rather, empower the users to exercise free speech, practice self-reflection, express spiritual purity, improve literacy



skills, and form strong interpersonal connections” (p. 1833). This kind of argument has also appeared in popular venues. For example, Glynnis MacNicol (2015) writes in *ELLE* that for women to take their own pictures is “to give voice where before there was often none.” In reference to the paucity of information about women’s lives “in history,” MacNicol concludes, “So selfie away this summer, ladies, and do it with pride. Leave as many voices behind as you can.” A similar article by Rachel Simmons (2013) in *Slate* is titled “Selfies are Good for Girls.”

While apologies for the selfie as empowering appear to be at odds with criticism of the selfie as narcissistic, they remain rooted in a valuing of the same (or similar) forms of relationality. Again, if critics disagree about whether selfies express/engender narcissism, they agree that this would be a bad thing were it true. While my primary focus here is popular discourse, this is also true of much academic work on the selfie, which has tended to foreclose debate about normative investments by bundling these into empirical questions, as if to say: we can all agree on what is good, and can therefore move on to consider the extent to which the good exists or, if not, what transformations might engender the good. In an effort to produce space for this foreclosed debate, I turn now to consider in greater depth the trouble of narcissism, beginning with the myth from which the diagnosis takes its name, and with which it shares a political genealogy.

## Pink Narcissus

In Roman poet Ovid’s (2000) telling of the myth of Echo and Narcissus—often treated as the definitive version—Narcissus is 16 years old, “both boy and youth,” and the object of affection for “many youths” (sometimes translated as “boys”) “and many young girls,” despite his disinterest in either. Indeed, “[T]here was such intense pride in that delicate form,” Ovid writes, “that none of the youths or young girls affected him.” Most notably in the myth, Narcissus rebuffs the advances of the nymph Echo: “He runs from her, and running cries ‘Away with these encircling hands! May I die before what’s mine is yours.’” In turn, one of Narcissus’ rejected suitors begs the gods for vengeance. Rhamnusia (or Nemesis), the goddess of retribution, grants this request, smiting Narcissus with an insatiable desire for his own form, as if he were his own suitor. Drawn to a still pool of water, Narcissus spies his own reflection and is so enamored with it that he is unable to leave: “How often he gave his lips in vain to the deceptive pool, how often, trying to embrace the neck he could see, he plunged his arms into the water, but could not catch himself within them!” Enraptured by his own reflection, so much so that he does not eat or sleep, Narcissus eventually wastes away and dies, and is metamorphosed into a flower.

Despite the myth’s melancholy conclusion, Louise Vinge (1967) has argued that Ovid’s telling of the Narcissus myth is not didactic, offering no moral lessons on the dangers of

vanity or self-love; these lessons are the product of later, Christian iterations of the myth, ultimately providing discursive fodder for the clinical pathologization of narcissism in the early 20th century. But before this Christian transformation, the myth is fundamentally queer, as Steven Bruhm argues. Referring back to Ovid, Bruhm (2001) proposes that Narcissus be understood first and foremost as “the figure who *rejects*,” rather than as a figure trapped in desire for the self/same, which—it should be noted—Ovid narrates as revenge for the rejection of Narcissus’ suitors (p. 15). Bruhm (2001) writes,

As Narcissus rejects Echo and the boys who want him, he rejects not only the dictate to desire another (a socially prescribed and approved other) but also the drive to stabilize a range of binarisms upon which gender in Western culture is founded. (p. 15)

This rejection is significant not only in relation to gender but, insofar as gender *is* alterity in the Freudian tradition, to the project of subjection (Warner, 1990). In other words, in his refusal to desire another being, Narcissus evades his own (gendered) subjection.

Curiously, Narcissus desires no other, yet narcissism as psychopathology is historically linked to the pathologization of homosexuality (a desire for a same other); according to Freud, homosexuality could be considered a “*special case of narcissism*” (Bruhm, 2001, p. 7). This association is possible insofar as homosexuality entails a failure to develop desire for the (gendered) other, a failure manifested through a regressive desire for the same. As Tim Dean (2001) notes, it is precisely Freud’s account of homosexuality as a form of self-love in the place of love for another which makes it ripe for pathologization. Bruhm similarly argues that it is no accident that the advent of narcissism as psychopathology coincides with the clinical designation of homosexuality as a distinct form of “inversion” in the early 20th century. Bruhm (2001) locates this intersection in the work of Havelock Ellis, “the first person to refer to a ‘Narcissus-like tendency’ of autoerotics to become absorbed by their own image” (p. 4). “Narcissus-like tendency” would be translated as *Narcissmus*. The term was then adopted by Freud, most famously in his 1914 essay “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” though as Dean notes, the concept makes an important appearance in Freud’s 1910 essay on Leonardo DaVinci. Bruhm (2001) points to a particularly poignant passage in “On Narcissism”:

We have discovered, especially clearly in people whose libidinal development has suffered some disturbance, such as pervers and homosexuals, that in their later choice of love objects they have taken as a model not their mother but their own selves. They are plainly seeking *themselves* as a love object, and are exhibiting a type of object choice which must be termed “narcissistic.” In this observation we have the strongest of the reasons which have led us to adopt the hypothesis of narcissism. (p. 4)

To reiterate, the genealogical proximity of narcissism to homosexuality is no coincidence; their intersection is a pathologized absence of desire for the other, expressed through a surplus of desire for the self/same. Importantly, however, desire for the self/same is symptomatic; the real trouble lies not in the surplus of this desire, which can be normalized (as clearly demonstrated by the movement for same-sex marriage), but rather in an originary absence of desire for the other.

This absence of desire threatens the social in two significant ways. First, it amounts to a refusal to enter into social bonds, that is, to participate in the social, insofar as these bonds require an interest in the other, whether as an imminent threat to be excluded or annihilated (as the Right would have it) or as an exploited/oppressed outsider to be assimilated/incorporated (as the Left would have it)—an other that in both cases provides a discursive backdrop against which valued relational bonds can be articulated. The refusal to enter these bonds raises the specter of pleasure, hedonism, and self-gratification. As Stanley Aronowitz (1980) observes,

The paranoid assertion that narcissism has become rampant in Western, particularly American, culture is not entirely false. We wish to hold onto our youth, if by this we mean the moment when play, the sexual, the “bad” was the underworld that we inhabited under the fearful and watchful eyes of adults. (p. 70)

Second, an absence of desire for the other threatens the reproduction of the social insofar as this requires biological reproduction and child-rearing. As Aronowitz (1980) observes, “The aim to ‘normal’ sexuality is a love object with whom procreation and the inscribing of children into the social order is the final object” (p. 67).

Even as Narcissus is condemned to locate his desire in an object (himself, or the image thereof), narcissism thus remains a queer affliction indeed. One might even say that, discursively speaking, narcissism lies at the heart of queerness, insofar as the normal or normative (i.e. the not-queer) requires an interest in and desire for different others. A narcissist/homosexual without desire for the other is essentially a failed subject.

This might help to explain why women are so frequently the target of accusations of selfie narcissism. As Burns (2015) writes, “Selfishness is a particularly barbed insult when directed at women, as it references the subject’s transgression of the norm of feminine self-sacrifice” (p. 1729). If the disciplining of women takes place, in part, through norms of self-sacrifice, accusations of narcissism do not simply serve as a mandate for social regulation, as Burns suggests, they speak to the threat engendered by this repudiation of the social, particularly by those subjects most often called upon to do the work of reproducing the social through birthing children and caring for the family.

Rather than hastily dismissing attributions of narcissism as empirically unfounded and/or as an attempt to stigmatize

selfie-takers, we might instead consider these discursive constructions and associations as inadvertently disclosing the political potential of narcissism—in a particular form—as a “hygienic” mode of relationality, to borrow phrasing from Leo Bersani (1987). Writing about and within psychoanalytic discourse, Bersani suggests that desire for the similar circumvents the violence that characterizes relations structured by difference. Bersani’s argument hinges upon the notion that “difference is the one thing we cannot bear,” insofar as difference always threatens to shatter the boundaries of the ego (Bersani and Phillips, 2008, p. viii). The psychic processes—identification, projection, and so on—through which the ego attempts to eliminate difference speaks to this threat. There is thus no innocent interest in difference, including “supposedly disinterested pursuits of knowledge” (ethnography comes to mind, particularly insofar as it has been held up as a corrective to false attributions of narcissism); the desire to know the other is invariably motivated by a desire to eliminate the threat of its difference (Bersani, 2015, p. 2). This is also true of liberal humanism, which masks its violence in the rhetoric of love. As Bersani notes, Freud and Lacan thoroughly demystify the notion that “in love, the human subject is exceptionally open to otherness” (Bersani and Phillips, 2008, p. 74).

Importantly, however, it is not simply that the world is composed of “differential otherness,” but rather that the world is seen this way in “a misrecognition of the subject’s perception of a differential otherness within the subject’s self” (Bersani, 2015, p. 45). In other words, it is not the outside world that is the problem, but the subject itself, hence Bersani’s embrace of male bottoming as self-shattering in his canonical essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?” As he writes, “An intersubjectivity grounded in the subject-object dualism is perhaps inevitably condemned . . . to a paranoid relationality” (Bersani, 2015, p. 3).

This begs the question, what alternative modes of relationality might escape this dualism and the violence it engenders? In place of relations of difference, Bersani suggests that relations of similitude outside the strictures of identity could undermine or circumvent the motive for violence. More specifically, he offers what he terms “impersonal narcissism” as an alternative to “the limiting and harmful assumption that intimacy necessarily includes, indeed may depend on, a knowledge of the other’s personal psychology” (Bersani, 2015, p. 5). He explains that the modifier “impersonal” is meant to clarify that one’s interest in another person need not target their unique personality or personal difference, but rather their “universal singularity.” In this way, Bersani opens up the seemingly paradoxical notion of a similar (rather than different) other, distinguishing “impersonal narcissism” from the conflict with otherness that characterizes narcissism in psychoanalytic discourse.

Impersonal narcissism is not individualistic, as narcissism is sometimes understood, insofar as individualism is “grounded in the notion of a fundamental opposition, or difference of being, between the subject and the world” (Bersani,

2015, p. 34). Rather, it moves beyond “the very opposition between sameness and difference,” subject and world/object, so that this opposition might become “irrelevant as a structuring category of being” (Bersani and Phillips, 2008, p. 86). In short, Bersani suggests that desire for the similar and, perhaps, indifference toward the different ultimately work to undo the same/different binary so fundamental to social relations and their endemic violence.

Similarly, Tim Dean (2001) has stressed the importance of maintaining an analytical distinction between otherness and difference, a distinction often lost in psychoanalytic thought (in which otherness is subsumed under sexual difference) as well as in particular feminist critiques of psychoanalysis. Making this distinction allows Dean to preserve a kind of otherness that does not get collapsed into a same/different binary and is thus spared from intersubjectivity. While it might seem ironic that a desire for the similar would provide a foundation for non-violence, it is precisely an attunement to the simultaneous sameness and otherness of others that for both Bersani and Dean neutralizes what to the ego would otherwise be the threat of difference.

## Surface and Depth

There is something else queer about Narcissus: his transfixion by an image. In the myth, Narcissus’ desire for himself is wrapped up in his seduction by the image of himself. Similarly, there is a kind of discursive alignment in popular diagnoses of selfie narcissism between what one might call a politics of desire and a politics of images, where the failure to develop desire for the other coincides with and is mapped onto an inability to discern the real from its image, and, ultimately, an insufficient concern with the real, where the real becomes a discursive proxy for the other. Like Narcissus, selfie-takers are imagined as unable to tear themselves away from their own reflections and to attend to others/the real.

In the Ovidian myth, Narcissus is at first deceived by his reflection—“that false image”—thinking it to be a real, other person: “Unknowingly he desires himself, and the one who praises is himself praised, and, while he courts, is courted, so that, equally, he inflames and burns” (Ovid, 2000). Initially, Narcissus is not able to distinguish appearance from reality—“He loves a bodiless dream. He thinks that a body, that is only a shadow”—nor is he able to recognize his own appearance as such. Then, suddenly, the myth changes course. Narcissus says,

I am he. I sense it and I am not deceived by my own image. I am burning with love for myself. I move and bear the flames. What shall I do? Surely not court and be courted? Why court then? What I want I have. My riches make me poor. O I wish I could leave my own body! Strange prayer for a lover, I desire what I love to be distant from me.

Narcissus is thus able to realize his reflection as a sort of punishment, the impetus for his impossible desire to possess

himself: “I am allowed to gaze at what I cannot touch, and so provide food for my miserable passion!” While the image is apart from his being, it is somehow insufficiently distant, such that he desires to leave his own body; distance is required in order to possess one’s object of desire. Narcissus’ reflection in the pool creates an illusion of distance, but real distance (and possession) requires the presence of a distinct, separate other who one might possess; if Narcissus is his own love object, he is a queer object.

It is because Narcissus rejects his suitors that his subsequent image-fixation can be read as an expression of his disinterest in the real, where the real (in contrast to the image) becomes a proxy for the other and, beyond this, for valued modes of relationality. It is no coincidence that narcissists are thought to be insufficiently concerned both with other people and with the real—those depths that lie hidden beneath the surfaces by which the narcissist has been seduced; the other *is* the real to which the image-obsessed narcissist has failed to attend. When we are scolded for not attending to the “real world” or our “real lives,” this invariably means that we are somehow failing our social obligations.

If the real serves as a proxy for valued forms of relationality, the image expresses precisely the opposite: antisocial forms of relationality—irresponsible, unaccountable, and so on. This holds not only for the image but for other forms of surface as well, particularly when these forms are embraced, as in queer cultural practices built around appearance, aesthetic, and costume—practices like drag pageantry and looking for hookups on apps like Grindr. These practices are unapologetically superficial, refusing the heteropatriarchal logic that would deploy “superficial” as an insult, preferring instead to indulge the erotics of spectacle, of looking and being looked at.

This is also to point out that the image is discursively proximate to the object; to be taken with images is to be taken with the object-properties of things. It is also to put oneself into particular kinds of relations with others, in which one might become an object to be regarded, or take pleasure in another’s object-properties, or both. To be narcissistic, then, is not only to be self-centered to the point of solipsism, but to be a diminished subject; narcissists, as Christopher Lasch (1991) laments, are self-centered but not self-reliant. It is not simply any self that Lasch values, but a particular self: lead by reason not emotion, immune to the delights of consumer capitalism, and family-oriented. Narcissism thus entails two distinct (though related) failures: a failure to relate to others properly, and to individuate properly. Following Bersani, one might say that the narcissist’s “disinterest” in depths indicates a refusal of subject-object dualism, insofar as this dualism is established, in part, through the identification of an unknown depth—the unconscious—that belongs to the subject. One might see this refusal expressed in the way that the selfie-taker is both subject (the arm/eye that takes the photograph) and object (the same arm/eye that appears in the photograph), as I discuss below.



The anxiety surrounding the image—rooted, I am suggesting, in an attempt to discipline forms of relationality—is exacerbated when the image is of the self, or is understood as an extension of the self, rather than as engendering or evidencing proper social ties.<sup>4</sup> There seems to be something particularly unnerving about taking a keen interest in one's own image—an extension, perhaps, of the perversion of being sexually excited by the sight of one's own body in a mirror, as Ellis (2004, p. 188) cites Iwan Bloch—as indexed by the anxiety that surrounds the selfie as an expression of narcissism. Recall that Narcissus is not simply transfixed by any image, but by his own image. The pathologization of this self-interest has been carried discursively through the intertwined diagnoses of narcissism and homosexuality, surfacing now in popular debate surrounding the selfie.

A queer reading of both Narcissus and the selfie might thus find politically compelling the interest in one's likeness which, as Dean points out by way of Jacques Lacan, offers a mode of relation to otherness—the otherness of one's own image—prior to the processes of identification/differentiation. It should be pointed out that Dean (2001) ultimately contends that ethics “depends not on familiarity and likeness, but comes into its own when we confront the other's strangeness” (p. 129), though this confrontation entails a reckoning with our own constitutive otherness. More to the point, as Dean (2001) writes about the other (following Laplanche and Foucault), “In the end there may be no mystery to penetrate”; constituted outside an identical/different binary, the other ceases to be a threat (p. 135). Here, Dean cites Bersani's conceptualization of “homo-ness” as “inaccurate self-replication,” suggesting that the ethics Dean is searching for may indeed have something to do with likeness.

Jonathan Flatley's work on Andy Warhol is more helpful in this regard. Flatley draws a connection between Warhol's unusual capacity for liking things—anything and everything, it seems—and his interest in and production of likenesses: images and objects of a similar kind. Following Jean Luc Nancy, Flatley notes that to like the similar is not the same as liking the identical; the similar exceeds the identical/different binary by being both the same and different, as in Warhol's silkscreens. One might think here too of André Gide's novel *The Immoralist*, in which the protagonist Michel finds a new lease on life through an awakened sexual desire for young boys while living in Tunisia. Writing about this novel, Bersani (1996) observes, “Untroubled and unconcerned by difference, [Michel] seeks, in those beautifully healthy Arab boys, nothing more than to touch inaccurate replications of himself, extensions of himself” (p. 124). Resemblance, in Flatley's (2010) framework (as in Bersani's), is a condition for “emotional connection, even affectivity itself” (p. 74). In other words, an attunement to the similar opens us to the world affectively, offering it up as potential material to which we might attach. Difference, in this framework, becomes a “nonthreatening supplement to sameness” (Bersani, 1996, p. 7). Grouped together, the similar does not

constitute a society or community, Flatley writes, but rather a kind of assemblage, linked precisely insofar as it is not unified. Again, Bersani's (1996) reading of Gide is instructive in terms of imagining antisocial or simply non-communal forms of relationality:

Michel's pederasty is the model for intimacies devoid of intimacy. It proposes that we move irresponsibly among other bodies, somewhat indifferent to them, demanding nothing more than that they be as available to contact as we are, and that, no longer owned by others, they also renounce self-ownership and agree to that loss of boundaries which will allow them to be, with us, shifting points of rest in a mobile communication of being. (p. 128)

## Conclusion

Is the contemporary proliferation of selfies indicative of a toxic culture of narcissism as critics fear? Or might the practice of taking selfies be empowering in certain contexts? I have framed my argument here to avoid these questions, not because we need to “break through this hype” (as Senft and Baym propose), but because their very asking assumes that narcissism is a problem, and in so doing participates in the valuing and reproduction of particular modes of relationality that ironically pose a much greater threat to otherness than the kinds of impersonally narcissistic sociability Bersani and other queer theorists have imagined. My aim has thus been to interrupt the asking of these questions in order to identify their political unconscious and contest their normative ends; it is this unconscious and these ends that are primarily of interest here, rather than the actual practices or motivations of selfie-takers. My hope is that this interruption might lead scholars not to move beyond the discourse of narcissism, but to entertain this discourse in reformulating and responding to the above questions in new and different ways that appreciate the political utility of what we might think of as selfie-takers' “inaptitude . . . for sociality as it is known” (to borrow phrasing from Bersani, 1996, p. 76).

To begin to theorize this inaptitude, we might consider Geoffrey Batchen's observation that selfies enact a shift in popular photographic practices, from using photographs to remember, to using them to communicate (Colman, 2010). For my purposes here, it is useful to read this shift through Jean Baudrillard's argument in *Simulacrum and Simulation*. Baudrillard essentially queers the relation between the real and its so-called representation, inverting this relation so that the representation—or “simulacrum” as it is renamed to accommodate this inversion—could be said to produce the real, rather than holding a mirror to it. If the prospect of a distorted representation produces discomfort for those invested in the idea of the real, this prospect at least preserves the reality principle. As Baudrillard (1994) writes, “One can live with distorted truth” (p. 5). The notion of the simulacrum, of a “real without origin,” on the other hand,



does not preserve the reality principle, and thus can engender a kind of “metaphysical despair.” What the selfie suggests, then, in its drift away from a memorializing function and toward a communicative function, is that photographs produce the real, rather than representing it. Or perhaps more accurately, for critics, the selfie unsettlingly undermines the concept of the real by removing its discursive partner, representation. Insofar as the real is a discursive proxy for the social, this is a disturbing proposition indeed.

The “reality” produced by the selfie-taker places them at the center not only of the photograph but of the universe, as Kate Losse (2013) writes. This produced self is not stable, but rather “enacted” or “post-authentic,” as Paul Frosh (2015) and Rob Horning (2014) have argued. If photographic technology previously allowed for a boundary between the photographer and the person photographed, a boundary that provided a material foundation for the concepts of the real and its representation, not to mention subject and object, the selfie makes explicit its own construction, in part through the visible arm that reaches to the camera—the arm of the photographer/photographed. This seemingly minor detail creates a significant rift between a photograph that says “see this, here now,” and a selfie that says “see me showing you me,” as Frosh (2015) writes (p. 1610). For this reason, Frosh calls the selfie a “gesture of mediation.”

As a gesture, the selfie produces not only the enacted, post-authentic self at its center, but a particular mode of relationality as well. This mode is established, in part, through stimulating and evoking an “outside point of view” through which a desired self can temporarily congeal (Horning, 2014). In other words, the selfie constructs a momentary self through constructing the perspective from which that self becomes legible, a perspective that viewers are invited to occupy. This is reminiscent of Bersani and Phillips’s (2008) discussion of “virtual being” as an alternative to distinct identify formation:

In the generous narcissism of the exchange between Socratic lovers, each partner demands of the other . . . that he reflect the lover’s type of being, his universal singularity (and not his psychological particularities, his personal difference), by recognizing and cultivating that singularity as his own most pervasive, most pressing potentiality. If we were able to relate to others according to this model of impersonal narcissism, what is different about others (their psychological individuality) could be thought of as merely the envelope of the more profound (if less fully realized, or completed) part of themselves which is our sameness. (p. 86)

The word “reflect” is evocative here, reminiscent of Narcissus gazing at his own image, and suggests a visual dimension to the relations of similitude established through impersonal narcissism. The selfie not only invites us to see others as they want to be seen—lingering on their superficial, object qualities, rather than their subjecthood, psyche, or “voice”—but to become like them, not just in terms of resemblance but also in finding pleasure in similar modes of

appearing/being and relating. Furthermore, we may have no supplementary knowledge of the selfie-taker to contest or “disprove” their image; they are as they appear—image is everything. Again, this is politically interesting insofar as it is the attraction to similitude (and indifference to difference) that circumvents psychosocial motives for violence, as Bersani suggests.

Perhaps, then, what so rankles critics about the selfie is its invitation to reflect others’ “types of being” and little else: no relations of responsibility, accountability, or sacrifice; no knowledge of the other’s illicit desires or innermost psychological truths; no ugly interior to expose in exchange for love or redemption; and no threatening difference to be assimilated, deported, or otherwise annihilated. In the selfie, critics see not only a vehicle for our superficiality but also, alongside this, a mechanism for our detachment from social bonds. Far from being anti-relational, though, the selfie disturbs in the kinds of perverse attachments it solicits: irresponsible, unaccountable, fickle, and fleeting, where social bonds are responsible, accountable, dedicated, and sustained.

Given this, how should we respond to the charge that selfies are narcissistic? In her book *Willful Subjects*, Sara Ahmed offers the provocation that subjects charged with willfulness might not contest, but rather accept this charge. She writes,

As with other political acts of reclaiming negative terms, reclaiming willfulness is not necessarily premised on an affective conversion, that is, on converting a negative into a positive term. On the contrary, to claim willfulness might involve not only hearing the negativity of the charge, but insisting on retaining that negativity: the charge after all is what keeps us proximate to scenes of violence. (Ahmed, 2014)

The word “queer,” Ahmed observes, can work in the same way. Following Ahmed, I offer that there may be something to be gained in indulging the discourse of narcissism, rather than leaving it behind. Instead of arguing against attributions of narcissism as a means of exclusion from the public sphere, as Burns does—an argument that contains an implicit valuing of the public sphere, its speaking subjects, and the society served by these—this would mean allowing for a more sweeping refusal of the social. This is not to say that selfies are always antisocial, or an expression of narcissism. Nor is it to say that we ought to value the selfie as narcissistic, shifting narcissism from the “bad” column to the “good” column. Rather, it is simply to say that narcissism may be the selfie’s most radical political accomplishment.

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## Notes

1. This pattern of analysis (narcissism vs empowerment) has been noted by a number of scholars, including Ori Schwarz (2010), Ilija Tomanić Trivundža (2015), Alice Marwick (2015), and Theresa M. Senft and Nancy K. Baym (2015).
2. The concept of narcissism has long been used to explain, diagnose, and rectify a variety of troubling social and cultural phenomena: the emergence of mass society and the concomitant marketization of social relations, the decline of the family, the rise of fascism, the advent of identity politics, and now the breakdown of social relations at the hands of social media. The concept has been ideologically elastic enough to accommodate both the Right—as in work by Daniel Bell (1976), Christopher Lasch (1991), and David Brooks (2015)—and the Left—as in work by Theodor Adorno (1968), Richard Sennett (1977), Luce Irigaray (1985), and Julia Kristeva (1987). Contemporary analyses of the selfie as an expression of narcissism are the most recent expression of this discursive strategy (see Hanson, 1992).
3. For the purposes of this article, I am interested in narcissism primarily as it is popularly understood and maligned, that is, as the condition of being excessively vain, self-centered, self-absorbed, ego-driven, and so on. As Ellen Willis (2012) has observed, “narcissistic” is jargon for “selfish and irresponsible” (p. 151).
4. Of course not all image-interest is cause for anxiety. Family photographs, for example, serve precisely as a defense against anxiety, as Susan Sontag (1973) notes (p. 8).

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