PHOTOGRAPHING EVERYTHING AND SEEING NOTHING

TRAVEL SELFIES AS PERFORMANCE, AFFIRMATION OF SOCIAL-COLLECTIVE PERCEPTION, SPATIAL COLLAPSE

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In *White Noise*, Don DeLillo wrote of a well-trafficked tourist destination he called "The Most Photographed Barn in America." Because it is known through a proliferation of photographs, he suggests, "no one sees the barn" anymore. Thus, making a picture of the barn is not about '*looking*', but akin to "taking pictures of taking pictures" –a performative mass social ritual of image-making. This behavior also is a relational means of collapsing physical space to connect psychologically and virtually with larger narratives of the human experience for both the selfie subject and their social-media followers. Thus, travel selfies remediate physical and psychological distances and, in Walter Benjamin's terms, "bring things spatially and humanly closer."

This essay takes a closer look the reframing of both physical distance and psychological presence by digital travel selfies. Rather than being a means of producing subjects/objects to behold and to archive as 'embalmed' memories or artifacts of personal history for later review, digital social-media travel photographs are driven by different relational impulses: the collapse of material conceptions of time and space, the performance and promotion of self-as-'avatar', the dissolution of psychological space between viewer and subject, and by communal/network participation.

INTRODUCTION

In the novel *White Noise*, Don DeLillo wrote of a well-trafficked tourist destination he called "The Most Photographed Barn in America" (DeLillo, 1999, p. 11). The barn itself is not particularly exceptional, majestic, or historic in any way, but instead derives its fame from the mere fact of *'being photographed'*. Moreover, because this structure is so well-known through others' photographs, DeLillo writes: "No one sees the barn" anymore. Making a picture of the barn, he suggests, is not about *looking*, but akin to "taking pictures of taking pictures" a performative social ritual of image-making tied to the mass-cultural behavior and experience of tourism. The sharing of these images remediates physical and psychological distances between photographer and viewer by making faraway sites accessible. In Walter Benjamin's terms, such images "bring things spatially and humanly 'closer' " (1935-1969, p. 5).

Although DeLillo imagined this scene in 1985, and Benjamin was writing even earlier in the 1930s, their observations about the psychological impact of image reproduction and dissemination are remarkably prescient of the state of the medium in today's Post-Digital age, as digital photography's diverse social practices have become normalized and entrenched in our sensorium. Smartphones and social media enable users worldwide to share their digital images online with a global audience almost as quickly as they are made. The acts of photographing, uploading and 'sharing' images on social media, and 'reacting' to them, have become mere reflexes in a culture in which we skim a dizzying succession of visual stimuli very quickly, enjoy keeping up with a network of others (with whom we may or may not be 'real-world friends'), and employ such images as a means of virtual socialization. As a result, Om Malik (2016) quipped that in the digital age, more than ever, we "photograph everything and look at nothing". A travel destination cedes importance to the '*photographer's presence*' with it and often does so literally, as the backdrop for a selfie. Social/psychological spaces thus su-

persede and provide a surrogate presence for online viewers in an actual, tangible, material space.

This essay takes a closer look at digital social-media travel self-portrait photography. Rather than being a means of producing subjects/objects to behold and to archive as 'embalmed' memories or artifacts of personal history (an approach often associated with analog, or pre-digital, photography), digital social-media travel photographs are driven by different impulses: the collapse of material conceptions of time and space to enable a mediated virtual presence, the performance and promotion of self-as-'avatar', the dissolution of psychological space between viewer and subject, and by communal/network participation.

TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHY AS PERFORMING COMMUNAL CULTURE, TWICE OVER

As the characters arrive at "The Most Photographed Barn in America", DeLillo offers this commentary on photography in the dialogue of *White Noise*: "We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura. Can you feel it, Jack? An accumulation of nameless energies" (1999, p. 11). These "energies", he notes, have a momentum of their own, derived from the seductiveness of participation in an exercise that unites mass-culture-connected humankind. DeLillo writes that "thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We've agreed to be a part of the collective perception. […]. A religious experience in a way, like all tourism" (1999, p. 11). In analog and digital photographic practices alike, photographers are motivated by the desire to mark one's own presence at a site of mass-cultural significance. At this point of the image-making process, the material space (of the original, singular site –such as the barn itself) remains important. In this last section of chapter three of *White Noise*, DeLillo suggests that the act of photographing the barn "maintains"

the "aura" of the act of photographing the barn, which is a ritual of the "collective" that droves of people before him have enacted (1999, p. 11). This allows the individual to connect to a grand narrative larger than him/her/itself, and to contribute to the site's mythology by supporting the pilgrimage's importance. When each tourist shoots a photograph, they enact near-'religious' mass-cultural behaviors that DeLillo suggests are an innate part of the 'tourism' experience. Moreover, they act according to peculiar anxiety about human mortality that Roland Barthes discusses in *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1981, p. 87) by marking the importance of their own life within a grander cultural narrative and shared experience, and by endowing "a certificate of presence" at the tourism site before death would steal their opportunity to do so.

Performing communality is not only about connecting to humankind on the site of pilgrimage. In the digital age, photographers rapidly and easily 'share' such images on social-media pages to enact a "*second*" and significant facet of social relations. Mette Sandbye has suggested that digital photographs embody a very different approach to documenting and preserving the past. She writes: "[t]oday photography is predominantly a social, everyday activity rather than a memory-embalming one, creating presence, relational situations, and communication" (Sandbye, 2016, p. 97).

Indeed, the making and online-sharing of photographs is a means of documenting the self, of connecting to others, of conveying the desired persona, and of maintaining relationships. This is to say, social-media photography functions as visual rhetoric that weaves a calculated personal narrative, rather than functioning as an 'objective' document that maintains a critical distance from its subjects. For example, in the dialogue of *White Noise*, DeLillo asks:

"What was the barn like before it was photographed?" he said. "What did it look like, how was it different from other barns, how was it similar to other barns? We can't answer these questions because we've read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures. We can't get outside the aura.

We're part of the aura. We're here, we're now." (DeLillo, 1999, p. 11) This is to say, travel photographs have a different function. They stop being about 'the barn', the material site, and affirming its greatness (for virality often renders the tourist destination's historic/cultural significance optional), but are about the '*photographer*', and the opportunity to share a certification of their presence with others. Material space transforms into a psychological, relational, and social space. This does not obliterate the site's literal material presence (which is still important for the practicality of pilgrimage), but reinforces of its nebulous, viral 'aura' while maintaining a more privileged temporal digital space that brings the material site within vicarious reach of online viewers. These social-media viewers enjoy a surrogate presence in that site's space through the photographer's, while affirming the site's 'aura'.

For example, in the BBC television series and book *Ways of Seeing* (1990), John Berger commented that the experience of viewing Leonardo da Vinci's seminal painting *Mona Lisa* (1503) is not about appreciating the actual painting, which became the subject of viral fascination and extensive mechanical reproduction for the first time after its theft from the Louvre Museum in 1911, and its two-year disappearance. The painting's virality, therefore, was not a direct result of its unique quality among da Vinci's work, but was a consequence of media coverage. As a result, a journey to see the artwork is not about a quiet, contemplative art-viewing experience. Once visitors enter the gallery housing the *Mona Lisa* (and countless other tourists), they are kept a distance the artwork, which many viewers comment is –in person– much smaller than they expected (from the many parody memes, postcards, mousepads, cookie jars, ties, t-shirts, refrigerator magnets, cartoons, etc., that they have seen of the painting before making the trip to see the original). Of those who wait to get a spot near the front of the rope-line, surprisingly few people actually '*look*' at the painting. Most miss the more mysterious aspects of the *Mona Lisa*, such as the winding roads in the background that differ on each side of the canvas.

As Berger suggested (1990, pp. 19-34), it is amazingly difficult for viewers to form new thoughts and ideas about this artwork because its likeness has been so widely circulated and parodied by the time they see the original version. This is to say, mass culture and mechanical/digital reproduction have assimilated the *Mona Lisa* into the pantheon of ritual, communal art-tourism, stripping of it of its original intent and framing as a masterwork of fine art and lending it a visual repackaging becoming of social-media-circulated selfies and memes. The taking of a selfie in the presence of the *Mona Lisa* functions as a verification of oneself in the artwork's popular presence (Berger, 1977, pp. 7-34) for sharing with others.

Berger's proposition was based on ideas raised in Walter Benjamin's 1935 essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in which Benjamin coined terms such as 'aura', 'authenticity', and 'cult value' to describe how photomechanical media's dissemination of images pluralizes their meanings. Berger's and Benjamin's essays are especially germane to our study of the 'viral effect' of social media today, which have sped up this phenomenon and placed photographic dissemination in the hands of anyone possessing an internet-enabled device. Virality, as this essay has suggested, regularized the selfie, its unspoken conventions, and encouraged its replication – especially for sharing certification of one's presence in a site of tourism.

What the *Mona Lisa* has become –a prompt for the socialized practice of relational photography, with its reconfiguration of spatial and temporal relationships– is no less interesting for academic study. Certainly, seeing the *Mona Lisa* is an act of participating in a 'collective' behavior of making the pilgrimage, and an affirmation of the importance of the artwork' material presence. Tourism function as means to belong to a historical narrative larger than ourselves. We are not born knowing that we need to photograph the *Mona Lisa*, or ourselves with it. This is also a behavior learned from the example of others' ritualistic behaviors at the destination, or shared on social media. It is born from the desire to connect

to humankind via participation in that pilgrimage (which is then shared on social media). The performance of photographing, enacted by many –in the spirit of producing a tangible, lasting souvenir that testifies to one's presence with the painting– produces an expected, anticipated 'normative' expectation of photograph-taking by all, with smartphones, on the site of the *Mona Lisa*.

Once made, the resulting digital photograph has an additional communal function as it is typically shared on *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Snapchat*, *Twitter*, and more –with social media 'friends'. These often are people we may not have spoken to, or seen in 'real life', for extended periods of time. Nonetheless, one's social-media 'friends' opt to follow a person's posts– which include travel photography. The illusions of social intimacy and physical proximity are affirmed by social mediation. This was especially urgent during COVID-19 quarantines worldwide, as the freedom to travel and enjoy social intimacy were challenged, especially during the 'lost' summer of 2020.

The experience of travel, in particular, provides social-media friends with a surrogate 'presence' for their own, as well as the touristic, vicarious experience of being there (only without having to '*be*' there). This allows viewers to feel a personal investment in –or connection to– a news event or historical/touristic site when they might not otherwise have one. Space is thus collapsed and an association with the site is enabled via social connection to the poster.

Social-media photography also participates in an arena of online reception that invites a unique array of emoji-expressed external judgments from viewers or 'friends', including a 'thumbs-up' (for approval, or 'likes'), hearts (to denote 'love'), 'sad'/'angry'/ 'laughing'/ and 'wow' faces. Social-media posts also have prompts that invite 'friends' to add written commentary that may evolve into semi-public conversations among the poster and his/her/their mutual 'friends'. Such digital vernacular photographs are '*relational*', and their functions are rooted in the genre's function as social commu-

nication with an online audience, and a desire to connect to the outside world. This is another way the digital, vernacular, social-media travel photograph enacts communality and relational behavior to collapse previous notions of space and render them psychologically accessible.

Such images and the narratives that they encourage, however, convey a distorted sense of intimacy and an immediacy of the connection between the taker and viewer, and between the site and the viewer. Photographers may form bonds with social-media 'followers', bonds that often themselves are built on a narrative that conveys a desired, edited, contrived version of the self, an online, semi-public version of an online persona, or 'avatar'. Digital social-media photography thus functions visual rhetoric that weaves and supports a calculated personal contextualizing narrative (one in which the photographer or selfie subject is witnessing history on that very site, firsthand), rather than functioning as an 'objective' document, or as proof of what Barthes (1981, p. 96) called a "that which has been". This inherently marks a shift away from discourses that see such images only in 'analog' terms of 'embalming memory' and preserving the past in materialized form. Instead, the selfie creates and maintains a social persona, a version of the self 'as the poster/author wants to appear' to others. Travel photography, in particular, kindles the persona of the jet-setting, enviable 'friend' who has the financial means, physical mobility, and the adventurous spirit to engage in mass-culture-encouraged acts of pilgrimage. (Before the digital era, inviting neighbors and friends over to your house to enjoy snacks, conversation, and to watch a narrated version of your vacation slide show was a common middle-class social practice in the United States in the 1950s-1970s.) In the internet age, showing off one's travels is a means of displaying one's worldliness, wanderlust, and wealth, all of which are markers of internationalist politics and/or financial privilege.

PERFORMING COMMUNALITY: A RELATIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY

As images that convey a desired narrative of the self for a semi-public audience of social-media 'friends', travel photographs do not assume a traditionally assumed documentary function. They are an example of "the power of authentification exceed[ing] the power of representation" (Barthes, 1981, p. 89). Rather, travel selfies certify the presence of both the selfie-taker and the site of tourism, rather than provide a lasting material touchstone for the appearance of that tourist destination. Digital social-media travel photographs are driven by different impulses: the participation in a communal cultural event, providing a virtual touchstone for projected presence in another space and time, contributing to a collective perception of the site, the performance of virtual-sociality, and the maintenance of a social-media narrative that is synonymous with one's online persona, or 'avatar'.

While travel selfies are visually forgettable for their rigorous compliance with established selfie norms or pose and expression, their memorability resides instead in their performance of relational, virtually-social, performative behavior that supports the selfie-taker's image 'as they wish to appear' in the eyes of others. Selfies –frequently dismissed by commentators on visual mass culture as shallow and depthless– thus reveal themselves to be rich artifacts that reveal encultured social behaviors, and speak to the importance of virtual social connections and surrogate presences. As DeLillo suggested in a description of the touristic experience of 'most photographed barn in America' in *White Noise*: "We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one." (1999, p. 11). Only in the selfie age, it is not just the 'barn' whose 'auratic' image needs constant maintenance and connection to something larger than itself, but the selfie-maker's, the viewer's, and the site's, as well.

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