

The Selfie and the Low-Resolution Self: Beyond Foucault's Technologies of the Self

Elena Tavani

The article discusses Foucault's «technologies of the self» by reconsidering the link between ethics and aesthetics in this paradigm, with a view to its possible application to selfie technology as a «gestural image» (Frosh). This reconsideration stems from a close examination of the self as understood by the concept of technologies of the self, emphasizing also the aesthetic aspects of its rationality and of its phenomenological dimension. The article also highlights how technologies of the self fail to overturn the logic of domination, which is still present in Foucault's formulation and is likewise evident in «performative» interpretations of both Foucault's technologies of the self and of the techno-social phenomenon of the selfie. From this perspective, the article proposes not to consider the «self of the selfie» as a mere support for self-narrative or as a product of performative action, but rather to view it as a «low-resolution self». In displaying itself through an act of outward projection within often complex situations and environments, this «low-resolution self» embodies a new ethos of coexistence and connectivity. On this basis, the question of interpreting the selfie phenomenon as a technology of the self shifts into a broader inquiry, where the focus moves from a technology of the self to an ecology of the self.

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1. The self of the technologies of the self

One of the questions I pose in this contribution is the following: can we define the selfie as a «technology of the self», with reference to the expression introduced by Michael Foucault? This may seem like a trivial question, but if we consider it closely it is not. In fact, many answer affirmatively.

I believe this has happened and continues to happen because the self is simply assumed to be the element that performs certain practices, where the focus is on the distinctions made at the level of practices and their technologies. Thus, since the selfie also constitutes a practice that involves a «relation to oneself», in the form of visual self-narrative or self-writing, enabled by digital technology, namely the camera of portable devices – as in videos, blogs, travelogues, self-tracking – it follows that it can indeed be considered a technology of the self. My proposal is to change course. That is, to focus not only on the practical qualities but also on aesthetic qualities of the self at play in Foucault's technologies of the self, and then turn to the «self of the selfie» to see whether and how its aesthetic and practical qualities differ from those of the former.

Foucault approaches the self by describing a plane of behaviours and operations that respond to a certain type of rationality, which he calls practical. It is this *plane of exteriority*, devised by Foucault to remove the self from the internal theatre of reflection, that I believe may offer some useful insights for focusing on the «self of the selfie». This is a self that cannot be separated from its being an image and whose perception of itself is “entangled” with digital technology.

In his 1982 essay *Technologies of the Self*, Foucault defines technologies of the self as those:

Which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality¹.

I will come back shortly to the verb used here, «to effect». Foucault is thinking of Seneca, Epictetus, Plutarch, Xenophon. He is interested in the «ethical» thought of Stoicism and the ancient Socratic schools. These are primarily moral programs of «care of the self», or *epimeleia heautou*. Among these, the *Moral letters to Lucilius* by Seneca stand out: remedies and prescriptions for the «care» of the self – a true «clinic for the soul»². But what exactly needs remedying?

Foucault's starting point is that the subject is the byproduct of power and power relationships. It is notably one of the prime effects of power that «certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires» come to be identified and constituted as individuals³. Foucault explains that it is power itself that constructs the individual as a tool to confirm and provide power with a basis for its articulation: «the individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle»⁴. What is mainly underlined about this critique is the fact that power «determines the conduct of individuals and submits them to certain ends of domination»⁵. Here, we begin to understand that «care of the self» is required to remedy the expropriation of bodies, gestures, desires and discourses carried out by power, which organizes all these aspects of individuals' lives so they may be regulated based on a series of ends. However, there is one further issue, an element that needs to be added to the picture.

What is the main tool with which power determines the conduct of individuals? The game cannot be played solely on the basis of force or coercion. Foucault is perfectly aware of this, and this is the reason why he clearly emphasises the very close relation between «power» and «knowledge». The entanglement of power with knowledge focused on by Foucault implies that every time it occurs, in some context, a power-mediation, as it were, also occurs, ipso facto, a knowledge-mediation, a process of *identification* enacted by knowledge⁶. On this basis Foucault clarifies the idea of the «technologies of the self»: a practical way for the self to escape the subjugation by the *external* regulation imposed by the power/knowledge interaction. This however does *not* mean that one eludes

¹ M. Foucault, *Technologies of the Self* in L.H. Martin, H. Gutman, P.H. Hutton (eds.) *Technologies of the Self: a Seminar with Michel Foucault*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press 1988, p. 18.

² See P. Fabbri, *The Care of the Self*, “Comparative Civilizations Review”, vol. 22, n. 22, 1990.

³ M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge, Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, New York: Pantheon 1980, p. 98.

⁴ See *ibid.*

⁵ See M. Foucault, *Technologies of the Self* in L.H. Martin, H. Gutman, P.H. Hutton (eds.) *Technologies of the Self: a Seminar with Michel Foucault*. University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst 1988, p. 18.

⁶ «Knowledge» can either be considered in the traditional sense, as the cooperation of various cognitive faculties, or as the algorithmic process that “discovers” interesting patterns in large databases.

the power/knowledge interaction as such, which seems to be unavoidable. Neither can one elude the logic of control, since the experience of oneself becomes «intensified and widened»⁷ through technology of self-vigilance that Foucault identifies as «care of the self». It is no coincidence that Foucault describes the practical path of the technologies of the self as a path which must run parallel to a renewed self-knowledge (this is Alcibiades' aim).

Foucault attempts to get rid of the terminology of traditional subjectivity, not only by using «self» rather than «subject» to refer to this domain of practices, but also by moving the self from the inner world to the outer one. This shift leads Foucault to speak of the self not as something internal but as a «crossroads» of actions and practices gathered under the concept of «technologies of the self»⁸.

We should therefore ask ourselves what exactly is contained in the now-familiar phrase «technologies of the self», which Foucault introduces as a way of reconfiguring ethics based on the notion of care of the self, or *epimeleisthai heautou*. The core concept is twofold. The first element lies clearly in the term «care», or *epimeleia*. The fact that care unfolds as a technique explains why, in Foucauldian vocabulary, the terms «care of the self» and «technologies of the self» are almost synonymous. But why does Foucault speak of «technologies» rather than simply of strategies or tools for achieving self-transformation aimed at perfecting both soul and body, and thus attaining happiness? The most accurate answer, I believe, can be found when he describes these technologies as «systems of organization» of knowledge in relation to the self (e.g., «What must I know about myself to be willing to give something up?»), or as the enactment of a specific form of rationality that enables individuals to «act upon themselves».

The second element is *heautou*, «of oneself», which specifies both the recipient and agent of care through a genitive that is both objective and subjective. In the phrase «care of the self», the key aspect is the fact that care impacts the *same* person who performs the act of caring. However, the object here should not be understood as an object in the strict sense, nor the subject as a true subject in the conventional sense. To address this, the self – that is, the recipient-and-operator of care – is presented as a dual domain: an operational domain (ethos) and a terrain that encompasses the situations in which care is exercised and the benefits derived from it. In practice, this configuration of care cannot prevent the operator from doubling, it is both an “agent” subject responsible for the individual initiation *and* for the ethical practices informed by the care of the self. This function persists, though it remains

⁷ M. Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*, cit., p. 28.

⁸ This movement echoes what Maurice Blanchot suggested with his idea of writing as a «thought from outside»; see M. Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini*, Gallimard, Paris 1969 and M. Foucault, *La pensée du dehors*, Éditions Fata Morgana, Paris 1986.

somewhat opaque in relation to the self as «crossroads» introduced by Foucault. The suggestion seems to be that this self cannot be identified this side or the other side of the technologies it implements. In fact, the apparatus of technologies of the self does not eliminate the subjective will necessary for its activation, in anticipation of a self-pragmatics.

2. Art of existence and appearing of the (ethically treated) self

The elements Foucault provides to answer this question are helpful only in part, as they also tend to leave it unanswered. Foucault refers to the technology of the self as an «art of existence» or «art of life». Here, art is *techné*, a skill in organizing and shaping material based on a certain type of technical knowledge. In this context, the material is the living substance of our lives – our body, desires, emotions, and thoughts – while the product, the outcome of the organization of this material through a specific (practical) rationality, will also be something practical: an ethos. What about the form? The form is a way of existence, a style – a set of rules we give ourselves. It is easy to see that this idea of setting oneself free from constraints originates from and is influenced by the Enlightenment, as Foucault suggests here, namely from the notion of an individual condition in which individuals are able to transcend themselves – going beyond the “individualization” that determines them from the outside – and exercise a form of freedom in the ethical domain.

The critique of the fictional character of the subject, the critique of its artificial nature, includes a *pars construens*: the appeal to the creative and vital resources that allow individuals to resist, to some degree, the subjugating powers that have shaped them from the outset as individuals functional to the prevailing power/knowledge structures of the time.

Explicitly acknowledging that this aligns with the path outlined by Nietzsche in *The Gay Science*, where he states that through patient practice and daily work, it is possible to “create” one’s life according to a particular style⁹, Foucault articulates this notion as follows: «From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art»¹⁰. From the artifice of a generalized truth constructed for purposes of power and control, one must transition to an art of the self that produces a difference (from that artifice) on the

⁹ M. Foucault, *On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress*, Interview with H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, 1984; also in P. Rabinow (ed.) *The Foucault’s Reader*, Pantheon New York 1984, pp. 340-372.

¹⁰ Here, self-construction should be understood, in line with Nietzsche’s perspective, as self-affirmation – a creative force oriented toward *techne tou biou*, an art of living that involves the formation of a style; see M. Foucault, *L’écriture de soi*. in Id., *Dits et Écrits II, 1976-1988*, Gallimard Paris 2001. See also M. Foucault, *On the Genealogy of Ethics*, cit., p. 351.

factual level of one's life. Among the many issues that can be raised here, I would like to briefly focus on two aspects: the specific rationality that guides the technologies of the self and the type of creativity that can be associated with it.

The nature of the *specific* rationality behind the technologies of the self is, I believe, a point that Foucault did not fully clarify. He describes it as a practical rationality, based on means-end reasoning¹¹. Yet, he simultaneously attributes certain creative qualities to it, making the technical dimension, that is the set of rules and skills employed by practical rationality, an innovative and shaping dimension as well. The new ethical style must be built through an aesthetically and not only ethically creative application of available ethical rules. Without this, the self would not be able to truly transform itself – creating a self that has gained a different, material and ethical understanding of itself. If we consider the outcome of such a practical and shaping rationality, we find that it leads to a new *configuration* of the self. Thus, in addition to the practical and creative level of rationality, there must also be a further aesthetic level, referring now to the self as it appears, as it displays itself in behaving and executing specific actions. The self-as-crossroads must become visible as an active configuration of events and images of itself. The new *appearance* of the self, having reconfigured its ethos, will publicly display both self and ethos¹².

Although Foucault largely leaves aside the aesthetic dimension of the self's appearance, in his 1983 essay on self-writing he claims that:

To write is thus to “show oneself,” to project oneself into view, to make one's own face appear in the other's presence. And by this it should be understood that the letter is both a gaze that one focuses on the addressee (through the missive he receives, he feels looked at) and a way of offering oneself to his gaze by what one tells him about oneself.¹³

Here, the aesthetic nature of the “externity” of a self that reveals itself is quite evident, as it is *offering* itself as an example of a particular technology of the self. This aesthetic dimension pertains to the *appearance* of the self and remains distinct from the poietic-and-creative aspect of self-production. We must therefore say that what is realized through the technologies of the self is a *practice of the self* that is, simultaneously, an *aesthetics of the self*. Put differently, if government of self becomes

¹¹ Foucault defines it a «practical rationality governed by a conscious goal»; see P. Rabinow (ed.) *The Foucault's Reader*, cit., pp. 255-256.

¹² By «aesthetic self» I mean the self as it perceives itself and appears (displays itself) in an opening within a relationship of coexistence with other entities.

¹³ See M. Foucault, *L'écriture de soi*, cit. The 'collective' character of the selfie as a portrait is examined in E. Tavani (ed.), *Selfie& Co. Ritratti collettivi tra arte e web*, Guerini, Milano 2016.

possible through a new, practical knowledge of oneself – given that the constructive aspect of the self, produced through a technology of the self, initiates an unprecedented intertwining of power and self-knowledge – this knowledge will also be shaped by the forms of exteriority and relationships it establishes, making it recognizable. This aspect is already established in the Greek meaning of *ethos*, which «was a way of being of the subject and a certain manner of acting, visible to others»¹⁴.

This need becomes visible in the first scene presented by Foucault at the beginning of the 1982 seminar, taken from Plato's *Alcibiades*, where the question regarding the relationship between care of the self and political activity is raised. Socrates urges the young Alcibiades to confront eros – to find within himself the active principle of erotic activity, that is, to desire rather than to be desired. This self-awareness, along with the qualities it cultivates (initiative, courage, and an ability to listen to oneself), should then be brought into the public sphere, enabling Alcibiades to pursue his political ambitions. In this context, the technique of the self involves moving beyond one's own ignorance – characterized by subjection to laws of which one has little understanding, much like one is subjected in a love affair – and establishing a concrete foundation for the ambition to gain political power. This is achieved by opening oneself to and engaging with the “forms” of exteriority, namely, the communal rules and values of the *polis*: «the ability to govern oneself and the spirit of competition»¹⁵.

On closer inspection, however, all the elements gathered in this description of «governance of the self» raise some concerns. These practices once again resemble disciplines to which one must submit, and the individuality of existence tends to disappear within the «style» it embodies. It seems that with governance of the self the same «sovereign subject» that was thrown out the door comes back through the window.

The persistence of a principle of «dominion» in the dynamic of the technologies of the self has been highlighted in the recent book *The Comic Self*¹⁶. The authors emphasize that, while Foucault's reflection is valuable as a starting point for abandoning the fallacy of the autonomous subject in favor of the self, the very notion of care of the self and of technologies of the self ultimately reinforce «the tyranny of possession». In this sense, Foucault falls into an even subtler fallacy: the defense of self-possession. In other words, he misses the opportunity to take his critique of subjectivity further by

¹⁴ See M. Foucault, *L'éthique du souci de soi comme pratique de la liberté* (1984), in *Dits et Écrits II*, cit.

¹⁵ As Deleuze summarizes in his course on Foucault held in 1985-1986; see G. Deleuze, *Sur Foucault: les formations historiques; année universitaire 1985-1986* [BNF catalogue Gallica]; ed it, *La soggettivazione. Corso su Michel Foucault (1985-1986)*, Ombre Corte, Verona 2020, p. 96.

¹⁶ See T. Campbell, G. Farred, *The Comic Self. Toward Dispossession*, Minnesota University Press, Amherst 2023.

addressing the ownership still presupposed in the concept of governance of the self¹⁷. In a certain way, also the idea of an aesthetic life, of turning oneself into «material for stylization», is to a certain extent ambivalent. It could be seen either as an alternative to the norms of social normalization or perhaps as a more refined form of disciplinary submission, an appearance of freedom¹⁸.

3. Performative creativity?

I would like to further expand the issue of dominion but from a different angle.

When discussing the art of existence or the production of the self through technologies of the self, Foucault uses the term *réaliser*: something that did not previously exist comes into being: a way of existence, a style. In English, this term has been accurately translated as *to effect*, but it has also frequently been rendered as *to perform*¹⁹ in various discussions of Foucault's technologies of the self, including references to the selfie. However, this shift is not as seamless as it might seem. The core issue remains that of rules (which norms should I adhere to within the realm of ethos?). And Foucault's introduction of creativity, drawing on Nietzsche, is crucial here. It suggests that one can exercise a certain creativity over the apparatus of behavioral rules and specifically this creativity can be exercised at the level where ethical rules apply. This nuance, I believe, should caution against substituting *to effect*, which is tied to production, to the actualization of a mode of existence, with *to perform*, especially if it tends to imply not only the concrete use of already existing rules or the execution of something (works or styles), but something more similar to enactment and theatricality, with a reading that tends to be presented as being compatible with Foucault's idea of a self-producing subject.

This interpretive shift largely stems from Judith Butler's rethinking of Foucault's ethical framework through a performative lens, a perspective now well-established²⁰. According to Butler, who acknowledges her indebtedness to Foucault on the theme of self-production, performativity

¹⁷ See *ivi*, in the *Preface*: «Foucault is not incisive enough [...] the central weakness of the Foucauldian notion of “care for the self” lies in the missed opportunity to challenge care on the grounds of property – that is, the proprietariness that founds the notion of self-possession».

¹⁸ See C. Menke, *Zweierlei Übung. Zum Verhältnis von sozialer Disziplinierung und ästhetischer Existenz*, in A. Honneth, M. Saar (Hgs.), *Zwischenbilanz einer Rezeption: Frankfurter Foucault-Konferenz* (2001), Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 2003, pp. 283-299; pp. 296, 299.

¹⁹ The lexical shift is present in many variations on Foucault's technologies of the self.

²⁰ The performative approach in academic studies gained prominence primarily during the 1980s and 1990s, significantly contributing to the fusion that emerged between J.L. Austin's theory of the performative and what is known as the performative turn in fields such as cultural anthropology, sociology, and ethnology. On the subject see E. Fischer-Lichte, *Performativität: eine Einführung*, Transcript, Bielefeld 2012; see also E. Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 2004.

constitutes the condition through which acts, actions, and occurrences can enact a critical intervention in individual and social reality. This paradigm remains central to both gender performativity theory and the more recent assembly theory²¹. For instance, saying that gender is performative implies that gender «consists of a certain kind of enactment». The implications go beyond the transformative potential of an act by virtue of being performative, as this view also assumes a pragmatic basis for access to being, which, in other words, subordinates being to action, ontology to pragmatics²². I emphasize this aspect for a specific reason.

Indeed I believe that Butler's ontological-pragmatic perspective clarifies the ontology underlying the pragmatist approach often found in theories of the performative. The performative act modifies the entities involved in a given situation, both as actors and as spectators. In my opinion Butler's performative twist on Foucault's technologies of the self is possible only at the cost of a certain distortion, which, in a way, removes the sense of "freedom" that these technologies still possess. It fits them into a performative-transformative framework, presented as a formula for all possible «subjectivations», a becoming-subject against subjugation by the system. While I do see the shift from «effect» to «perform» as indicative of this, Butler is, in some sense, also helpful. That is, she helps me grasp, by means of a kind of reverse effect of an interpretation I do not fully agree with, the pragmatist objective that I believe *also* serves as a prerequisite in Foucault for technologies of the self and for self-configuration (or aesthetics of existence). I cannot fully explore this theme here, but if I have mentioned this point it is because it helps shed light on some less visible aspects that might be useful for better evaluating Foucault's position in the context of the critique of subjectivity. Foucault is careful to distance himself from various "subjectivist" currents of the philosophical tradition, yet he overlooks the pragmatism – and therefore, again, a kind of subjectivism – conveyed by the idea that practices «liberate» entities.

I believe this aspect reveals a vulnerability of the theory of technologies of the self that makes it less effective for a critique of subjectivity in the traditional sense. This is especially pertinent regarding its central theme, which is «dominion». The differences achieved through a reconfigured ethos – what is termed «subjectivation» – propose an alternative truth (compared to perspectives that have acquired a general value), which ultimately coincides with a new or renewed possibility of "grasping" and controlling reality, beginning with the reality of one's own existence.

²¹ The framework of the performative is consistently reiterated throughout Judith Butler's body of work, spanning from her exploration of gender constitution (Butler 1988) to her reflections on embodied alliances (Butler 2015).

²² See J. Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Harvard University Press, Harvard 2015.

4. Is the selfie a technology of the self?

Returning to the selfie and its interpretation as a performative act, I would like to briefly mention another (indirect) influence of Judith Butler on the alternative between «performative» and «representational» found in several analyses of the selfie that are influenced by the performative turn. This results in an interesting polarization between viewing the selfie as a technology of the self, coinciding with a representation or narrative of the self, and, conversely, seeing it as a performative act. The alternative, also shaped by some of Butler's positions, becomes one between a performative view of the selfie, one that implies agency, with dynamic and critical potential, akin to the concept of the «non-persistent subject» expressed online²³, and, on the other hand, the selfie as a representation of the self, an image that has some form of “transparency” with respect to the photographed subject²⁴.

For supporters of the performative interpretation of the selfie, particularly considering its nature as a «techno-social» phenomenon, the argument is in favor of an idea of the self opposed to the one entailed by the description of the selfie as a communication tool, a form of self-representation or storytelling.

The challenge, however, is that the application of Foucault's terminology to the realm of the «performance of the self» enabled by the selfie inevitably encounters several difficulties. First, there is a problematic conflation in the use of the word «technology» in the Foucauldian sense as a technique for constructing the self, and in the sense of technology in the stricter, digital sense, which introduces new and highly pervasive forms of «governmentality». Furthermore, the rejection of the representational nature of the selfie leads to minimizing or censoring the selfie's status as an image: in order to preserve the (performative) act of the selfie, one must sacrifice the image (which tends dangerously towards representation). Ultimately, the translation of Foucault's technologies of the self into technologies of the selfie is forced into a pragmatic-performative pattern, which goes by the dual name of performative-transformation, that does not account for the selfie as an image²⁵. We must therefore look elsewhere to be able to describe the particular dual nature of the selfie. This duality is

²³ J. Abbas, F. Dervin, *Digital Technologies of the Self*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne 2009.

²⁴ I am referring in particular to the article E. Gómez Cruz, H. Thornham, *Selfies beyond self-representation: the (theoretical) f(r)ictions of a practice*, in “Journal of Aesthetics & Culture”, 7, 2015, pp. 1-10. Gomez-Cruz and Thornham implicitly refer to Judith Butler's framework when she considers the performative dimension as one that opposes the expressive, specifically contrasting with the version given by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. See J. Butler, *Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory*, in “Theatre Journal”, XL, 4, 1988, pp. 519-531; see also M. Summa, *Expression and the Performative. A Reassessment*, in L. Guidi, T. Rentsch, *Phenomenology as Performative Exercise*, Brill, Leiden 2020.

²⁵ E. Gómez Cruz, H. Thornham, *Selfies beyond self-representation: the (theoretical) f(r)ictions of a practice*, in “Journal of Aesthetics & Culture”, VII, 1, 2015, pp. 1-10.

clearly expressed in Paul Frosh's definition of «gestural image». This definition highlights the hybrid nature of the selfie, both a gesture and an image, which is moreover dual from a semiotic point of view, «deictically indexical», offering new impetus to the theory of photographic language. Insofar as «the selfie is a “gestural image”», we should not understand its aesthetics purely in visual terms. Rather, «selfies conspicuously integrate still images into a technocultural circuit of corporeal social energy that I will call kinesthetic sociability»²⁶. In this circuit «response» by the viewers is crucial: the self of the selfie, as I call it, is a «mediatic phatic body as a visible vehicle for sociable communication»²⁷. A «phatic energy» replaces the «ethic energy», as it were, being the outcome of Foucault's technologies of the self, while the selfie, as an exchange of «gestural responses», proves to be a *sociable* practice, unlike the almost private practice of «care of the self».

I believe that the definition of «gestural image» successfully captures not only the hybrid character of the selfie from a semiotic perspective but also the hybrid nature of the selfie's self, which is both real and virtual, as we will see shortly.

5. The self in the digital context: auto-technical competence and entanglement

A perspective that complements Frosh's view, which frames online self-practices as 'techniques of solitude' rather than social practices, is offered by Thomas Macho, who approaches this subject through his reading of Foucault's technologies of the self²⁸.

Macho first highlights how, in Foucault's framework, care of the self involves «techniques of solitude» which emerge not only from spiritual exercises or meditation but also from practices like reading and writing. This suggests that techniques of the self are closely related to media techniques operating within the communication technologies of any given time²⁹. These two elements, taken together, allow individuals to develop a «capacity for solitude» associated to skills linked to technologies already experimented with by others and made accessible through a process of appropriation and sharing. In the new digital media environment, techniques of the self become, as Macho notes, true «techniques of solitude», because accessing this environment requires an «auto-technical competence» that while aligning the self with the standards of digital media remains

²⁶ See P. Frosh, *The Gestural Image: the Selfie, Photography Theory, and Kinesthetic Sociability*, in “International Journal of Communication”, 9, 2015, pp. 1607-1628; pp. 1622-1623.

²⁷ See *ivi*, p. 1623.

²⁸ T. Macho, *Tecniche di solitudine*, in “aut aut”, 355, 2012, pp. 56-77.

²⁹ See *ivi*, pp. 76-77.

centered on the primary goal of a *perception of the self* inside that medium³⁰. Based on this understanding, also the selfie can be viewed as both a self-perception strategy and as a «technique of solitude». In fact, solitude appears to be a fundamental condition imposed by technology – whether referring to Lucilius’s notebook (*hypomnemata*) or to the act of taking a selfie – if it is to result in auto-technical competence. The goal of «self-perception» emphasized by Macho seems to align seamlessly with various technologies of the self described by Foucault. However, the similarities might be only superficial.

In the socio-technical context of the digital age, the self of a selfie *does* become a «crossroads», but one that is better understood as a node within a network of connections. Solitude itself is no longer a matter of care of the self, it is technically produced by digital technologies, manifesting as «auto-technical competence» in Macho’s terms. To some extent, the self remains «a material for stylization» yet this occurs without emphasizing the demiurgic aspect of the *techné* (art) of existence – the act of technically producing oneself – as autonomy depends on technology itself. What persists, as Macho suggests, is the need for flexibility in how the self organizes its body and nervous system, or its «internal apparatus», in response to new technological standards. Also, this adaptation highlights the self’s being-in-situation also in relation to the situation of the media, or, in other words, to the condition of entanglement with the media environment³¹.

However, embracing this condition requires a further explanation.

It seems appropriate to contrast Foucault’s *pragmatics* of the self, still centered on a principle of mastery that presupposes the self as an object of «care», with *aesthetics* of the self that we may describe as the result of an ever-renewed process of appearing as presence, as a new auto-technical sensibility no longer characterized by the traits of the autonomous and proprietary subject, whose practices aim to assert ownership, even if “only” over the self³².

6. The self of the selfie as a «low-resolution self»

I argue that the self of the selfie can be understood as a characteristic exemplar of the new hybrid condition of the self, one that is very different from the «high resolution» (identical, or proprietary)

³⁰ See *ivi*, pp. 57-58.

³¹ See A. Noë, *The Entanglement. How Art and Philosophy make us what we are*, Princeton University Press, Princeton & Oxford 2023.

³² The «low resolution self» I am considering in relation to the self of the selfie is similar in many aspects to the «comic self» described as self invested by the dynamics of «dispossession of self and the dismantling of care»: see T. Campbell, G. Farred, *The comic self*, cit., p. 2.

self, not only epistemologically but also pragmatically. Such a view offers useful elements to go beyond Foucault's «technologies of the self». In this vein, I propose defining the self of the selfie as a *low-resolution self*³³. We may indeed consider the selfie as an experimental ground of this self, which is tasked with making itself perceivable and visible within increasingly hybrid environments – real, virtual, material, digital, and algorithmic environments.

From this perspective, one we might say it is an *ecological* perspective, the self is one entity among many. The operations that characterize any singular experienced existence remain entangled with other entities present not only in anthropic environments but also in hybrid ones, where the interconnectedness of all the entities that can be recorded, whether perceived at the level of human-animal senses or through devices and sensors, shifts the practices of living (and human) beings taking them to a different level without however impeding the practices with which they present themselves and eventually also produce images of themselves³⁴.

The acts of appearing, showing oneself, producing images of the self no longer aim to help individuals feel positively contained in the context of a sense of daily dispersion³⁵. Instead, they open up a «zone of appearance»³⁶ and, in doing so, test and promote the experience of self through play, in a ludic repetition of appearing and exhibiting, while at the same time preparing the self for coexistence with other entities in mixed milieus. The selfie highlights how gestures of self-exhibition not only operate on the plane of appearance as inherently technical acts but also participate in an image-making process that encompasses more than just the self – or the other selves “interacting” with it – but the digital medium *and* the offline situation.

For the self of the selfie the dimensions of self-perception and real/virtual appearance are inseparable. In this sense, the self of the selfie offers an updated version of the self that is compatible with the virtual environment, with regards to the living quality of the internal/external experience characterizing the self, insofar self-perception tells the aesthetic impact on the self of the deictic event of self-presentation, either online or offline. However, the self in real-world experience, while

³³ *Low Resolution* is also the title of a book by M. Mantellini (Einaudi, Turin 2018), which, however, addresses the “reduction” of our expectations in the digital age from the perspective of media culture and sociology.

³⁴ As a model of hybrid environment, I would like to refer to the one created in certain site-specific interventions by the artist Pierre Huyghe. On this topic, see E. Tavani, *The Aggregate as an Image of Connection and Individuation. The Case of Pierre Huyghe's “Untilled” (2011-2012) and “Abyssal Plain” (2015-2016)*, in “Paradigmi”, XLI, 3, 2023, pp. 439-455.

³⁵ See E. Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1956), Penguin, Harmondsworth 1990.

³⁶ Martin Seel describes the «turn to the presence of something present» in aesthetic perception as «the opening of a zone of appearing». Though the author refers the formula to «aesthetic consciousness» (which is not the case of the self I am talking about) it nevertheless can be applied to self-presentation of the self of the selfie; see: M. Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, English translation by J. Farrell, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2005.

retaining the ability to transmit its «semantic capital» in synthetic environments, undergoes re-ontologization in an algorithmic sense³⁷ and is encouraged to become a carrier of a new type of image³⁸.

Many questions remain open. In what terms does the experience of digital media, mediated by the selfie, generate “affections” on the level of feeling, particularly feelings-of-the-self? And what coordinates must be established for such an experience insofar as it provides a sensory knowledge that engages with the “sensoriality” of the media? To begin, we could say, drawing on a suggestion by Luciano Floridi, that the self of the selfie is a self *ludically wrapped* in algorithmic matter³⁹. Since it increasingly lives *onlife*, in a daily dimension of online presence⁴⁰, the self's capacity to design itself must find real/virtual supports⁴¹. Neither purely real nor purely virtual. This self co-produces with the media communicative exchanges and *real* “conversations”. It is precisely here that the necessary rethinking of the self – what we are describing here as a low-resolution self – accounts for unprecedented “reciprocities”.

A «low resolution» of the self would thus suggest not so much a “low profile” of the self but rather a style of presence characterized by a high intensity of openness to encounters and *connections at various levels* with other entities, whether animate or inanimate, including technical devices. “Connection” in this context implies both more and less than “relationship”; less because it does not presuppose the intentionality inherent in relationships (or interactions); more because it admits a possible link to entities variously connected to others, where this connection does not necessarily constitute a relationship in the strict sense.

But how can we think about these conditions in a way that makes space for the living quality of the self, which prevents us from considering it as just one entity among others? Is it not precisely this quality that provides a gap whereby the self can distance itself from the power/knowledge apparatus represented by digital media? Yet, can this distance concern the rules of the self's datafication and their being functional to strategies of control and data commodification?

³⁷ See L. Floridi, *The Ethics of Artificial Intelligence. Principles, Challenges, and Opportunities*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2022. In particular, see chapter 2, § 2.5 and chapter 9, § 9.37.

³⁸ Andrea Pinotti has insightfully noted that this type of image tends to break the threshold separating it from the environment; see A. Pinotti, *Alla soglia dell'immagine. Da Narciso alla realtà virtuale*, Einaudi, Torino 2021.

³⁹ Regarding AI technology, Luciano Floridi has highlighted a design capability – a specific rationality – that significantly follows a dual register of action: to «gamify and envelop»; see L. Floridi, *The Ethics of Artificial Intelligence*, cit., cap. 3, § 3.5.

⁴⁰ See *ibid.*

⁴¹ On the concept of virtual bodies as ontological, real/ virtual hybrids, see the fundamental study by R. Diodato, *Aesthetics of the Virtual*, English transl. by L. Harmon, Suny Press, New York 2012.

I believe it is crucial not to eliminate this doubt. This is particularly true because the Internet not only reintroduces, in different terms, a kind of “political technology of the body” reminiscent of what Foucault denounced, but also resembles those «monolithic models» that have expressed a «synchronic» mode of thought, a thought of the total system⁴².

On the other hand, it seems to me that an operation of misalignment with the system of identification and subjection – which is also what I have referred to as the issue of non-identity suggested by Foucault’s technologies of the self – requires an auto-technical capacity for self-production that does not lose sight of the vital quality of the self emanating from self-perception. This quality must also be subject to analysis, taking into account insights from neuroscience on the progressive emergence of the self and the convergences and divergences in sociocultural homeostasis⁴³. It is accessible to each of us through an awareness of oneself that can be described as a convergence of sensations, emotions, and thoughts, a kind of “self-vigilance of myself” as a living being⁴⁴, rather than a fundamental identity of “my own me”.

What does the self of the selfie teach us? In part, it reiterates – through a different techno-social mode – what we already know: that the self is a hybrid condition, internal and external at the same time. That it contains vast components of anonymity or, if we think of it as a person, depersonalization. That the individual «is and is not important», as shown by the paradox that emerged from the experiment of Selfie-city⁴⁵. Finally, that a «low-resolution self» can constitute a minimal level of situated and experienced presence of a self that is permeable to aggregations with heterogeneous entities, conceivable only as a self-in-situation and in-connection within mixed contexts.

However, rather than narrowing its significance to the behavioral dimension – a pragmatics of the self – it is necessary to prioritize the selfie’s gesture on the aesthetic plane where the self presents itself, where appearance is performance linked primarily to the production of presence⁴⁶. This should not be confused with a primarily performative nature, even though this may seem counterintuitive given the exhibition of the self that the selfie encourages. On its part the selfie, which as a gesture

⁴² See F. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1981, chap. 1, III. Jameson lists a series of thinkers who developed «monolithic models», from Vico to Hegel, from Spengler to Deleuze.

⁴³ See A. Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind. Constructing the Conscious Brain*, Pantheon, New York 2010, Part Three.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ On the pioneering research project *Selfiecity* (2014), directed by L. Manovich, see A. Tifentale, *The Selfie: More and Less than a Self-Portrait*, in M. Neumüller (ed.), *Routledge Companion to Photography and Visual Culture*, Routledge, London-New York 2018, pp. 44–58.

⁴⁶ On the theme of the phenomenology of the image and the performativity of deixis see E. Alloa, *Performing Appearances. On the Performativity of Images*, in “Paradigmi”, 3, 2023, pp. 415-428.

seeks a «phatic» outcome, as an image reactivates the dimension of appearance inherent in living beings offering it to a technical device. In doing so, it maintains the self's production of itself on a real/virtual plane, where this duality recalls the creative character of self-design (or of outright auto-poiesis) that prevents its complete assimilation into either the power/knowledge dynamics of algorithms or the dynamics of habitus⁴⁷. Certainly, the self's presence in synthetic environments and milieux, and in connections variously scattered across the web or concentrated in ecological niches, might suggest the idea of an apparently limitless exchange of gestures, presences, emotions, opinions and narratives of the self. However, I believe that we must understand "limitless" not in the sense of infinite but rather in the sense of "all-you-can-eat".

⁴⁷ On the possibility that the aesthetic, understood as the creative dimension of human existence, always positions itself as a divergence from the *habitus*, see A. Nöe, *Entanglement*, cit.