NOT MYSELF: ANTI-SURVIELLANCE AESTHETICS AND THE CHIN-DOWN SELFIE

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In On Photography, Susan Sontag (1977) writes, "photographs furnish evidence" (p. 5). She describes them as "incriminating" and as tools of surveillance — observations tied to the mechanical workings of cameras. A photograph is made possible by the material presence of the objects pictured. They existed in that time, in that place, in front of a camera. Yet, Sontag goes on to write, "a camera's rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses" (p. 123). There are limits to what photography can tell us or teach us, for there will always be something — a whole life even — outside the frame.

For users of the platform Tumblr, these limits become tools for reimagining online spaces of privacy and self disclosure. Advancing camera technology and the inescapability of social media have given us new (or perhaps transformed) modes of representation, and an increased expectancy for one to do so. This is perhaps most visually evident in the recent proliferation of self portrait photos: the selfie. Yet, as digital photography provides tools for new forms of exposure, the users of this technology also create new kinds of privacy.

The proposed paper looks to a specific selfie sub-genre, the chin-down selfie, and asks what photos taken in this way can tell us about the conflicting, often ambivalent, relationship digital media users have with self disclosure. Chin-down selfies, like standard selfies, are self-portrait photographs, usually taken with a web-cam or cellphone. Instead of documenting a person's face or full-body though, "chin-down" selfies capture only the lower portion of the face or no face at all. This sub-genre has been a way for me to theorize the interstices of privacy and photography – specifically on the microblogging platform, Tumblr.

The selfie is theorized here as a social document, demonstrative of broader cultural concerns over how (and to whom) we represent ourselves. In dialogue with literature on photography and surveillance, the chin-down selfie becomes a text for asking questions about young people, their internet use, and the broader concerns for personal privacy in the digital era.

This project is based, in part, on a larger qualitative research project specifically focused on college-aged women and their use of the platform Tumblr. In the spring of 2014, I held a series of focus groups and focus groups with students in Five College consortium in Western Massachusetts. Focus groups involved three to five women, with nineteen participants in total. At the end of each interview and focus group, participants provided me with their Tumblr URL. These were also used as primary sources. While the discussions of anonymity and privacy found in this paper are derived from in-person interactions, the discussion of selfies is drawn primarily from a year long period of observation during the completion of this project. I viewed participants' Tumblr pages on a daily basis throughout this time, and also spent significant time observing the vast number of Tumblr blogs in participants extended networks.

These photos were analyzed using a Visual Cultural Studies framework — looking at selfies beyond the stylistic, personal choices of a single user and as part of the social. I argue that the chin-down selfie is an embodiment of a larger structure of feeling (Williams, 1977), making apparent a cultural concern over who is watching and at what consequence. Like written content and pseudonyms, visual aspects of Tumblr demonstrate the tension between wanting to share personal information but not wanting to permanently tie that information to one's offline identity.

What can broadly be termed "privacy" was the single most significant reason that college-age women chose to use Tumblr. None of the focus group participants identified themselves with their first and last name. Rather than tying them to their offline social networks, the Tumblr platform provided a space that is both away from the watchful eye of their parents and potentially judgmental acquaintances and couldn't be located by future employers or partners.

More relevantly, focus group participants commonly created what Quian and Scott (2007) term "visual anonymity" (p. 1430) They used icon pictures that may very well be of them, but don't make them immediately identifiable should the user be seen in an offline context. Although most users didn't expressly cite privacy concerns as their reason for choosing those photos, the prevalence of images used in this way indicates that there is a culture of anonymity on Tumblr. The choice to obscure personal information doesn't challenge platform norms the way it would on a site like Facebook, which through it's "real name only" policies insists on a connection to one's complete, offline, identity. Being able to withhold identity information emboldened users to share about themselves in other ways, talking about their emotions or beliefs more openly and intimately than they did on alternate social networking sites.

Yet, the desire for anonymity results in an interesting hurdle for selfies, which are common feature of Tumblr's visual vocabulary. Widely held assumptions about photography purport that cameras represent one accurately and irrevocably (Tagg, 1999). Photographs are thought to be reproductions, rather than representations in which the messy nature of subjectivity can obscure reality (Cartwright & Sturken, 2001). Furthermore, the conventions of snapshot photography place great emphasis on the eyes and face (Chalfen, 1987, p. 42). So, how does one take a selfie without identifying the self who's pictured?

Chin-down selfies are social photographs that reflect digital youth's desire to document themselves and their anxiety about what the consequences of that might be. These photos are marked by the use of modern technologies – namely webcams but, more broadly, personal computers and cell phones. And, they are created with a reflexive knowledge of the life they take on once they are uploaded to an internet platform. Chin-down selfies are the product of privacy strategies, born out of an online culture acutely aware of being watched.

References

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