The self on the wane: understatement, making-faces and #nofilter selfies versus three autobiographical poems

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Abstract

Three types of "non-flattering" selfies, contrary to the beautiful ones that most people are accustomed to posting, are considered in this paper: "understatement selfies" that employ a strategic presentation of oneself downplaying their abilities in anticipation of objections from followers, friends etc.; "making-faces selfies" that temporarily undermine one's image but from the safe side; and "#nofilter selfies" that expose non-flattering sides of oneself, reflecting the need to encompass reality instead of ever-beautiful constructed images. These are then compared in pairs with three autobiographical poems from Greece and Turkey, in the framework of comparative literature: Kostas Varnalis's "Minature writing" (with "understatement selfies"), Georgios Souris's "The sketch of me" (with "prank selfies") and NazimHikmet's "Autobiography" (with "#nofilter selfies"). The comparison confirms the equivalence of the pairs, notwithstanding the differences that exist. Additionally, the process leads to an awareness of the different levels of reality with which communication and literature are concerned.

Keywords: Selfie, autobiography, communication, poetry, reality.

Introduction

Looking into an issue from two standpoints allows for a better understanding of the issue and sometimes of the standpoints as well. Selfies are often contrasted with painted self-portraits[1], but in this paper the contrast involves autobiographical poems; the method used is that of paired comparison.

In more detail, three different types of "non-flattering"[2] selfies, contrary to the beautiful or at least neat ones that most people are accustomed to posting, are considered: i. "understatement selfies" are those that employ a strategic presentation of oneself "ostensibly downplaying one's relevance, abilities and achievements", while "implicitly expecting objections from others" in their feedback, finally leading to a positive re-valuation of the self[3]; ii. "making-faces selfies" are selfies of people making funny or ugly faces, temporarily compromising their image but from the safe side, actually saying "I'm not really like that"; and iii. "#nofilter selfies" are those that expose non-flattering sides of the people taking them, reflecting society's need to encompass reality instead of ever-beautiful, utterly constructed images.

These types of non-flattering selfies are compared in pairs with three autobiographical poems from Greece and Turkey, in the framework of comparative literature: Kostas Varnalis's "Miniature writing" (with "understatement selfies"), Georgios Souris's "The sketch of me" (with "making-faces selfies") and Nazim Hikmet's "Autobiography" (with "#nofilter selfies"). The comparison confirms their equivalence.

A non-flattering selfie and an autobiographical poem, then, can be seen as two aspects of the same willingness to disclose non-flattering aspects of oneself; this willingness can be part of the narrative that the person conjures for himself in order to describe his/her identity, sometimes serving as an argument against the neat image that society expects of them. In this manner, a selfie and an autobiographical poem can be seen as means that establish a social dialogue which transcends the individuality underlining the selfie and the poem.

At a more fundamental level, the selfie and the autobiographical poem can also be seen as examples of different sets of signs, symbols or simply messages employed to this end. Their main similarity, however, is that the selfie brings the individual dynamically to the fore, pretty much like literature.

Though focused on the self, we still examine the selfie as a collective practice in the framework of communication. This observation leads to an awareness of the different levels of reality with which communication and literature are concerned. Communication explores collective reality through the prism of consequences; literature focuses on the reality of the individual and constructs a world out of it, offering insights into our own world in the process.

General facts before the comparison

Selfies: A selfie is a picture taken with the camera turned towards the photographer, who thus simultaneously becomes the subject and the object of the photography. Nowadays, a camera is no longer necessary: smartphones are equipped with a reverse camera; therefore, taking selfies has become very easy. And since smartphones also offer an internet connection and avail, at their owner's discretion, of social network applications, it is also very easy to post these selfies on social networks, as part of the material that people feel they want to share over such platforms. As a matter of fact, "photo sharing on various social networking sites (SNSs) has become an important part of the online sharing experience"[4] and photo-sharing includes, of course, selfies.

Selfies, however, are "less the trace of a reality imprinted on the photograph than of an action enacted by a photographer"[5]. In other words, they are part of the narrative that a person weaves for himself/herself, i.e. of the "self-branding" in which s/he engages. In self-branding "one thinks of oneself as a brand […] and strategically constructs an 'edited' identity that represents the user in an ideal image"[6]. Since the selfie is posted on social media platforms, it becomes a message with which the person addresses a known or unknown audience. According to Barthes[7], a published photograph is primarily "a message without a code", but a selfie is a message with codes that vary according to the will of its taker to present himself in this rather than that way. This makes it "not only perceived, received" but "read, connected more or less consciously by the public that consumes it to a traditional stock of signs"[7].

Although these are valid for standard selfies, notice should be given to the fact that there exist selfies which are less than ideal. Psychotherapist Doug Ronning in *Psyched* (n.d.)[2] has called them "non-flattering" selfies and he believes they can be liberating: "capturing and curating a multitude of these images can help to redefine how one sees his or herself, to go beyond the daily roles one inhabits, by cultivating creative risk-taking", as he argues.

Autobiographical poems: An autobiographical poem is a poem about one's life and usually refers to the past. It is written by a poet, who is its protagonist at the same time. Consequently, "as the protagonist of his autobiography, he expresses his own feelings and thoughts and, as a writer, he remains detached from the life of the protagonist"[8] in a very interesting mixture of subjectivity and objectivity.

In much the same way that the person taking a selfie gets to choose the way he will depict himself, the poet too chooses the way he tells the things he is telling by adopting a specific point of view (i.e. angle from which the story gets told)[9] and tone (i.e. the attitude that the piece of writing exudes)[9], which present the reader with the actions, setting and events that the writer sets out to talk about, giving them an intonation that may scold or caress, denigrate or magnify them, at will. This is more emphatic in the case of autobiographical poems, in which, like in all autobiographies, "the author is free to record only such events of his life which he considers important […] The autobiographer selects only those events which help him to establish the growth of his personality and drops other artistically less meaningful ones"[8].

The comparison: It is understood that seeing the words "selfie" and "poem" in the same phrase may be shocking enough on its own; even more so, when a comparison is involved. Notwithstanding that, a non-flattering selfie and an autobiographical poem can be seen as two aspects of the same willingness to disclose unflattering aspects of oneself; this willingness can be endemic in the narrative that the person conjures for himself in order to describe his identity, serving as an argument against the neat image that society expects of him. In this manner, a selfie and an autobiographical poem can be seen as establishing a social dialogue that transcends the individuality underlining the selfie and the poem.

Even before that and at a more fundamental level, a non-flattering selfie and an autobiographical poem can be seen as examples of different sets of signs, symbols or simply encoded messages that need decoding. In other words, a selfie and a poem can both be interpreted as "discursive formations within the wider socio-cultural and political circumstance of which they are a differentiated part"[10], through a process that can be broadly described as "reading"[7].

Here follows the paired comparison of the three types of selfies with the three autobiographical poems:

Understatement selfies: Diefenback & Christoforakos[3] explore two different strategies of self-presentation that a selfie allows: self-promotion and self-disclosure. With reference, however, to the taxonomy by Merzbacher[11], Diefenbach & Christoforakos point to strategies of self-presentation that seem less compatible with selfies: understatement is one of them. Understatement is a strategic presentation of oneself "ostensibly downplaying one's relevance, abilities and achievements", while "implicitly expecting objections from others", finally leading to a positive re-valuation of the self. Miller[12] also argues that such selfies "are usually intended to elicit some kind of supportive response from one's concerned friends". Such selfies can be found under e.g. the unrevealing hashtag #ruinedselfie on Instagram. Examples of them are the following:
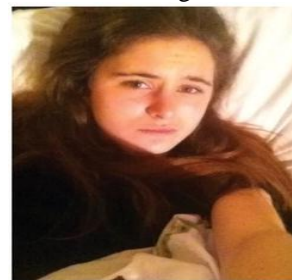

Figure-1:. "Can't contain the excitement"[12].

Figure-2: Instagram, user: zardouka/penelopez[21].

This kind of selfie can be likened to an autobiographical poem written by the Greek poet Kostas Varnalis[13]: the poem "Mikrografia" ("Miniature writing"), which was published in his last poetry collection *Eleftheros Kosmos*[13], when he was 81 years old. It was re-published in many books and compilations, such as Kakavanis[14] and a large part of it is translated below:

"Miniature writing" by Kostas Varnalis

I
Kindness I never knew! A child I was
but nobody reached out to caress me,
to take me in their arms and kiss me.
Me, the last child arrived late,

everybody sending me away, hitting me!
Nobody called me by my name.
"Him" and "you" and "shut up! You're not
our child! We bought you from a black-skinned

gypsy for half a bag of barley!"
I believed it and crouched on the corner.
A foundling I was and a foreigner, I dared not
play or ask – or cry.

But even when the lie lay bare,
I still was a foundling and a foreigner!
When will I grow up and leave!...
My father died when I was a baby

and my first brother, my first hate,
black glasses no words, stubbornly
beat me up all day long to break!
Even at night he woke me up and hit me.

The third or fourth spring I left the house.
Oh how big the world outside!
The sun, a thousand times brighter!
Swallows flew low
fearlessly around me – I was the one in fear!
If only I too had wings to fly
high, the farthest away from here!...

Further beyond all-green vast spaces.

It was the first time I saw sprout fields,
the wind chasing the cobs
that ran endlessly. Such beauty
I couldn't stand and burst into tears!

II
[…]
I grew up early and went abroad.
Between me and my kins, sixty years now

no writing, no message! But,
I've carried them inside wherever I've been:
I've carried my poor self
Unable to root anywhere.

Always a foreigner and a foundling…
                                        Translation: Christina Linardaki.

The poem is further explained in an autobiographical letter dated between 1972-1973 and addressed to a friend of Varnalis's, Giorgos Valetas[14]. Varnalis in the verses presents his life as being an unsuccessful one and himself as being an underestimated victim with tough luck, which however is not entirely true. He surely led a difficult life and he gives a realistic account of it in the poem, but his hardships were more than offset by the fact that he was a renowned poet, even while he lived, he enjoyed the respect of literary critics and the public, he was awarded the Lenin Peace Prize in 1959 and he was even recommended by the Society of Greek Writers for the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1961[14]. Of course, the poem mainly refers to his childhood, but also extends to his adulthood, the circumstances of which, according to his biography, were much different than the ones he chose to show in the poem.

Making-faces selfies: The term "making-faces selfies" was coined from the hashtag #makingfaces on Instagram. It is self-evident that the term describes selfies of people making funny or ugly faces, temporarily undermining their image but from the safe side, as they are actually saying "I'm not really like that and you know it" or "Look at me doing this!". Such selfies give the people taking them a sense of freedom and liberation, exactly as Doug Ronning pointed out in his comment on non-flattering selfies, cited at the beginning of this paper. Proof of this is provided in a thread entitled "Why do people make funny faces while taking selfie photos?" in quora.com[15], where members like Omkar Amrutanshu, write e.g. "We sometimes make faces at the camera to be a non-conformist, appear less serious or just for the heck of it!" (comment of 21.11.2017). Here follow a couple of examples of such selfies, all obtained from the internet following a google search "making faces selfies":
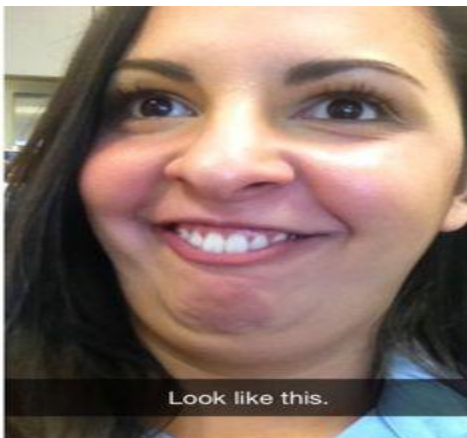
Figure-3. mtv.com.[22].

Figure-4: onedio.co.[23].

This kind of selfie can be compared with an autobiographical poem written by the Greek poet Georgios Souris[16]. Georgios Souris was a satirical poet and his own self couldn't have escaped his preference for satire. He named this autobiographical poem of his "I zografia mou" ("The sketch of me"). The poem was initially published in *Hestia* newspaper[16] and it describes his looks in a satirical way. There is at least another autobiographical poem by Souris, entitled "Syntomos aftoviografia mou" ("My brief autobiography"), which was published in *Hestia* again, but this time in 1887. "The sketch of me", the only one of the three poems in this paper which is focused on the appearance of its composer and thus particularly facilitates the comparison with selfies, is translated in full below:

"The sketch of me" by Giorgos Souris

Two inches tall
An awful build
Beards with hair
Like a field.

Forehead divine,
somewhat wide,
unmistaken sign
of a poetic tide.

Two black eyes
without spite
full of menace
but like a sprite.

A nostril long
like grain of rice
and a big chin
just like Christ.

A pit for mouth
and flowing hair
to staff a mattress
leaving no air.

A wild face
wrinkled and harsh,
pale and cold
like Death has marched.

No colour
is fitting
and as we speak
the dyes are fleeting.

Teeth of a gummy
full of gaps
face of a cheapskate
without a lapse.

Translation: Christina Linardaki.

Georgios Souris is actually painting an ugly face of himself in this poem. Since satire "can be described as the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking toward it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation"[9], its effect in this case it that it makes the poem look exactly like a making-faces selfie.

#nofilter selfies: These are selfies that expose natural, albeit non-flattering, sides of the people taking them, reflecting society's need to encompass reality instead of ever-beautiful, utterly constructed images. The hashtag isamplified with its equivalent #nomakeup and usually they both figure under "natural", non-photoshopped selfies. The "#nofilter movement" account on Twitter (@filter_movement) describes itself as "a campaign dedicated to spreading awareness of the body image lies created by media". These "lies" are analytically exposed in Wissinger[17], who discusses modelling and "glamour labor" at "the age of the blink". There are numerous instances of everyday people and celebrities that desist the trend of appearing ever-ready for the ideal selfie and choose to photograph themselves just the way they are, with no filters and even no make-up on. Here follow some examples of #nofilter selfies:

Figures-5a and 5b: Lady Gaga[24,25].

Figure-6: Dina Sarakinou, writer and Managing Director of literature.gr[26].

This kind of selfie can be seen in parallel with an autobiographical poem from the East side of the Aegean, Turkey, in the framework of comparative literature. It was written by the Turkish "exile poet" Nazim Hikmet[18] in East Berlin on 11 September 1961 and it has the title "Autobiography".

"Autobiography" by Nazim Hikmet

I was born in 1902
I never once went back to my birthplace
I don't like to turn back
at three I served as a pasha's grandson in Aleppo
at nineteen as a student at Moscow Communist University
at forty-nine I was back in Moscow as the Tcheka Party's guest

and I've been a poet since I was fourteen
some people know all about plants some about fish
I know separation
some people know the names of the stars by heart
I recite absences
I've slept in prisons and in grand hotels
I've known hunger even a hunger strike and there's almost no food
I haven't tasted
at thirty they wanted to hang me
at forty-eight to give me the Peace Prize
which they did
at thirty-six I covered four square meters of concrete in half a year
at fifty-nine I flew from Prague to Havana in eighteen hours
I never saw Lenin I stood watch at his coffin in '24
in '61 the tomb I visit is his books
they tried to tear me away from my party
it didn't work
nor was I crushed under the falling idols
in '51 I sailed with a young friend into the teeth of death
in '52 I spent four months flat on my back with a broken heart
waiting to die
I was jealous of the women I loved
I didn't envy Charlie Chaplin one bit
I deceived my women
I never talked my friends' backs
I drank but not every day
I earned my bread money honestly what happiness
out of embarrassment for others I lied
I lied so as not to hurt someone else
but I also lied for no reason at all
I've ridden in trains planes and cars
most people don't get the chance
I went to opera
most people haven't even heard of the opera
and since '21 I haven't gone to the places most people visit
mosques churches temples synagogues sorcerers
but I've had my coffee grounds read
my writings are published in thirty or forty languages
in my Turkey in my Turkish they're banned
cancer hasn't caught up with me yet
and nothing says it will
I'll never be a prime minister or anything like that
and I wouldn't want such a life
nor did I go to war
or burrow in bomb shelters in the bottom of the night
and I never had to take to the road under diving planes
but I fell in love at almost sixty
in short comrades
even if today in Berlin I'm croaking of grief
I can say I've lived like a human being
and who knows
how much longer I'll live
what else will happen to me
                          Translation: Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk[18].

In this poem, Hikmet exposes his life in detail, without evaluations, presenting just the facts. According to Seyhan[19], "the enormity of Hikmet's trials are toned down not only by the soberness and precision of the poet's diction but also by his rejection of self-pity". A feeling of regret or indignation is nowhere to be found; the same is valid for positive sentiments too: they are just absent. It is truly a #nofilter poem that tries to make things look neither prettier than they are nor uglier; it presents the facts just the way they are.

At a deeper level, since Hikmet was very active politically, as made evident in these verses too ("I've slept in prisons and in grand hotels/ I've known hunger even a hunger strike"), the poem challenges the stereotype of the Poet, in much the same way that a #nofilter selfie challenges the stereotype of Beauty (even if artificial).

Meta-comparison observations

Although the comparison between the three types of non-flattering selfies and the three poems showed their equivalence/similarity, there do exist differences between a selfie and an autobiography: i. selfies refer to a moment in present-time, while an autobiographical piece usually stretches over a period in the past (Souris's poem, which focuses on his appearance, differs in this respect); ii. the main subject of the selfie is the person irrespective of the background; in an autobiography, it is the person against a background (inside the given circumstances of his life – again, Souris's poem is an exception); iii. a selfie is a non-professional, sometimes spontaneous photograph of oneself, whereas a poem is a piece of literature, i.e. art.

However, both the selfie and the autobiographical poem place the "self" at the very center. Bringing the individual dynamically to the fore as it does, the selfie resembles literature, which engages in much the same thing. According to Allan[20], "the 'reality' […] with which literature is concerned […] is that of the living human individual". However, in communication, we examine the selfie as a collective practice, stripping it off its subjective features or, rather, reframing them under the objective eye of research.

As Allan points out[20], such objective research, conducted within a scientific field, aims to progressively reveal "what the world is really like". But the aim and the value of literature (and indeed all art), as he also observes, "is much more difficult to estimate. Literature rarely claims to be based on 'empirical evidence' and has no equivalent to science's 'objective' tribunal or experimental verification". At the end of the day, is it really looking at the same reality as science?

The answer is no. Both science and literature can claim with equal justice that they are describing "what the world is really like", but they are looking at different worlds. According to Allan, for science the individual is a possible cause of distortion rather than a source of knowledge; thus it prefers impersonality. Literature, on the other hand, "is not the exploration of a collective reality in which individual thoughts, feelings and actions are perceived through the prism of their consequences. It is an exploration of those thoughts, feelings and actions in themselves"[20]. Literature is all about the reality constructed out of individual perceptions and understandings, which can offer valuable insights into our living world.

Conclusion

Three different types of "non-flattering" selfies were considered in this paper: i. "understatement selfies", ii. "making-faces selfies" and iii. "#nofilter selfies". These were compared in pairs with three autobiographical poems from Greece and Turkey, in the framework of comparative literature: Kostas Varnalis's "Miniature writing" (with "understatement selfies"), Georgios Souris's "The sketch of me" (with "making-faces selfies") and NazimHikmet's "Autobiography" (with "#nofilter selfies"). Both the selfies and the poems were considered as messages that can be "read".

The comparison confirmed the equivalence of the pairs and highlighted the similarities between non-flattering selfies and autobiographical literary pieces written on the same wavelength: i. both arise from the same willingness to disclose unflattering aspects of oneself; ii. the maker of the selfie and the writer of the autobiographical piece are simultaneously the subject and the object of the picture or the literary work in a fascinating mixture of subjectivity and objectivity; iii. both the selfie-taker and the writer of the autobiographical piece choose the way they present themselves. In the selfie, it is the facial expression or the mere absence of make-up or filter that does the trick; in the literary work it is the point of view and the tone that the literary writer adopts.

Utterly, the non-flattering selfie and the autobiographical poem give descriptions of their creator's identity, serving as arguments against the neat image that society expects of him. In this manner, a selfie and an autobiographical poem can be said to establish a social dialogue, which transcends the individuality resting at the core of both the selfie and the autobiographical poem.

In any event, in communication, we still examine the selfie as a collective practice, stripping it off its subjective features or, rather, reframing it under the objective eye of research. This happens, because for science the individual is a possible cause of distortion rather than a source of knowledge in respect to reality.

By contrast, literature focuses on the individuals' perceptions and understandings, which can offer valuable insights into our own world. This gap between science and literature is evidence of the fact that they are not looking at the same level of reality.

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