

Selfie-taking: a key semiotic practice within the 'show of the self'

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During the last couple of years, the action of taking selfies has emerged as a common everyday life practice, mainly among young people, but not limited to them. Selfie-taking is a meaningful practice that requires a semiotic analysis. In this paper I reflect on the semiotic character of selfie-taking, particularly by discussing its nature and a possible segmentation in smaller units. Moreover, I argue that in the current scenario of extended online exhibition that anthropologist Paula Sibilia calls 'show of the self', selfie-taking plays a key role as a way of making evident the presence of the 'real' offline author in the identity narrative that is being constructed online. Within the dynamics of online self-representation and in line with the idea that online identities are actively constructed, I discuss why selfies should be regarded as heterogeneous and semiotically complex devices, and particularly how they contribute to the creation of the online identity of its authors.

Keywords selfies, self-representation, everyday life, semiotics

Introduction

During the last couple of years, the action of taking selfies has emerged as a common everyday life practice, mainly among young people (Deeb-Swihart et al. 2017: 7), but not limited to them. As new practices usually foster the emergence of new concepts to be referred to, the word 'selfie' started invading daily conversations and academic discussions, and in 2013 it was chosen as the Oxford Dictionary Word of the year. From a scholarly perspective, selfies have been studied and discussed mainly as a practice linked to narcissism and attention-grabbing needs (Halpern, Valenzuela and Katz 2016; Fox and Rooney 2015; Sorokowski et al. 2015; Carpenter 2012). Within the research, 'little attention has been given to [...] how much the introduction of social media technology changes semiotic practices' (Vigild Poulsen et al. 2018: 593).

Reducing the practice of selfie-taking to a homogeneous attention-drawing phenomenon does not reflect its true nature: selfies are heterogeneous and semiotic complex devices that represent a 'new genre of identity performance' (Deeb-Swihart et al. 2017: 9). As such, they are the 'material output' of a particular practice, that is, a way of doing something: *selfie-taking*, a practice that belongs to the realm of everyday life and that implies the deployment, consciously and not, of 'auto-fictions', i.e., representations created by individuals that have a relation with their 'personal identity' (the self) and that are governed by a certain repertory of cultural codes following a referential pact based on the autobiographical genre (Lejeune 1975). Selfie-taking is to be regarded as a *semiotic* practice, one that consists of 'a situated set of mental, emotional and bodily activities linked by things, contexts and conventions' (Tiidenberg 2018: 133). As such, selfies require a thorough semiotic analysis to be properly understood. Due to this complex nature, in 2018 it could be said of selfies what Roland Barthes wrote in 1980 about photography: it is an 'anthropologically new object' (1980: 88) implying new ways of doing that are meaningful to individuals.

Drawing on the work of semioticians like Jean-Marie Floch (1990) and Jacques Fontanille (2008), a semiotic account seems appropriate to shed some light on the meaning these practices have for the individuals that carry them on. In *A Theory of Semiotics*, Umberto Eco argues that a general semiotic theory should be capable of explaining 'every phenomenon of signification and/or communication' (1976: 3). Given that selfie-taking can be clearly regarded as a signifying practice that is ruled by particular social codes, semiotics seems entitled to have a word on this very recent phenomenon. Therefore, in this paper I approach the practice of selfie-taking through the lens of semiotics. After discussing some methodological considerations, I examine the practice of selfie-taking from a semiotic stance and I argue why this represents a key practice within the context of what Paula Sibilia (2008) calls the 'show of the self'. Under the belief that semiotics is in a privileged position to foster a 'real and effective' interdisciplinarity (Floch 1990: 4), this paper considers both the semiotic and the sociological dimensions of the practice of selfie-taking, as the two are strongly intertwined.

The semiotic examination of everyday life practices

Everyday life practices can be powerful 'ways of operating', as suggested by Michel de Certeau (1978), who believed that 'many everyday life practices (talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking, etc.) are tactical in character' (1978: xix). De Certeau argues that these 'multiform and fragmentary' practices conform to certain rules, what suggest the idea that there might be a logic underlying them (1978: xv). It is not a surprise that some years later semioticians started paying attention to such practices. Due to the fact that 'social media is integrated into our everyday social practices, such as waiting for the bus, socializing with col-

leagues, or scheduling a date' (Vigild Poulsen et al. 2018: 593), selfie-taking practices belong to the realm of everyday life. As Deeb-Swihart et al. (2017: 9) suggest, 'selfies are in general quite ordinary, depicting everyday life rather than the ridiculous and the improbable'.

The semiotic study of practices has its roots in Ferdinand de Saussure's conception of semiotics as the discipline that should study the life of signs in the framework of social life. Departing from this seminal idea, the semiotic approach to practices aims at analyzing a broad spectrum of 'ways of doing', taking as its object of study a set of heterogeneous and diverse practices by means of which social life is constructed, reproduced and maintained (Lorusso 2010: 3). In this scenario, the unity of the object of study is given by the lens through which these are examined, that is, in Eco's words, 'a unified method of approach to phenomena which apparently are very different from each other' (1976: 8). The focus of semiotics lays on how meaning emerges, circulates, and is consumed within the webs of inter-subjectivity that constitute what we call 'culture' (Geertz 1973: 5). In this sense, semiotics of practices should be regarded as interested in understanding 'meaning in action' (Lorusso 2015: 4), i.e., how meaning is conveyed by specific ways of *doing*. What matters is to understand how *semiosis* happens, that is, how meaning is constructed based on a specific temporal succession of events. Eco argued that 'the whole of culture *should* be studied as a communicative phenomenon based on signification systems' (1976: 22), and practices are included in this conceptualization.

When trying to understand the dynamics of self-representation that are facilitated by social and digital media, a semiotic analysis of the practices as meaningful seems appropriate: when producing a simple and apparently innocent self-portrait posted for public consumption on a social network like Facebook or Instagram, or privately shared on a messaging app like WhatsApp, individuals have a particular *intention*: taking a selfie can be a way of actively reinforcing social relationships, for example by connoting a bond of intimacy or trust with the addressee (Paccagnella and Vellar 2016: 55). As Deeb-Swihart et al. (2017: 9) write, 'the most believable way to indicate that you are social is to take a photo with another person or a pet'. Therefore, to understand why and how individuals carry on these practices a closer look to the semiosis attached to them is needed.

From a methodological perspective, semiotics usually takes as its object of study the analysis of the *text*, a concept understood in a broad sense as a 'configuration of meaning' that is somehow empirically perceivable (Marrone 2011: v) or intelligible (Floch 1990: 4). Within the discipline, the concept has become a central one to describe, refer and understand a broad spectrum of phenomena, implying the use of the concept of text as a *model* for other social phenomena, like social practices. These can also be studied as texts (Floch 1990: 21) provided that they have a *closure* that individualizes the practice as a relatively autonomous totality with an internal structural organization that allows its methodological segmentation in smaller units of analysis (Floch 1990: 21). As it will be argued later, selfie-taking, just like the trajectory that an individual does in the Parisian subway (Floch 1990), is not a random chain of actions:

there is a logic behind it, one that reflects its *orientation* towards a goal (Floch 1990: 22). As Fontanille (2008: 3) argues, when analyzing practices from a semiotic perspective, their value should be looked for not only in the content of their goals, but also in the syntagmatic organization of the process itself.

The focus of this paper is set in the *practice* of taking selfies and not in analyzing selfies as *images*, a task that would require an analysis from the perspective of visual semiotics. The focus is not set in the selfie as a text itself (its topologic, eidetic and chromatic dimensions), but on the meaning that the practice of selfie-taking has for the person that carries it out. When analyzing the dynamics of online identity construction, a semiotic approach can be helpful by providing useful insights on two main fields: how these practices are meaningful to the individuals that carry them on, and how they produce meaning (Fontanille 2008: 3). Before proceeding to the analysis of these practices, and departing from the idea that selfies are meaningful practices that contribute to a particular way of performing one individuals' identity online, some clarifications need to be done regarding the concept of identity.

Identity as a social construction

Arguing against realist approaches to identity – those that take identity as something given, defending some kind of essentialism–, constructivist accounts argue that it is through social interaction that identities are constructed (Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013: 104). In this scenario, alterity plays a key role: it is through the existence and the look of the Other that one defines, recognizes and confirms his/her own identity. This theoretical framework opens up the field for a conceptualization of the self that is dual: there is an individual that perceives an 'I' and there are others that also perceive that 'I'. Therefore, identity implies a process of social co-construction between the individual and the others (Paccagnella and Vellar 2016: 26) and can hence be conceived as a 'relational position' (Arfuch 2005: 31), depending on the recognition and interpretations of other individuals.

When analyzing selfies from a semiotic perspective, this duality regarding the self is of utmost interest: based on his/her past experience, an individual has a perception of who she/he is and tries to generate an *image*, which should communicate the perceived self to others. From a semiotic point of view, in this dynamic a *ratio* between a dimension of the content (the perceived self) and one of the expression (the image, that is, the reflection of that perceived self) is established, and it is in this framework that the practice of taking selfies should be analyzed.

When dealing with the self in relation to others, revisiting Erving Goffman's ideas about the presentation of the self in everyday life can be of use. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), Goffman developed a theoretical framework aiming at explaining how indi-

viduals manage the impressions they produce in others. Using the metaphor of a ‘theatrical performance’, Goffman argues that within the social sphere ‘the part one individual plays is tailored to the parts played by the others present, and yet these others also constitute the audience’ (1956: ii). Within this logic, ‘the individual will have to act so that he intentionally or unintentionally expresses himself, and the others will in turn have to be *impressed* in some way by him’ (1956: 2). That is why Goffman speaks of a work of ‘impression management’, an active strategy aimed at controlling how others perceive us (1956: 3), which involves the existence of a *front* and a *backstage*, referring to public and private life, respectively. As it has been argued, practices of online self-presentation also fall under Goffman’s account, even if physical co-presence is not there (Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013: 110). Here, the online realm constitutes the frontstage, while offline life is to be regarded as the backstage, and ‘users are now editors and creators – designing and creating their self-representations, choosing what to bring to the foreground or hide in the background’ (Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013: 103). As evidence has shown, individuals ‘often attempt to re-create their offline selves online, rather than actively engaging with persona adoption’ (2013: 109), linking both realms –online and offline. As Deeb-Swihart et al. (2017: 2) argue, ‘by placing ourselves, our bodies, in the photos we take and share via social media, we come full-circle to Goffman, in some sense blending the online and offline selves together in this new practice’.

When considering online identities as a process of active *creation*, the use of resources (words, images, emojis, etc.) should be regarded as modes of *doing*, of *acting*, of *performing* (Sibilia 2008: 38). Hence representation – particularly self-representation – constitutes a key dimension to be analyzed when trying to understand how an individual comes to be a ‘self-conscious self’ (Arfuch 2005: 24). There is a narrative – and hence symbolic – dimension of identity that brings into the spotlight what particular ‘strategies of enunciation’ (Arfuch 2005: 25): given that the author is creating a product that is closely related to the perceptions he/she has about him/herself, the generated image needs to honor the implicit autobiographical contract between enunciator and addressee. In the online environment, ‘with enhanced potential for editing the self’ (Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013: 110), selfies are another tool available from a broad repertoire that an individual has at their disposal in order to show the others who she/he ‘is’. It is important to keep this ‘to be’ in quotation marks, because assuming that there is an *actual* self could be risky from an ontological point of view, as this would imply a naïve realism that is usually criticized by constructivist accounts. When speaking about who someone is, this is to be regarded as the interpretation someone does about who he/she is – the ‘selfhood’, in Ricoeur’s (1992) terms–, which is also a construction.

At this point the caveat of iconism needs to be addressed. Both from a generative and an interpretative semiotic account, Peirce’s iconism has been catalogued as an illusion. Floch believes that iconism does not imply a relationship of the representation and ‘reality’, but that it is ‘the result of the production of a sense effect of ‘reality’” (1986: 28), and hence implies a *ma-*

nipulative enunciation (1986: 31). Eco, meanwhile, argues that iconism is a naive conception about how copies work (cfr. 1976: par. 3.5) and states that 'similarity is also a matter of cultural convention' (1976: 204). Although it might seem intuitive to believe that the self-representation that a selfie implies is an iconic copy of a 'real' self, it is ontologically questionable if such thing as a 'reality' exists. In the best case, it should be spoken of a *model*, that is, 'the real that the utterance claims to resemble' (Lejeune 1975: 23), a 'real' that is a cultural unit of meaning (Eco 1976) and that does not imply an ontological commitment with realism.

The 'show of the self'

During the last years, selfie-taking has become an extended practice. This has happened not only as a result of the technological developments that have made them possible, but also due to a new socio-cultural context that has enhanced the appropriateness of these practices. This new context has been facilitated by these technological developments, but is not purely based on them. In fact, it could be argued that it is another unfolding of a set of social transformations that have been shaping societies around the globe for decades: changes in how social relationships and privacy are conceived (Turkle 2011; Eco 2014), consumerism (Bauman 2007), processes of personalization and individualization (Lipovetsky 1983), the so-called 'society of the spectacle' (Debord 1967; Vargas Llosa 2012), a shift from the linguistic to the visual (Sartori 1998), and the mediatization of society (Hepp 2013; Hjarvard 2013), among many others.

Anthropologist Paula Sibilia refers to this context as the 'show of the self'. In her book *La intimidad como espectáculo [Intimacy as Spectacle]* (2008), Sibilia critically describes the new 'confessional practices' that take place online and that consist of publicly exposing one's intimacy (2008: 32). In the 21st century, personality has become, according to the author, 'a visible subjectivity', 'something that can be seen', and 'a way of being that is shaped to be shown' (2008: 32). In this same line of thought, Sherry Turkle argues that there has been 'a shift in how we create and experience our own identities' (2011: xi).

From a semiotic perspective, the interest lies in the analysis of the output of these practices of exhibitionism. According to Sibilia, individuals become craftsmen and women, in the sense that they permanently work on 'creating their own personalities'. This new context gives place to a 'spectacle' oriented towards the others, which Sibilia calls 'the show of the self': a permanent exhibitionism of who we (believe we) are and what we do. In her account, when posting content online for public consumption in platforms like Facebook, Instagram or Snapchat, individuals are creating a *product*, which is supposed to *reflect* who they are (2008: 165). Following Barthes, we can call it their *image* (1980: 11). When posting online about themselves, individuals create an image, which re-creates their own personality (2008: 165) by

using the tools made available to them by private companies, with a very particular feature, one that is of utmost interest for semiotics: in that product, the author, the narrator and the character are blended into one (Sibilia 2008: 37). When an individual uses online and/or digital media to 'show' others who he/she 'is', there is an empirical enunciator (Mary), who at the same time is the narrator of the story that is being told (Mary tells you a story about...), and the main character as well (Mary tells you a story about Mary): the three dimensions, usually distinct, are merged into one. This blend is heavily based in the fact that the identity narratives that are constantly being told online rely on the acceptance of a referential pact of verisimilitude, involving the existence of a real, offline individual, which reflects the logics of the autobiographical genre (Sibilia 2008; Robin 2005; Lejeune 1975).

Selfie-taking as a meaningful practice

I come now to the semiotic analysis of selfie-taking as a meaningful practice that links a dimension of the expression (the image of the self) with a dimension of the content (the 'real', offline self). Why is selfie-taking a *semiotic* practice?

To start with, selfie-taking is a type of active and conscious *production*. Except for infrequent cases in which animals like the monkey Naruto snap selfies without knowing what they are doing, when taking a selfie, someone does something consciously –a labor, in Eco's terminology (1976: 152). It is as a result of this action that selfies –the material output of a way of doing– come into being. There is an act of *poiesis*, a creation that implies something being done aiming at a specific goal: boosting the self-image, reinforcing social bonds, etc. Hence, selfies are creations, 'artifacts', something done with a particular intention that is oriented toward a goal.

Secondly, when taking a selfie, a connection between a dimension of expression and one of content is established. As Paccagnella and Vellar (2016: 28) suggest, selfies imply a 'circular relation' [*rapporto circolare*] between the offline and the virtual dimensions. In this sense, selfies are *referential* texts, a feature that Barthes already attributed to photography in general: as he argued, photography does not invent anything – 'it is authentication itself' (Barthes 1980: 87), it 'attests that what I see has indeed existed' (1980: 82). In this sense, 'every photograph is a certificate of presence' (1980: 87). Every selfie has, just as photography when Barthes wrote *Camera lucida*, a 'photographic referent' (1980: 76), which is to be regarded as 'the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph' (1980: 76). When seeing a selfie, we can 'never deny that *the thing has been there*' (1980: 76). In this sense, selfies could be considered forms of the autobiographical genre (Lejeune 1975: 22).

This is the reason why selfies are intuitively regarded as mere iconic copies of the real

offline individual. The most that can be affirmed is that selfies are *self-referential*, that is, their content is the offline self. As Barthes writes, 'what I want, in short, is that my (mobile) image, buffeted among a thousand shifting photographs, altering with situation and age, should always coincide with my (profound) "self"' (1980: 12). When taking a selfie, the author creates a product using him/herself as the subject, a feature that is inherited from the practice of photographic self-portraits, although selfies pertain to a different, more complex, genre. Because of being self-referential, the dimension of the content of a selfie is to some extent limited: it can only refer to the 'cultural unit' of the self, particularly to its *body*.

Moreover, although there might be exceptions (I will come to this point later on), selfies are normally taken to be shared, publicly or privately, and consumed by others. As Paccagnella & Vellar write (2016: 29), the process of production of online content is aimed at producing a reaction of appreciation, commenting or sharing by the addressees. In this sense, a selfie becomes an object of communication. Furthermore, selfies are meaningful to the individuals that take them. As previously mentioned, a selfie is the result of a labor that comes from an *intention*: it can be to reinforce self-esteem (e.g. the mirror selfie), to document a presence in a particular place or event (e. g. in a museum), to reinforce social bonds (e.g. group selfies) or to generate trust (intimate selfies), among others (Paccagnella and Vellar 2016: 55). From a semiotic perspective, a typology of selfie-taking could be proposed based on this point, as I will do in the next section.

Given that selfie-taking is a type of production, this practice implies *making choices*, conscious or unconscious: who is going to be in the frame, what from the background will be framed and what not, from which angle it will be taken, which gesture should be displayed, etc. This is an essential feature of selfies, one that shows the *stylized* character of this kind of photograph and that supports the idea that selfies are not mere copies of the individual, but constructions in which cultural parameters play a role. Displaying a particular gesture like the duckface is a good example of this, as well as the well-known 'legs or hot dogs' selfie: they aim at reproducing preexistent models that are valid within a particular culture.

In view of the fact that selfies are forms of self-representation, it is possible to speak of selfies as instruments of *self-stylization* (Sibilia 2008: 256). As Barthes (1980: 10) wrote on photography, 'once I feel myself observed by the lens [...] I constitute myself in the process of "posing", I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image', a thought that also applies for selfies as a particular genre of photography. In this sense, Barthes (1980: 13) writes that portrait-photography implies the intersection of four 'image-repertoires': 'the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes us of to exhibit his art'. In the case of selfies, these repertoires are blended and reduced to only two, given that who is posing for the picture and the photographer are usually the same person. However, the distinction between self-perception and desired image remains.

Due to technological developments, it is possible to *stylize* in different ways how to represent the body in a selfie, for example by the existing possibilities of *modifying* the self (the body, the face) with filters (artistic, like the ones Instagram has, and/or funny, like the ones Snapchat offers). When analyzing faces from a semiotic perspective, Massimo Leone underlines the importance of the *possibility of alteration*, a practice that seems to be attractive among the young: ‘millions of teenagers, today, daily enjoy exchanging Snapchat images of their faces, heavily transformed through flamboyant visual effects’ (2018: 28). As Paccagnella & Vellar write (2016: 55), filters alter the way in which the photograph is perceived and hence the message conveyed by it. In this sense, selfies could be seen as mechanisms of control of the self-image, clearly for public consumption, but also for private use, as a way of checking how the self-image is. I will come back to this point later on.

All in all, selfie-taking is a socially *codified* practice: there are non-written, underlying rules that regulate it. Good examples of this are the forced smiles, the sexy faces, the need to look at the camera, or even the decision regarding the percentage of one’s legs and of landscape to be shown in the ‘legs or hot dogs’ type of selfie. When taking a selfie, individuals recognize the codes and try to reproduce them in their own selfies in a way that is acceptable and understandable (Eco 1976: 152), that is, *conventional*. As selfie-taking constitutes a meaningful practice, a grammar of selfie-taking, ruled by certain codes and conventions, could be postulated, as I will proceed to do in the following section.

Selfie-taking: a syntax and a typology

I have argued why the practice of selfie-taking could be considered as meaningful and hence deserves a semiotic account, specifically by having a look at the dynamics that these practices involve. Jean-Marie Floch argues that a trajectory can be analyzed from a semiotic perspective if it has a closure and a structural organization that allows its decomposition in minor units of analysis (Floch 1990). As discussed, selfie-taking is a practice that is socially coded and hence ruled by ‘internal, but culturally shaped, deliberations surrounding taking, editing, posting, sending and deleting’ (Tiidenberg 2018: 133). These deliberations need to be examined. In this sense, the following five moments of selfie-taking could be identified for a semiotic analysis:

1. *Recognition of a ‘selfie-situation’*. In this first moment, the individual recognizes a specific situation as appropriate for taking a selfie. This recognition involves the presence of normative criteria of appropriateness, which are culturally coded and identified based on specific cues, like being on a touristic spot, with a celebrity, or being involved in any other situation that would justify taking a selfie. The recognition can take place while being in an infrequent situation, like the ones mentioned, but also when doing

everyday life tasks, like waiting for the bus (Vigild Poulsen et al. 2018: 593). In this recognition there are normative social conventions based on the principle of appropriateness that play a role and allow the individual to identify the situation as a possible 'selfie situation' (or not).

2. *Pre-production.* The second moment consists of the employment of aesthetical and general cultural codes for choosing the 'good' scenario/frame for the picture: Which angle should be snapped? What should be on the background? How should I pose? All these questions come, consciously or not, to the perception of the individual that will take the selfie. Furthermore, what is the image that wants to be projected? Evidence shows that 'users posting selfies try to construct an identity that appears attractive, fashionable, wealthy, and/or important' (Deeb-Swihart et al. 2017: 8). Here also conventional cultural categories – gender, social status, nationality, etc.– play a role. As Bulligham and Vasconcelos (2013: 106) have shown, the desire to look 'professional', 'feminine', 'fun' or 'creative' have an incidence when carrying out practices of self-representation online. In this regard, the conclusions by Veum and Moland Undrum (2017), regarding the similarity between selfies shared on Instagram and visual representations in advertisements and image-banks, is especially enlightening, since they show that there is a norm that is taken into account when conceiving how the selfie should look like. The recognition of different sub-genres of selfies (e.g. touristic selfie) also plays a role in this 'pre-production' phase: as Deeb-Swihart et al. (2017: 8) argue, 'in the Travel category users often pose in such a way that their face occupies a small region of the image, giving the background a larger prominence in the image'. As it can be seen, in the 'pre-production' moment, many decisions are taken, and these are based on the recognition of culturally codified social conventions (aesthetic, ethical, technical) that have a normative power mainly by establishing boundaries to what is appropriate.
3. *Taking the selfie.* This is the moment of creation the selfie, that is, the material outcome of the process, which implies a technical dimension involving the sharpness of the image, an appropriate selection of the angle, an adequate frame, the correct use of light –all these codes belonging to the aesthetical repertoire –, but also the recognition of particular conventions regarding the content: what to frame, how to pose, how to look like, to smile or not, etc. Usually, there is a tendency to display a forced smile, what shows the recognition by the individual/s on the picture of normative cultural conventions on how the image should look like.
4. *Evaluation.* After having taken the selfie (one or more) comes the moment of its evaluation, in which the individual (or individuals) involved in it analyze(s) and control(s) the material outcome of the previous moment. When evaluating the outcome, many social codes, mainly aesthetical ('does it look good?') but also ethical ('is this appropriate?') are in play. Regarding the aesthetical, Deeb-Swihart et al. (2017: 9) argue

that ‘users overwhelmingly attempt to appear attractive over appearing intentionally unattractive’, and they add that ‘it seems selfies follow conventional beauty standards, with individuals wishing to appear fashionable, clean, and put-together’ (2017: 9). Regarding the ethical dimension, Deeb-Swihart et al. (2017: 7) found out that usually ‘people want to appear *effortlessly* happy, healthy, and successful rather than showcasing the intermediate stages or the failures that had to occur to achieve that lifestyle, position, or appearance’. This is an ethical decision dealing with hiding some things and showing others, following Goffman’s dichotomy between a back and a frontstage, respectively. When evaluating the selfie, there is a correspondence of the codes in play with the ones present in the ‘pre-production’ moment: the selfie will be evaluated as appropriate if it reflects the normative codes identified in that earlier stage. If this is not the case, the selfie will probably be taken again until the desired outcome is met.

5. *Finalization*. It would be naïve to believe that the practice of selfie-taking ends with saving the selfie as the material output of the process: usually it goes on to a finalization phase, in which the selfie is edited and manipulated, in a process based on the recognition of and compliance with many codes, mainly aesthetical. This is a distinctive feature of the practice of selfie-taking: its output can be controlled – embellished (Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013: 107) –, mainly by means of the use of photographic filters.

Going back to the idea of the recognition of certain codes that rule the practice of selfie-taking, we could draw on Floch’s (1986) typology of photography to have a better understanding of what individuals might be aiming at. In *Formes de l’empreinte*, Floch presents a dichotomy between *referential* and *constructivist* photography, according to the type of relationship that is established between the photographic discourse and ‘reality’. According to Floch (1986), while referential photography presupposes the existence of meaning and tries to capture it, making of photography a sort of *testimony*, constructivist photography considers that meaning is produced by the photographic discourse itself. Following this classification, when taking selfies, some individuals just aim at ‘saving’ and/or ‘sharing’ the moment they are living, as a sort of testimonial document (a ‘carrier of memory’) without any self-representative intention behind it. However, in many other cases, when taking a selfie, individuals are trying to construct a particular *image* of themselves, making of the selfie a *communicative* device and not only a ‘carrier of memory’. As an example of the first type of selfie we could think of someone who is not literate in the practice of selfie-taking, an amateur, while in the second case we can think of one of the many teenagers who are fully aware of the image they are projecting by means of the selfie they share, and are in possession of both the technical knowledge and the aesthetical and ethical codes to control that output. The well-known semiotic square proposed by Floch (1986: 20) could be employed to better illustrate this differentiation:

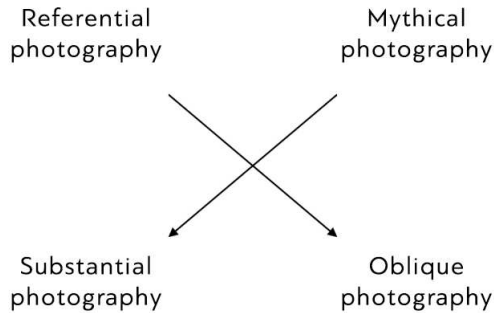


Figure 1

Attributing a clear interpretative function to photographic discourse, *referential* photography tries to reflect the world 'as it is' and hence to create a testimony of 'reality' - therefore, photography is a mediator in 'letting reality speak' (Floch 1986: 20). From a semiotic perspective, what is at stake here is the production of the effect of a *referential illusion*, an 'effect of reality' (Barthes 1968); however, as discussed before, considering iconism as a *reflection* of reality is ontologically risky. The negation of this referential function is what Floch calls *oblique* photography, a type of photography that plays with the limits and possibility of referentiality by addressing the paradoxical and by employing double senses (Floch 1986: 21). On the other hand, based on a constructivist approach to photography, *mythical* photography implies an articulation that creates meaning based on what is being photographed. In this sense, 'reality' is only the basis for a second discourse that goes beyond the figurative dimension, showing precisely how meaning is constructed through discourse (Floch 1986: 22). The negation of mythical photography is called by Floch *substantial* photography, which displays a tension with the 'real' (Floch 1986: 23). These four categories can be useful when trying to understand the practice of selfies-taking, particularly when paying attention to the possession of a repertoire of cultural codes (technical, aesthetical, ethical, situational) that the individuals taking the selfie might possess. Therefore, while individuals with no literacy in selfie-taking might be closer to the referential pole, a young influencer, fully literate in the practice, should be placed closer to the mythical pole.

Selfie-taking and its function in 'show of the self'

Taking now a more sociological stance, a discussion of the function that selfie-taking fulfills within the socio-cultural context of the 'show of the self' described before should be conducted. Drawing on Goffman's account on the presentation of self in everyday life, two main

features should be stressed out in order to understand how selfies play a specific role in the process of impression management: on the one hand, in the process of presentation of the self, signs play a key role, as they are the *carriers* (sign-vehicles) by means of which impressions can be managed. As Goffman writes (1956: 19), ‘while in the presence of others, the individual typically infuses his activity with signs which dramatically highlight and portray confirmatory facts that might otherwise remain unapparent or obscure’. On the other hand, Goffman attributes a role to idealization in the game of performing the self. As he writes (1956: 23): ‘when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, than does his behavior as a whole’. The presentation of the self, both offline and online, is ‘molded and modified’, in Goffman’s words (1956: 23) by underlying rules, that is, institutionalized conventions – or codes. These ideas go in line with the concept of stylization presented before. According to Eco (1976), stylizations are ‘apparently “iconic” expressions that are in fact the result of a convention’ and that are easy to recognize by the interpreter of the sign as the result of ‘large-scale overcoding’ (1976: 238). It is probably in this sense that Sherry Turkle believes that ‘on social-networking sites such as Facebook, we think we will be presenting ourselves, but our profile ends up as somebody else – often the fantasy of who we want to be’ (2011: 153). As Barthes wrote on photography, selfies are ‘images partially true, and therefore totally false’ (1980: 66). In this process, the ‘self’ we create is not an actual *reflection* of who we are, but a stylized copy, ‘molded and modified’ by the values of society we recognize as institutionalized: coolness, cuteness, sexiness, etc. Turkle further argues that ‘our online performances take on lives of their own. [...] Sometimes we see them as out “better selves”’ (2011: 160). Both idealization and stylization imply the recognition of a code that is seen as meaningful and that conditions our performances. In this sense, within the impression management dynamics, selfies fulfill the function of letting individuals have some control on how they *will* be seen, following a logic of ‘check and balances’, or on how they *would* be seen: in fact, selfies are not always meant to be *actually* shared.

On the other hand, there is a central feature of selfies that make them so special and interesting from a semiotic perspective: they anchorage the offline self to the online narrative. I believe it is in this feature where it’s essential value within the ‘show of the self’ lies: the online environment offers many possibilities of self-representation, but only selfies are a guarantee that something really happened in a particular ‘here and now’, as stated by its author/character. As Barthes wrote, photography ‘*authenticates* the existence of a certain being’ (1980: 107), contrary to what happens with written text, which presents ‘the object in a vague, arguable manner, and therefore incites me to suspicions as to what I think I am seeing’ (1980: 106). On June 21, 2018, to celebrate the selfie day, Facebook published the following message about selfies: ‘Whether they’re silly, sweet or stunning, selfies are a way to show the world, “This is me, right here, right now”’. This apparently naive text addresses the essence of selfies: it anchors the author/narrator/

character to a specific 'here and now', that is, to a spatial-temporal situation. This is what Barthes had in mind when he wrote that 'what the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially' (1980: 4). In this sense, selfies constitute a particular and interesting form of *débrayage* including an actor (me), a space (here) and a time (now) that generate the illusion of *authenticity*.

In this regard, Sibilía argues that as a result of growing mediatization of society, people are more and more interested in authentic, *non-staged* experiences (2008: 221). As a result of this craving for 'the authentic', there is a need for authors to introduce 'effects of reality' into their life-stories (2008: 224), a need that turns the anchorage of the story told online in the offline life to be irresistible, even when offline life might be banal and dull (2008: 231). As Paccagnella and Vellar argue (2016: 27), the process of online identity construction requires an incorporation of signs that send the reader to the 'real' offline dimension, and selfies are one of the few devices by means of which the body of the author enters into the digital world (Paccagnella and Vellar 2016: 54). That is why I believe we can speak of an *anchoring function* of the selfie, consisting of introducing and making visible the 'real' offline self, bounded to a specific 'here and now', into the identity narrative that is displayed online. Although both dimensions are strongly linked, they shouldn't be confused: the 'self' that is shown in a selfie is not the offline self; the Mary shown in the selfie is not a copy of the 'real' offline Mary: it is a stylized copy that is 'molded and modified' according to underlying codes that are socially institutionalized. Nevertheless, the selfie is the closest occurrence we might have of bringing the 'real' offline dimension into the online environment, as it shows the offline self bounded to specific date, time of the day, geographical location, etc. As Barthes writes, due to its nature photographs are a 'false on the level of perception, true on the level of time' (1980: 115), a statement that also includes selfies. Barthes uses the concept of 'biographeme' to refer to the biographical features of the photographers' life that are present in the photograph (1980: 30). In this sense, selfies are biographemes in themselves. As Deeb-Swihart et al. (2017: 8) argue, they 'serve as photographic evidence for a persons' behavior or interests.'

Based on these remarks, it could be argued that selfies belong to the *autobiographical* genre (Sibilía 2008; Robin 2005), a genre that implies a reading contract between enunciator and addressee which unifies the identities of author, narrator and protagonist (Lejeune 1975: 5; Robin 2005: 45). As Sibilía writes (2008: 45), facts narrated in autobiographical stories are considered truthful. Moreover, the addressee assumes that the facts that are being narrated are *verifiable*, that is, 'claim to provide information about a "reality" exterior to the text' (Lejeune 1975: 22). There is an implicit 'referential pact' between enunciator and addressee, 'in which are included a definition of the field of the real that is involved and a statement of the modes and the degree of resemblance to which the texts lay claim' (Lejeune 1975: 22). The selfie is a genre that is *contractual* (Lejeune 1975: 29); in this contract, the proper name, referring to a particular cultural unit attached to a referent, is an essential element.

However, in practice it might be tricky to draw a clear line between fictional and veridical narratives: as it has been discussed in this paper, the cases of online self-representation are a clear proof of this challenge. That is why it might be more appropriate to follow Robin (2005: 46) in arguing that instead of 'autobiography' it should be spoken of 'auto-fictions', as the stories being told are to some extent fictional constructions based on 'reality' that are mediated by cultural codes: there is never a full correspondence between author, narrator and character, even though in the narrative it might look like they are the same as a result of the referential nature of selfies. Processes of stylization, embellishment and modification are usually in play.

Concluding remarks

Our goal was to approach the practice of selfie-taking from a semiotic perspective, focusing on why it plays a key role within the 'show of the self'. Regarding the first point, I have argued that selfies are the output of a photographic practice that is meaningful to individuals because it mobilizes codes that are culturally institutionalized. Identifying these codes and the function they play during the selfie-taking process is essential when trying to understand how individuals perform their identities online. I have also suggested that a syntax of selfie-taking could be formulated and tried to come up with one – it was only one of many other possible segmentations. Semiotics, by studying how the emergence of meaning is made possible, is in a favorable position to investigate the signifying processes related to the practice of selfie-taking. Moreover, the hypotheses developed within the semiotic framework could be tested empirically within the context of sociological and ethnographic studies: very interesting insights could be found out by seeing 'meaning in action'.

Regarding the second point, I have tried to argue that selfies play a key function in the 'show of the self' because they anchor the offline into the online narrative. Much more could be said about this relationship between the offline dimension and the virtual, but I believe I have made my point by arguing how the selfie constitutes a semiotic device in which the dimension of the content and the dimension of the expression become very close, but still don't blend, as this blending is ontologically impossible: a selfie might seem as a copy of 'reality' – a 'resemblance to the truth', in Lejeune's (1975: 22) words –, but, in the best case, it is '*vraisemblable*' (Barthes 1968): in the process of taking selfies, as another unfolding of the general process of presentation of the self, there are always stylizations, idealizations, and modifications based on institutionalized codes that establish an essential ontological difference between factual and fictional dimensions of life. Nevertheless, compared to other tools for online self-representation, what is undeniable is that a selfie, just like Photography, 'always carries its referent with itself' (Barthes 1980: 5), and it is here where its popularity as a new genre within the contemporary digital culture could be looked for. In this sense, Roland Barthes wrote in

1980 that 'what characterizes the so-called advanced societies is that they today consume images and no longer, like those of the past, beliefs; they are therefore more liberal, less fanatical, but also more "false" (less "authentic")' (1980: 118). Almost 30 years later, this statement seems to describe our present in an appropriate way.

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