

# Semiotics of the Selfie: The Glorification of the Present.<sup>1</sup>

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*After anecdotic evidence providing biographic background for the author's interest in selfies, the semiotic question of their meaning is tackled, distinguishing between the signification of taking selfies and the meaning of selfies thus taken. Both entail authorial, reception, and structural meaning, to be studied in the long period of the cultural history of self-representation and in the context of a specific semiosphere. Selfies can, hence, be interpreted as symptoms of an emerging and increasingly hegemonic temporal ideology in which escape from both traumatic past and anguishing future gives rise to a valorization of the present expressing itself also in the new visual format of the selfies: they attempt at bestowing an ontological aura to the insignificance of the postmodern present.*

**Keywords** Selfies, Cultural Semiotics, Identity, Temporal Ideologies, Postmodern Conception of Time.

'This above all: to thine own self be true'  
William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1, III

## Confession of a Selfiest

First, a confession: I have been and, to a certain extent, I keep taking selfies. I started when a new technological device — a mobile phone with back camera —, the platform of a social network — Facebook —, and a new format of photographic discourse (I do not remember when I first saw a selfie, but surely it was at a time when everyone was taking photos of this kind) were made available to me. I cannot retrieve my first selfie either, but I can surely recover the first selfie that I published on Facebook (Fig. 1): it represents me in Australia, my head inexpertly peering into the photographic scene, a lazy and cute kangaroo in the background.



**Figure 1:** My first selfie, Australia, probably Brisbane, 2008.

The passion for taking pictures of my face with animals of various kinds in the background — especially cats but also exotic animals — has remained a constant in my selfie production, in keeping with a popular trend, itself deserving further semiotic interpretation (why do people like so much taking and seeing selfies with animals?).<sup>2</sup>

My selfies have included in their backgrounds landscapes, monuments, works of art (very few artworks, to tell the truth — for including them in my selfies would somehow hurt my bourgeois sense of distinction) and, of course, people, sometimes individual friends or acquaintances, sometimes groups of them, sometimes strangers or groups of them; many of my past selfies would include my ex-wife (Fig. 2), while the following partners have never obtained this symbolic privilege, because either they or I have not wanted it, the symmetry of the desire for appearing in a couple selfie perhaps being as rare as love. I took some selfies with my brother but rarely with my mother and never with my now deceased father; although I now regret a little not having any selfie with him, such representation would seem to me almost sacrilegious, a brutal invasion of the present *époque* into a remote one.

In most selfies I smile, so as to abide by the euphoric imperative of the digital social networks, but also so as not to worry my mother, who follows my journeys through the images that my brother forwards to her from Facebook. One of the most touching moments of my digital social life occurred when, upon returning for a short Christmas vacation to the town where I was born, in Southern Italy, I realized that my mother had printed, framed, and hung in my room — a room almost always empty in the last twenty-five years — meticulous collections of the selfies that I had so absentmindedly taken during my travels, neglecting them immediately after having posted them on Facebook (Fig. 3).



**Figure 2:** Last selfie with my ex-wife (taken without knowing that it was the last one)



**Figure 3:** Analogic maternal love

The style of the selfies that I have been taking has slowly but incessantly changed with the development of technology and in order to follow a rhetorical tendency of spontaneity, quite common today or even hegemonic; the selfie cannot be unintentional and, therefore, excludes the possibility of spontaneous self-representation. Nevertheless, in the most recent selfies and, generally, in the photos that currently circulate in digital social networks, many efforts are made so as to give the impression that the represented subjects have been caught *in medias res*, that is, in the middle of the flowing of their lives. Stretching the arm, indeed, and without ever using the horrific *selfie-sticks* — a true stigma of lower-class photographic style — one can give a selfie the format and, thus, the connotation of an image that someone else has

taken from close distance, especially if one removes from the picture all the traits that could communicate, conversely, a narcissistic premeditation of the photo (Fig. 4).



**Figure 4:** Pseudo-spontaneous selfie

Taking a selfie that does not look like a selfie is not easy but can be achieved. Obviously, one must not check the appearance of one's own countenance on the mobile screen while taking the selfie itself; this 'retrospective' anxiety would be the equivalent of Orpheus's backward look: it would have all suggestion of spontaneity and, therefore, life, immediately perish. The desire for appearing in a selfie that looks like an unintentional self-representation is motivated by the socio-psychological status that the selfie attributes to one's identity, with an always ambiguous connotation between loneliness and solitude, fashionable affirmation of individual independence and fear and, therefore, rejection, of any suspicion of marginalization. In selfies, people want to appear as solitary travelers, not as lonely journeyers.

Despite the variety of visual contexts represented in my selfies, and the change of style therein — from the quite naive selfies of the neophyte until the super-careful and edited ones of the expert — what appears in these images is mainly my head, with my face, my hair, a part of my neck, a part of my back, and sometimes even a portion of my thorax. I appear with more or less beard, shorter or longer hair, fatter or slimmer, progressively older.

## **The meaning of selfies**

I always include the same question in the written test for the students of my course of visual semiotics: what is the meaning of a selfie?<sup>3</sup> I do so with a selfish purpose: I hope that, one day, a genial student will write an answer revealing the deep and ultimate meaning of this

new discursive practice and the texts it produces. Until now, however, responses have always disappointed me, which indicates that the social omnipresence of the selfie has given rise to its naturalization: we have stopped asking ourselves why we take this kind of photos.

In order to 'denaturalize' the meaning of a selfie, different levels of analysis must be articulated. First, one must distinguish between the meaning of the practice itself of taking selfies and the meaning of selfies as individual images. In addition, one must consider that, as has been suggested earlier, there are selfies whose nature of selfies is concealed in their communication (*crypto-selfies*), images that circulate as selfies but that are not actually such from the point of view of their empirical production (*pseudo-selfies*), and representations of social contexts in which selfies are taken (*meta-selfies*, a sub-genre that, as we shall see, politicians widely adopt).

The practice of taking selfies and the images thus produced, then, result in meanings that can be distributed according to Umberto Eco's famous hermeneutic trichotomy. In selfies there is, first, an *intentio auctoris*, that is, the meaning that a subject wants to express in a more or less conscious way through this photographic format and its content; second, an *intentio lectoris*, or the meaning that emerges from a selfie or a set of selfies as they are observed and interpreted by a receiver; and, third, an *intentio operis*, that is, the meaning that this practice, its format, and the texts that they produce implicitly entail in the context of the history of culture and, especially, in the structure of the semiosphere. The existence of such *intentio operis* implies that, beside the individual psychology that motivates the creation of selfies, and next to the sociology of their reception that attributes to selfies a certain connotation of meaning as they are published, a semiotic structure is intrinsic to this form of self-representation and produces meaning independently of any individual psychology or collective sociology, because it essentially depends on the place that the selfie occupies in the history of the culture of representation and self-representation of the body and, above all, the face. An analysis of the meaning of the selfie can be complete only if it considers these three hermeneutical dimensions and their interrelations.

## **Intentio auctoris**

An evident relation obtains between the individual tendency to publish selfies and a psychology characterized by a certain narcissism, a certain exhibitionism, and even a certain dependence on the judgment of others (Eler 2017). Whoever takes a lot of selfies enjoys controlling the representation of his or her own face, its inclusion in photographic scenes of social distinction — such as those of exotic travel experiences, for example —, its exhibition in social networks, and the positive judgment it might receive, in terms of *likes* or praising comments. When taking a selfie, we do not think only about storing an image of something memorable, or

about the probable prestige that it will result from showing this picture to others, but also and above all about the fact that our own face will be looked at, admired, and praised in conjunction with the background of the selfie. In other words, we do not take a selfie with a famous actor because we want to remember, in the future, this memorable encounter, or because we want the actor to be seen and admired by those to whom we shall show his picture, but because we want to associate the image of our own face with that of the actor, and attract admiration toward the former by situating it in the 'visual aura' of the latter.

Whoever produces and publishes a number of selfies that is statistically high in comparison to those taken and published by the other individuals in the same community implicitly or explicitly attributes an essential value to creating and diffusing tangible signs of her or his presence through the visual representation of the face, its circulation, and the look that others will project on it. This trend may become even disturbing, and be interpreted as a neurotic symptom, when the selfies that an individual takes – and especially those that she or he publishes – are excessive in relation to the other visual formats used, or when these selfies suppress or marginalize the background of the photographic scene and present themselves as solipsistic icons of an isolated face. In these cases, selfies turn from a format of social distinction into a source of ridicule or even stigmatization: excessive selfies will be interpreted as a symptom of a personality that is insecure of its own presence and social desirability.

Nevertheless, even in the domain of the psychology of the selfie, the format and especially the context of the images that such format produces are characterized by a stylistic variability that also carries psychological connotations. Such variety can give rise to a typology that considers the traits of the individuals that take selfies. For example, investigations conducted so far seem to show that there are some stylistic features that are prevalent in female selfies – such as the female tendency to take and spread self-images that do not represent the whole face but fragments of it (Losh 2015) – and others that are prevalent in male selfies.<sup>4</sup> Other features depend on age, class, nationality, and the contextual situation in which the selfie is taken. For instance, Lev Manovich's laboratory has demonstrated that selfies 'smile' more in certain cities of the world than in others (Manovich and Tifentale 2015).

## **Intentio lectoris**

In addition to this inner articulation, even more important is the requirement not to stop at a superficially psychological analysis of the selfie. The selfie arises from the encounter between a narcissistic tendency and a set of technologies, devices, and platforms that allow such tendency to express itself. This expression, however, is always characterized by the potential presence of a viewership, that is, by the dimension of an *intentio lectoris*, which is the object of study of a sociology of reception. The zero degree of the audience of the selfie is a kind

of Bakhtinian social interlocutor, that is, an implicit and often internalized notion of who will see, interpret, and even evaluate one's selfies. This interlocutor, however, is almost never an individual or a collective empirical observer, but rather a model observer, that is, a hypothesis of cognitive, emotional, and pragmatic reactions that viewers will show upon observing the selfie. These are taken, edited, and posted with the idea that they will help building, for the fraying and fluctuating viewership of the social networks, an image of oneself that will produce effects also outside the digital world.

In this field too, then, one can distinguish between good and bad communicators of selfies, among those who are aware of the semiotic characteristics of this format, of their own semiotic objectives, and of how to best reach the latter through the former, and those who, conversely, fall victim to aberrant encodings and decodifications. At one end of the spectrum, there will be public figures like Pope Francis or most powerful politicians. They, or rather their communication experts, astutely use selfies so as to convey the idea of these VIPs' proximity to the people and their communicative manners; there is a fundamental difference, indeed, between the selfie of the powerful and that of the unknown person. Powerful people appear in the selfies of others, but do not take selfies, for this would imply an expression of existential uncertainty. In fact, what the powerful post in their social networks are not so much selfies as pseudo-selfies, or even meta-photos and -selfies (that is, selfies in which other individuals or groups are depicted while taking selfies), representing the people's desire to take a selfie with the powerful and underlining, thus, their charismatic capacity for attributing existential presence to whomever appears in a photo at their side. On the other side of the spectrum, many common people take and publish selfies without any awareness of their semantic and pragmatic effects, and even obtaining a reception that is contrary to the expected one. For example, those who take and post selfies in order to seduce a particular contact in their digital social network may, conversely, send out an impression of being excessively narcissistic, frivolous, and even too conscious of the aesthetic judgment of the others.

## **Intentio operis**

Nevertheless, the dimension of the meaning of the selfie that most interests semiotics or, from another perspective, the dimension of it that semiotics can study in the most interesting way, is neither the set of psychological motivations that lead to take, publish, or admire selfies, nor the social connotations that selfies communicate, but the intrinsically meaningful and communicative structure of the selfie, its position and role in the diachronic and synchronic development of the semiosphere of a community of interpreters. Reflecting on the selfie in the framework of a semiotics of cultures pursues several objectives; from the most general and abstract to the most particular and concrete: first, using the cultural semiotics of the selfie as



a case study to develop epistemological hypotheses about the relation between technological innovation and change in the prevailing semiotic practices (Leone 2019 *El giro*); second, proposing analyses that interpret the selfie and its practices as symptoms of a more general semiotic ideology, concerning the relation between meaning and time (according to this interpretation, each selfie implicitly affirms, in the semiosphere in which it appears and circulates, a certain temporal and aspectual ideology); third, developing a phenomenology of the selfie, of what happens to a face when it is represented by this format, and to a gaze when it observes a face thus displayed.

In the study of the selfie as a phenomenon of meaning, the methodological framework proposed by José Luis Fernández in his book *Plataformas mediáticas* ['media platforms'] (2018) is essential: one cannot articulate a syntax, a semantics, and a pragmatics of the selfie without carefully dwelling on a) the *semiohistory* of the selfie, or its relation to other devices, techniques, practices, formats, and styles of self-representation; b) the socio-semiotic state of the selfie, taking into account, for example, gender differences expressed through this semiotic form; c) the discourse of the selfie, which only abstractly can be seen as isolated but in fact always occurs in conjunction with complex sets of texts and other fragments of representative discourse.

## Selfies and the Ideology of the Present

The essay will now interpret selfies as a symptom of temporal and aspectual ideologies, that is, of the ways in which, in the current semiosphere, texts, discourses, and practices implicitly or explicitly express a certain axiology of time, a modality of understanding its meaning in relation to the construction of language. The hypothesis that guides such reflection is that the contemporary digital semiosphere is mainly characterized by an ideological valorization of the present time – especially among *millennials* and members of the Z Generation –, a valorization that manifests itself also in the dissemination of selfies.

On the one hand, hinting at the possibility of an ideological emphasis on the present time might seem pleonastic or even absurd: human beings experience the present moment after moment, and they can conjure a past or imagine a future only by temporarily distracting themselves from the present in which they inexorably live. Mental images of the past and the future, moreover, although 'encouraged' by signs of the latter (relics) and of the former (omens) that are disseminated in the present, can be semiotically and even linguistically constructed only from the point of view of this last temporal eon. As Émile Benveniste first formally intuited, the abstract enunciation point from which the future and the past, as well as any beyond, can be linguistically evoked, inevitably places itself in the phenomenological present that is occupied by the mind and the body of the speaker. I can say 'I shall buy a car tomorrow', but this verbal evocation of a future state of the world has its technical roots in the present, in here, in my persona.



An essential dissymmetry, then, holds between the ideological valorizations of the past and the future, on the one hand, and apparently similar ideological valorizations of the present, on the other hand.<sup>5</sup> ‘Cultures of the present’ basically arise as a result of the systematic effort of blocking the switch between the present awareness and the imaginary transportation to either the past, through remembrance, or the future, through fiction (the separation between the two mental processes is, of course, not so sharp: there is a lot of fiction in remembrance, and a lot of remembrance in fiction) (Leone 2019 *Chronillogicalities*). Ideologies of the present are not, nevertheless, more ‘natural’ than ideologies of the past and the future. They might seem so, because human beings phenomenologically live in the present, but that is also a consequence of an ideological construction (Huber 2016). In reality, blocking the switch that leads from the phenomenology of the present to the remembrance of the past or to the fiction of the future requires a considerable effort.

As regards the switch between the present and the past, ‘blocking’ or ‘hampering’ is ‘unnatural’ both at the individual and at the social level, as demonstrated by the fact that an *ars oblivionalis* [‘technique of the oblivion’] does not exist; an equivalent of the many mnemotechniques that have been invented and experimented with more or less success throughout history, and on which an abundant literature is extant, does not exist as regards the art of forgetting. That was a central preoccupation of the late Umberto Eco, who underlined in several essays that there is a semiotic dissymmetry between forgetting and remembering (Eco 1988); probably for evolutionary reasons, our cognition exerts an active agency as regards remembrance (to a certain extent, at least), meaning that we can voluntarily decide to remember a phone number or the name of a person, but no agency whatsoever as regards oblivion (we cannot in any way decide to forget a word, or a face).

That has probably to do with the fact that memorizing and keeping in our mind, at least for a certain time, the memories of past unpleasant events and experiences is useful for us not to undergo the same experience again; were we to exert direct and intentional agency on our memory, on the opposite, we would be inclined to immediately remove any painful trace of the past, losing, thus, the possibility of learning from it (Draaisma 2013). Blocking or thwarting the switch from the present phenomenology to the recollection of the past is, therefore, somewhat unnatural, in the sense that, at the individual level, it gives rise to an attitude and practice of systematic removal, a condition on the pathological implications of which abundant psychoanalytical literature exists.

Removal, though, can permeate a temporal ideology also at the level of society (Plate 2017). There are human groups in which such systematic oblivion of the past is not spontaneous but imposed by power with the aim of bringing about that which commonly goes under the name of *damnatio memoriae* (Augé 1998): with the advent of the new leader, the society as a whole is encouraged, and sometimes even forced to get rid of all signs that might work as relics of an undesired past: in these cases, the temporal ideology that prevails works symmet-

rically to the monumentalization of the past that is typical of nationalisms. The two trends and their relative practices can actually coexist, for instance in dictatorships that simultaneously remove all traces of previous democratic regimes and figures and build their symbolical pantheon and pedigree by extolling the memory of previous dictatorial periods and protagonists (Mussolini with Caesar, for example).

Both the social and the psychological ideologies of the present operate by eliminating from the personal or social entourage a series of signs that are closely or even remotely connected with a past epoch (Weinrich 2000): a person will avoid certain streets, pictures, or songs etc. so as to limit or avoid any access to a past whose remembrance is saddened with the presence of a lost beloved one; a society will reduce or erase statues, plaques, festivities, etc. so as to block the temporal switch that leads from the present to a previous painful or disdained historical period.

Temporal ideologies of the present, however, usually do not involve only the systematic erasure of such or such wounding or enemy memory, but the disabling of the switch itself that allows individuals and especially groups to transfer from the phenomenology of the present and its ontological fullness to the fantasmatic phenomenology of the past.<sup>6</sup> In radical or even extremist ideologies of the present, it is not a particular memory that is eliminated, or a range of souvenirs, but the practice itself of passing from the perceived present to the conjured or recollected past. Those individuals or groups that, voluntarily or involuntarily, adhere to such ideology do not limit themselves not to remember something; they do not remember anything; and that is the case not because they cannot remember, as in the circumstance of a pathological amnesia, but because they do not value the access to reconstructed mental images of past events any longer. Hence, an amnesic aesthetics takes place.<sup>7</sup>

Given the natural propensity of human beings to refer to the past, developing an individual or social amnesia does not usually involve an effort but is the consequence of a trauma: the individual is so anguished by the possibility of reminiscing some painful events that he or she does not try to eliminate a specific memory, or a range of souvenirs, but puts the entire mechanism of remembrance itself into brackets. The same goes for societies: those of them that embrace, often unconsciously, an extreme temporal ideology of the present, do not forget only one period, or one memory, or a determined series of them, but rather adopt the moral suggestion of the famous Neapolitan song: "those who have received, have received, those who have given, have given, let's forget about the past, we're all from Naples, comrade!"<sup>8</sup> In more explicit terms, in extreme temporal ideologies of the present, people and groups live in a constant obnubilation, in which any mental or psychosocial bridging toward the past is systematically discouraged. Ideologies of the present are quite successful in times of crises of various kinds for they are, at least at first sight, relaxing: anything that might bother from the past is simply erased from the scene, and the entire past with it.

Similarly, a society that does not cultivate a reasonable devotion to the past is condemned

to repeat its mistakes. That does not mean that the mere commemoration of the past is sufficient to generate progress in human history, and to avoid that, for instance, meaningless wars are waged around the globe. Unfortunately, thus far, the construction of monumental war cemeteries has not prevented societies from engaging in devastating wars over and over again. On the contrary, reacting to the ideologies of obnubilation should entail refraining from yielding to the opposite risk of embracing chauvinistic ideologies of the past, or to sterile self-victimizing, and should encourage cultivating, instead, the art of reasonable etiology, which is part of the more encompassing art of historical hermeneutics. In the present, that which matters is not remembering the past per se. What matters is, first, discovering, in the past, patterns whose configurations are analogous to those that are observed *in fieri* in the present; and, second, formulating plausible hypotheses about the genealogy of the present into the past. That is the case at both the individual and the social level.

Radical ideologies of the present, however, do not cause only the obliteration of the past, but also that of the future. As it was suggested earlier, ideologies of the past are frequently embraced by human beings and groups so as to soothe the uncertainty of the future: given the empty ontology and the statutory unpredictability of this temporal eon, individuals and societies start obsessively delving into their past, diverting their attention from the present but, above all, from the future. Extreme ideologies of the present are motivated by the same anxiety but they give rise to different side effects. Indeed, although the mania for relics of nationalist pseudo-monuments distracts a collectivity from the anxious need for imagining a future, it does not disrupt, notwithstanding, the faculty of imagination itself too. Reconstructing the past from traces or pseudo-traces of it, indeed, inevitably relies on the human cognitive capacity for switching from the present perception of the world to the imagination of possible worlds, which are ontologically absent but semiotically suggested by their relics. The nostalgic, the nationalist, and the hipster do not abdicate such faculty of imagination but simply reorient its efforts toward the past instead of aiming at the imagination and planning of the future.

The ideologies of the present, on the contrary, do not obliterate only the past and the future, but also the human propensity itself for mentally and linguistically accessing possible worlds. From this point of view, the radicalization of these ideologies is even more dangerous. It leads to the paralysis, or at least to the ankylosis, of an essential human faculty, one that has been probably selected throughout natural history as adaptive for its ability to allow human beings and groups to better adapt to sudden modifications of the environment, and not through experience but through prevention. In the long perspective of natural history, the superiority of the latter approach over the former is evident: those who must experience dangers in order to avoid them are likely to succumb to them in the short period. It is only through imagining both risks and opportunities before they present themselves that the individual (as well as the society) can survive in an ever changing natural and cultural context.

The current ideologies of the present, instead, are usually characterized by abnormal val-

orization of experience over planning. Accumulating experience in all fields of human activity, from the sentimental one to the professional one, seems to have become the moral imperative of the present time; many young people in the west do not know when and if they will secure a permanent job; when and if they will have a house; when and if they shall give rise to the next generation. As a reaction to the current difficulty or even impossibility of planning a future, they are successfully marketed an aesthetics of the present in which they even pay for accumulating experience without ever building or planning anything solid in the future. They travel, eat, love, and, more generally, consume by simply exposing themselves to experiences whose purpose is neither that of accumulating as memories of the past, nor that of turning into the basis for devising a future, but to remain encircled within an epidermal aesthetics, which soothes the natural anxiety for the future and its empty ontology by caressing the senses with increasingly sophisticated and sundry immediate environments. In relation to them, what matters is not to learn how to better react to a certain context, but to enjoy the superposition of sensations earned in *Umwelten* that present themselves as constantly changing and in which prevision is not an issue.

## Conclusion

The selfie constitutes the photographic glorification of this attitude: not only do I look at reality through a camera, that is, through the idea of a visual present that is attributed the aesthetic validation of a memorable past, but I even turn my back to reality, and do not look at it directly anymore, not even in the margins of my visual field (Kuntsman 2017); in the selfie, I take an image of the present that includes myself as being a memorable person, objectifying, so to speak, the memory of myself as remembered person (by myself). In the selfie, again, I do not take a picture that will allow me to remember how I was (as in the case of photographic portraits or self-portraits, for instance (Beyaert 2018)), but I take a picture that allows me to perceive myself as someone to be remembered. The selfie, as most present-day digital photographs, is a way to bestow to the vanishing present — isolated from any memory of the past and any plan for the future — the aura of a visual souvenir, of something that will survive me in the future. That, however, does not disrupt the aesthetics of the ideological valorization of the durative aspect of the present but reinforces it: I shall never look back at my selfie, because I am already looking at it in the instantaneous and durative moment in which I take it. The selfie conflates the present moment of the making of a picture of myself and the potential future moment in which I shall look at such picture in order to remember how I was: in the selfie, I look at myself as I am in the making of the selfie itself, and yet this looking at my own image in the present is not the same as looking at myself in the mirror. It shares the narcissism of the mirror but at the same time it absorbs the durativity of a photograph and its traditional connotations

of memory device. The selfie is, as a consequence, the perfect synthesis between mirror and camera, between a visual device that captures the present state of myself – delivering an image of it that, nevertheless, will vanish with my moving far from the mirror – and a visual device that captures the present state of myself for a potential future spectatorship. It is as though, by taking selfies, I was granting myself the possibility to attach a temporal dimension to my mirror, stretching its reflected image into a possible future (Godart 2016). The purpose of a selfie, however, is not functional but symbolic: I shall never look at my selfies again, yet I take them as if they were to become future images of myself to be looked at as visual deposit of my past identities. From this point of view, being a semiotic hybrid between a mirrored image and a photographed one, the selfie works as an index – meaning that it would not be there if the camera had not been in physical contiguity with my body in the *hic et nunc* – but also as an icon – meaning that this mirror actually retains a permanent picture of such indexical presence of mine – and as a symbol. The symbolic function of a selfie exactly derives from its conflating indexical and iconic properties: with digital photography, the ontology of the photographed object becomes uncertain; by connecting it with the idea of a firm physical contiguity with my body (through my arm or its prosthesis, the selfie-stick), I attribute an indexically ontological aura to digital icons of myself. Selfies are so popular because, in a temporal ideology of the present, reassure us about our own ontological continuity. They provide a present version of the temporal ideology of the past and its memories. Selfies are a visual device to remember the present as present and not as past. They attribute to experience the phenomenological aura of memory. In a selfie, I remember my present. It is the epitome of the radicalization of the temporal and aspectual ideology of the instantaneous, durative present.

Such ideology, then, manifests itself in a myriad of everyday experiences and gadgets, which nevertheless propose, in the present-day semiosphere, always the same temporal and aspectual attitude: do not look at the past, it is painful; do not look at the future, it is anguishing; look at the present, at a present that is disconnected from what precedes it and from what follows it, at a present that manifests itself as continuous instant, without the burden to remember or to plan, without the bother to accumulate, without the pain of imagination and its risks of disillusion.

## NOTES

1 This article was presented for the first time to the students and researchers of the Faculty of Communication of the University of Buenos Aires on August 17, 2018, on the occasion of a roundtable organized by José Luiz Fernández, with the participation of Pablo Semán, entitled 'Encuentro alrededor de nuevas retóricas en la Plataformas Mediáticas' ['Encounter around the New Rhetorics of Media Platforms']. I thank José Luiz Fernández for this opportunity, and

I am grateful to all those who, at the end of my presentation, proposed comments and questions.

2 In my essay 'Brève histoire topologique du monde' (Leone 2019 Brève), which also reflects on the new obsessions of digital identity, I have formulated the hypothesis that the selfie is produced as an attempt at self-monumentalization, where the marble statue is replaced by one of pixels and, therefore, animals appear in images of this sort like horses in equestrian monuments. There are more motivations, however: tender animals such as cats or dogs or those whose representation presupposes a risky journey, such as lions, gorillas, snakes, etc. are included in selfies in order to define the identity of those who take them. Taking selfies with animals has also produced several accidents, injuries, and even deaths, since their production often involves the obviously dangerous move of turning one's back to susceptible animals. There is even a fashion, in the web, of circulating pseudo-selfies taken by animals; I have dealt with this argument in my article on 'The Semiotics of the Face in Digital Dating' (Leone 2019 *The Semiotics*).

3 Scholarly literature on the selfie is growing but is often too attached to the psychological framework of narcissism. Explaining the diffusion of selfies in these terms is, perhaps, too simplistic (Pavoncello 2016; Riva 2016; Di Gregorio 2017). For a recent survey of the literature on the selfie, see Peraica 2017 and Tinel-Temple, Busetta, and Monteiro 2019; for a critical perspective, Kuntsman 2017, Stavans 2017, and Storr 2017.

4 See the forthcoming article of Federica Turco in Leone 2020 *The Face / Il volto*.

5 For an in-depth discussion, see Leone 2017.

6 Connerton 2008 articulates social oblivion as follows: repressive erasure; prescriptive forgetting; forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity; structural amnesia; forgetting as annulment; forgetting as planned obsolescence; forgetting as humiliated silence; that which is at stake here is similar to Connerton's "structural amnesia"; see also Connerton 2009.

7 Such 'amnesiology' would be a counterpart to Derrida's 'hauntology' (Derrida 1993).

8 Song *Simmo 'e Napule paisà* (1944); lyrics by Peppino Fiorelli; music by Nicola Valente.

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