Mirrors and Shadows:
The Digital Aestheticisation of Oneself

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ABSTRACT

Digital cameras have made self-portraits increasingly common, and frequently we post our self-portraits online. This paper compares online photographic self-portraiture with self-representations in weblogs and the creation of visual avatars. Contemporary projects and quotidian practice is connected to the history of self-writing and self-portraiture, as well as to psychoanalytic theories of how we use our own mirror images to come to an understanding of our *selves*. The paper concludes that our contemporary fascination with reflections and shadows is an expression of our newfound subjectivity as individuals able to represent ourselves rather than simply succumb to the generalisations of mass media.

Keywords

Weblogs, self-portraits, autobiography, diaries, subjectivity.

1. Capturing shadows

I couldn't put my first digital camera away. I held it for hours, staring at its little screen until the battery ran out and the screen went dead. I held it as I walked, pointing it at trees and grass and cars at first, until I discovered the seductive image of my own feet walking in the tiny screen. Usually I ignore my feet, or if I pause to look at them, I notice their flaws. I had never looked at my legs in the way I looked at their image walking steadily on that tiny screen. They were aestheticised, beautiful, seductive. They looked as though they were in a movie. I forgot all about photographing flowers and vistas, and took picture after picture of my own feet. I saw me, simultaneously mediated and immediate.

Figure 1: My first photo of the shadow of my own legs.

In years of owning conventional cameras I had never taken a photo like this. Yet within minutes of holding a digital camera, I began to see myself as the most obvious object to photograph.

Amateur photographers like me have not traditionally taken self-portraits. We've photographed our friends, pets and families, and sometimes tried to capture views seen on holidays. Yet digital self-portraits are everywhere on the web. Digital cameras certainly make taking self-portraits easier than conventional cameras did. My mobile phone even has a tiny concave mirror placed next to the camera lens, so that I can turn the lens towards me and take a picture of myself while seeing my reflection in the mirror, showing me roughly what the photograph will look like as I am taking it. I didn't even notice that mirror until I took my first self-portrait on my mobile phone and simultaneously realised its existence and purpose.

We share our digital self-portraits on the web, often combining them with digital autobiographies in weblogs and other forms of online narrative. Flickr, an online photo-sharing site I'll return to later in this paper, has twice as many photos tagged "me" as photos tagged "baby", and people take a lot of photos of babies. Even if we expand our search to include all photos tagged "family", photos tagged "me" do respectably, at about 150,000 self-portraits to 200,000 family pics.

In this paper I will explore how and why we have turned our digital eye inward. Why does digital technology seem to encourage us to portray ourselves rather than sticking to representing the world around us as we used to do? What kinds of self-portraits are we seeing? What might our digital desire to aestheticise ourselves mean?

I will begin this exploration by looking at the history of self-portraits and autobiography. Next, I discuss different examples of digital self-portraits, looking first at images and next at weblogs. I argue that we use these forms of self-presentation as mirrors allowing self-reflection. I will draw on the theories of the mirror developed by psychoanalytical theory, and also on historical traditions of introspection and self-reflection in order to present some understanding of what our fascination with pictures taken of ourselves by ourselves is about.

2. The Mirror Project

One of the most well-known photography projects on the web is The Mirror Project (mirrorproject.com), a rapidly growing collection of self-portraits taken in mirrors and other reflective surfaces. Heather Champ coordinates the project, which began when she started posting her self-portraits in mirrors to the web in 1999. Her open invitation to other mirror self-portraitists has to date resulted in a collection of 30,000 images, evidence of the fascination we have with this kind of self-portrait.

Champ doesn't specifically connect the popularity of self-portraits in reflective surfaces with digital technology, telling an interviewer instead that she began taking photographs of herself in mirrors when her parents died and she realised that without their photography, she would have to chronicle her own life.

Yet Champ also admits that there is something special about self-portraits. Self-portraits capture us differently from portraits taken of us by others. "You tend to see people as

they see themselves," Heather Champ told an interviewer, remarking that people are "less likely to put on a happy face" when they're in full control of the representation of themselves [9].

In these excerpts, Champ cites two different allures of the self-portrait in a mirror. The first, where the self-portraitist is continuing a documentation of her life that was begun by others, reveals how the continuous documentation of quotidian lives enabled by widespread cameras has become not simply a habit but an expectation and a necessity. When others cannot portray a person, she must take the job herself. The idea of the self-portrait as the inheritance of a job previously performed by others situates the self-portrait as a genre of necessity.

Champ's second characterisation of self-portraits is quite different. Instead of seeing self-portraits as a continuation of a documentation previously performed by others, she emphasises the control a person has over her own self-representation. As Champ is cited above, we're "less likely to put on a happy face" in self-portraits. Are self-portraits then a way of showing ourselves without the masks we're used to wearing?

3. Seeing yourself

Every time we have to choose a new nickname for another online service, we perform a small act of self-presentation. We choose whether to use our real names, to choose a name that reflects something about our personality or situation in the world or we create a fictitious personality. In visual environments, such as visual chat rooms, games and social spaces, we have to create a visual icon to represent ourself, and this can literally be a kind of self-portrait. Often an avatar is created from a selection of body parts, where you mix and match face shape, skin colour, hair, eyes, nose, mouth and clothes from a catalogue.
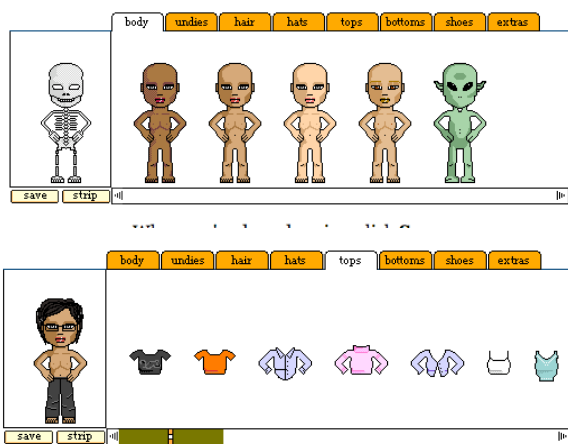

Figure 2: At storTroopers (stortroopers.com) you first select a body, then hair, hats, clothes and extras.

These paper doll-like images are often used as a stylised form of self-portrait, as when bloggers post a picture of a doll they've built to look like themselves. Blogs often have a photo of their author in the upper left or right corner. Blogger.com, one of the most popular blogging tools, comes with default templates that insert such a photo. Sometimes people use dolls instead of a photo, just as visual chat rooms or games may require the construction of a visual avatar. Sometimes this is to protect their identity, but it might also be as a way of presenting themselves in a more stylised and idealised manner than an amateur photo usually will.

Blogging, as Viviane Serfaty has pointed out, is usually not about trying to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth about oneself [12]. Neither, I would argue, is any kind of self-portraiture. We try to present an image of ourselves, and sometimes we want to keep a distance.

We're not simply interested in *presenting* an image, we're creating versions of ourselves. In a study of teenaged girls and their use of visual chat rooms, Angela Thomas found that the girls not only tended to have more than one avatar, they were deeply invested in their different self-presentations. Thomas quotes one of her informants, Christy, talking about the sexy avatar she has chosen for herself: "i look at her more than who i am speaking to sometimes lol!!"

Thomas argues that "Christy looks through the screen at her avatar as if she is looking in a mirror", and that she is both "the subject of her own gaze" and "that she is objectifying herself in a voyeur-like way as the fantasy of her gaze." [13] She connects this to Walkerdine's work on how girls use mirror, quoting Walkerdine thus:

> [T]his is what the girls do when they go into this private space with a mirror: they watch themselves and imagine being someone else and somewhere else. Would it be fair to say that these girls have made a move from child to woman in this private space? That in their fantasies they occupy another space than the one they are supposed to occupy as schoolgirls?") (Walkerdine, 1997, p. 152)

Thomas concludes that "the screen offers both a safe and private place to explore their fantasies, yet with an audience that can make judgements about their 'performances' of femininity. The private space of fantasy is now a safe space for performing these fantasies." [13]

4. The mirror phase

One of the more stubborn tenets of cinema studies is the idea of the camera's gaze, which forces a separation between subject and object, that is between the person who looks and the person or object who is looked at. To be photographed or filmed is thus to be objectified. To photograph is to be a subject with the right to define the world.

Christy challenged this duality of subject and object with her avatar, and so do all self-portraits. In my photograph of my own feet, I am both photographer and photographed, subject and object.

In the seventies, feminist critic Laura Mulvey argued that the cinematic *gaze* tends to objectify the people it portrays. Mulvey was writing within a staunchly psychoanalytical tradition that assumes that the patriarchy sees women first and foremost as castrated men, and men need women to lack a phallus in order to confirm their masculinity, and so her essay discusses how the camera often functions as a "male" gaze that objectifies women. Women spectators, in Mulvey's view, also assume the position of that gaze [11].

The mirror is important in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, which influenced not only Mulvey's discussion of the gaze, but much cinema and literary theory during the seventies and eighties. According to Lacan, infants are not aware of being separate from their mothers during the first months of their life. The point at which a child becomes aware of his or her self, of being a subject separate from other beings, is known as the mirror phase because one imagines that the child sees itself in a mirror and recognises that the mirror image is a reflection of itself. When Mulvey compares a woman viewing a cinematic image of a woman as similar to a mirror image,

then, she is referring to how seeing your mirror image is part of the way in which you learn to conceive of your self.

Obviously, when I gaze enraptured at the image of my own legs walking on the tiny screen on my digital camera I am not discovering my own self for the first time. Perhaps, though, I am discovering a version of my digital self that I had not before been acquainted with.

Accordingly to Lacanian theory, when the child realises that it is an independent being through recognising its own reflection in the mirror, the child also *misrecognises* itself. Mulvey explains it thus:

> The mirror phase occurs at a time when the child's physical ambitions outstrip his motor capacity, with the result that his recognition of himself is joyous in that he imagines his mirror image to be more complete, more perfect than he experiences his own body. Recognition is thus overlaid with misrecognition; the image recognized is conceived as the reflected body of the self, but its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ego ideal, gives rise to the future generation of identification with others. [11]

When I attempt to create a self-portrait of myself in storTrooper (see Figure 2) I cannot help but misrecognise myself. Yes, the hair colour is mine, so, more or less, is the style, and the clothes are similar to clothes I own. I recognise myself, and I also see it as a stylised, picture perfect version of me. It would never have holes in its socks or forget to put on mascara. It is as illusory as the digitally retouched photograph of a fashion model.

5. Self-portraits in history

Self-portraits can never portray the whole truth and nothing but the truth about their creator, and neither are they intended to do so. In fact, the distortions inherent to self-portraits have been one of their central themes for centuries.

The tiny, convex mirror on my mobile phone's camera distorts my image in much the same way as the mirrors of the fifteenth century distorted the features of the artists who used them to paint their self-portraits. Usually the mirror would not be shown in the painting, but sometimes it would be emphasised, as in Parmigianino's *Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror*, painted around 1523 (Vienna, Kunsthist. Mus.). The painting faithfully renders the artist's face and hand as seen in a round, convex mirror. His hand lies close to the mirror (or to the surface plane of the image) and is distorted and enlarged. The distortion of the self-portrait can be seen as an exploration of self-representation:

> This has no doubt been done to emphasize that a mirrored surface is required to make a self-portrait and that the reflection—all the artist will ever know of his own appearance—is not lacking in ambiguities: the image is the reverse of reality, right becoming left, and is always reduced to 50% of perceived reality, so that it has a more condensed quality. (..) There is a good deal of evidence that artists' portraits of themselves are often of a higher quality aesthetically than their portraits of others. [14]

Centuries before this, monks copying manuscripts would often draw small pictures of themselves in their texts, and painters would paint characters in their paintings that bore the painter's face. In the eighteenth century artists' self-portraits became fashionable collectors' items, and towards the end of the twentieth century, artists have increasingly used their own bodies in their art.

Some of the most interesting pre-digital self-portraits in our context are those created by early photographers. Our digital cameras can slip into a pocket or be a lens tacked onto a mobile phone. The first cameras, on the other hand, were huge devices. Just as the camera taking the photograph is visible in digital self-portraits taken in a mirror, so early photographers often included the tool of their trade in their self-portraits. When included, the heavy cameras often appeared as powerful extensions of the photographer's body, as in Kate Matthew's *Self-portrait* (c. 1900, page 118 in Borzello's *Seeing Ourselves* [2]) or Margaret Bourke-White's *Self-portrait with Camera* (c. 1933, p 135 in Borzello). Alternatively, cameras were presented as barriers placed between the photographer and the audience, as in Germaine Krull's *Self-portrait with Cigarette and Camera* (1925, p 143 in Borzello). Ilse Bing, on the other hand, took self-portraits with a small, compact Leica, including herself, her camera and some of her surroundings and the mirror or other reflective surface she was using to take the photo, in works very reminiscent of *The Mirror Project*. In *Self-portrait with Leica*, 1931, (p 142 in Borzello), Bing holds her small camera a little away from her face, looking just above and past the viewfinder at the spectator – or, as we realise, at herself in the mirror that is enabling the self-portrait at all. Another mirror is visible in the left of the picture, offering another view of Bing's face. Her face is serious yet intent, as we usually are when we look at ourselves in the mirror.

Decades later, many self-portraits show still more fragmented versions of the self. Rather than showing a single image of a head and shoulders, or perhaps of a whole body, these images show many fragmentary views (as in Nancy Kitchel's *My Face Covered (Grandma's Gestures*, 1972-73, p 163 in Borzello) or they might show a full body shot again and again, changing a little over time, as in Eleanor Antin's *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972, p 162).

As performance art and video art gained territory, self-portraits have become more and more common. Cindy Sherman uses her own image in most if not all of her artwork, posing in different roles. She claims these aren't self-portraits at all, but acting. Sometimes it is hard to draw the line. Is Christy's avatar or a pseudonymously written weblog a self-portrait or a performance? Perhaps they are a little of both.

6. Self-portraits in pixels

Flickr (flickr.com) is a photo-sharing site where individuals upload their photos and give them tags to help them keep track of them. If I uploaded my photo of my legs (Figure 1), I might assign it the tags "legs, shadow, skirt, me", for instance. If I made my photo public, allowing anyone to see it, then if you searched for photos tagged "shadow", my photo would show up. While *The Mirror Project* includes photos that have been contributed to the project by knowing participants, the group of photos tagged with "shadow" in Flickr consists of photos that were for the most part not intended to form part of a specific project. No one curates the "shadow" photos, however, programs can easily be written that take advantage of the groups of photos that coalesce through tags. An example can be seen in Neil Kandalgaonkar's series of images created by digitally combining 50 photos all tagged with the same words. Figure 3 shows his amalgamation of 50 photos tagged with the words "shadow" and "me".

Figure 3: *50 People See Their Own Shadow*, **by Neil Kandalgaonkar ("Brevity"), 2005. Flickr.com.**

The idea of combining many photographs of similar objects is not original, but the subject matter is. The most well-known example of amalgamated images is probably Jason Salavon's 2002 series of combined Playboy centrefolds, *Every Playboy Centerfold, The Decades (normalized)*. Salavon collected all the centrefolds for each decade from the sixties on and combined them in the same way that Kandalgaokar combined the Flickr images, showing vague images of women growing blonder and bustier with each decade.

Salavon's images deal explicitly with the conventional gaze of the camera, where the person photographed is objectified. Pornography of the Playboy variety is of course an extreme example of the male gaze objectifying women, which Mulvey claims occurs to some extent whenever anyone picks up a camera. By combining large groups of such images, Salavon emphasises their formulaic nature, obliterating the individuality of each woman.

Kandalgaonkar has chosen to combine a different kind of image: images taken by people of themselves. The images produced are less clearly defined, but perhaps more suggestive.

Many users use Flickr as a simple photo diary. One of the most fully-realised photographic diaries online is Miles Hochstein's *A Documented Life* (Figure 4). Hochstein has gathered photos of himself from each year of his life, leaving space for the remaining years he hopes to live. A headshot of him is presented in a grid on the first page of the site, and if you click one of the images, you are presented with a page showing more images and some verbal narrative about the photographs and about his life that year. Only some of the photographs are self-portraits, but the project in itself is a self-portrait on a grand scale. As the title suggests, this is an attempt to document an entire life.
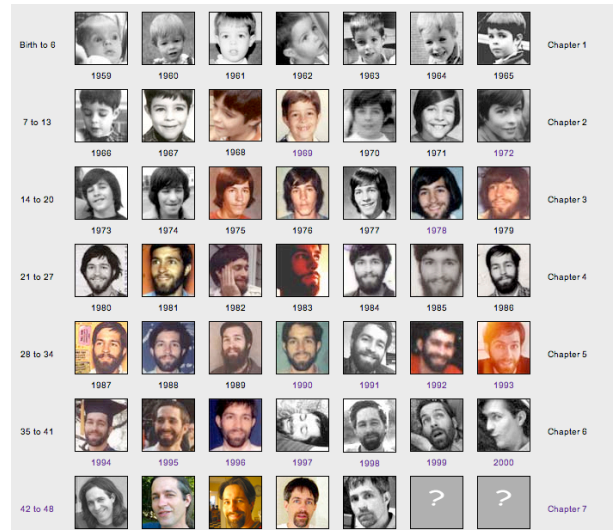

Figure 4: A section of the front page of Miles Hochstein's *A Documented Life*, **at http://documentedlife.com/autodocumentary.htm.**

While Hochstein is an academic and never presents himself as an artist, it is striking how similar this series of images is to Antin's *Carving*, with its succession of images of a single person changing through time. Antin's work shows herself naked, and only over an eleven-day period during which she lost eleven pounds. Although her black and white images are sterile as a hospital information sheet, the placement of her work in an art gallery (or an art book) instantly aestheticises her self-portrayal. Hochstein's work is less veiled – he addresses his audience directly.

Hochstein has designed his presentation of his life himself, yet multiple self-portraits are also often presented in ready-made templates. Flickr allows its users to gather a selection of their images in "photosets" that are presented together in a preset template. When you explore photos that are tagged with "me" or "self" or "self-portrait", you rapidly find that a lot of users have created photosets of photos of themselves. Many of these sets consist of unconventional self-portraits, showing the photographer's body from unusual angles, or showing sections of his or her body rather than the conventional head and shoulders shot.

Marinella's set "Pieces of me" (Figure 5) is an example of this. The image of her eyes and nose, half hidden in a pillow, is the closest to a conventional portrait. The other images show parts of her body. Some are traditionally sexualised body parts, such as the lips and the belly button covered in lace. Others are simply exploratory: fingers (elegantly and theatrically curved in space), a heel, a shoulder, an ear.

Many of the images in "Pieces of me" show the photographer's body in ways she could not have seen herself in a mirror. The only way you can see your neck from that angle is by holding out a camera and seeing what image it captures – or by having someone else take the photograph for you. Part of the fascination of photographing yourself is the surprising representations of yourself. The screen of my camera showed me my feet, captured in pixels in a way that I had never seen or thought of them before. Once you have seen yourself as an aestheticised object, both yourself and other, that vision of yourself is available to you whenever you like.

pieces of me
Created by marinella.

..do you hate her? 'cause she's pieces of you..

Photos are from between
19 Nov 04 & 01 Jun 05.

Figure 5: A photoset by Marinella at Flickr.com.

Another example of the fragmentary self-portrait in a photoset is lala-lala's photoset "me". These images are more clearly sexualised. Some of the images follow the conventions of lingerie advertisements, where the body of the woman is often cropped to show only the torso with its lacy coverings. The images have been edited in Photoshop to give them a washed out appearance, where the body bleeds into white, and the contours are often slightly blurry. Marinella has also chosen to manipulate her photographs, most obviously by converting them to black and white. Both techniques are often used in women's magazines and their photographs of models, and they instantly give the person portrayed an idealised, clearly aesthetic look.

The images in these two photosets are very clearly carefully selected. Simply taking the photographs doesn't complete the process of self-exploration. In these cases, the photographs are selected and then manipulated digitally. Then they are presented in a group, not individually. Both these photosets adhere to convention in many ways, and yet they refuse to present a self-portrait that shows the photographer as easily defined. They retain a great deal of mystery. We are not even allowed to see their whole faces.

This exploration of the self by looking carefully at oneself in different postures and from different angles is something most of us will recognise. Angela Carter describes the process beautifully in the first pages of *The Magic Toyshop*:

> The summer she was fifteen, Melanie discovered she was made of flesh and blood. (..) For hours she stared at herself, naked, in the mirror of her wardrobe; she would follow with her finger the elegant structure of her rib-cage, where the heart fluttered under the flesh like a bird under a blanket, and she would draw down the long line from breast-bone to navel (which was a mysterious cavern or grotto), and she would rasp her palms against her bud-wing shoulderblades. (..) In readiness for him, she revealed a long, marbly white leg up to the thigh (forgetting the fantasy in sudden absorbation in the mirrored play of muscle as she flexed her leg again and again); then, pulling the net tight, she examined the swathed shape of her small, hard breasts. Their size disappointed her but she supposed they would do. [3]

Marinella and Lala-lala's photosets on Flick may be expressions of the same desire to – and pleasure in – discovering oneself as flesh and blood. Perhaps we could say the same of the process involved in creating a paper doll that represents oneself. While Melanie's self-discovery in *The Magic Toyshop* was cut short, however, our digital self-discovery of ourselves is a process that may last all our lives.

In *A Documented Life* and the Flickr photo sets, as well as in Kitchel and Antin's multi-image works from the seventies, we see self-portraiture as a slowly cumulating collection of fragments. While many previous artists have painted a succession of self-portraits, each showing different aspects and ages, these collections that are presented together are a relatively recent development.

7. Self-reflection

Weblogs and online diaries parallel this development in that they are a form of self-presentation and -reflection that is cumulative rather than presented as a definitive whole. A weblog consists of a continuously expanded collection of posts, each of which is a micro-narrative or a comment that tends to express an aspect of the writer.

Many weblogs are not explicitly personal, of course, or at least the content of the posts is not about the personal experiences of their author. Weblogs written by individuals tend to use a recognisably personal voice, rather than an objective style like that of a news reporter or encyclopedia writer. Even weblogs that never explicitly represent the daily life and experiences of the author usually include opinions, likes and dislikes, styles, photographs and other snippets that pieced together can be read as a form of self-portrait. Looking at lala~lala's photoset "me" (**Error! Reference source not found.**) does not give us the kind of information about her that would allow us to recognise her on the street, yet it does express an idea of who she is, or rather, who she wishes to think of herself. Notably, lala~lala never shows her eyes. She never looks at us, indeed, in the main photo her back is turned to us as she studiously ignores us. Her turned back is reminiscent of Velasquez' seventeenth century *Toilet of Venus*, where Venus, her back to the viewer, reclines naked on a couch, lazily viewing herself in a mirror held by Cupid. Here the mirror not only allows Venus to see herself, ignoring the viewer, it also allows us to see her face, which otherwise would be hidden from our view. Yet it only affords us a partial view, and she, aware of our watching her, can adjust her features, seeing exactly what she shows us.

Viviane Serfaty characterises weblogs as simultaneously mirrors and veils [12]. Just as we study ourselves in a mirror, shaping our features so our reflections please us, so we create a reflection of ourselves in a weblogs. At the same time, we use our blogs to veil ourselves, not telling all but presenting only certain carefully selected aspects of our selves to our readers.

Pseudonymous blogs often play a flirtatious game of peek-a-boo, showing but not showing all. For instance, the pseudonymous blogger may tell us about funny episodes (this guy I saw at the coffee shop!) or life altering concerns (shall I have a child?) in a tone of voice as though she were writing to a close friend. Regular readers come to know the characters and places in the blogger's life. Often she'll post photographs to her weblog, cropped to only show herself from the chin down, or with her eyes blocked out. Pseudonymous blogs often have no links to archives. They exist in the moment, an autobiography of now, yet to regular readers, there is a long history and a slow feeling of growing to know the author. That, of course, is largely due to our susceptibility for stories. As Wolfgang Iser pointed out in the seventies, readers are experts at filling in the gaps (*lehrstelle*) in a narrative [6].

A pseudonymous blog like the one described above is a clearly personal blog about its author's life and thoughts, and posts regularly appear that are explicitly for the purpose of thinking through a topic that's important to the writer.

Sometimes she asks for advice or opinions, and commenters are often supportive and helpful. Blogs that stick to discussion of topics outside of personal, day to day experience can have a similarly self-reflective function, as Rebecca Blood, a pioneer blogger wrote in an early essay on blogs:

> Shortly after I began producing *Rebecca's Pocket* I noticed two side effects I had not expected. First, I discovered my own interests. I thought I knew what I was interested in, but after linking stories for a few months I could see that I was much more interested in science, archaeology, and issues of injustice than I had realized. More importantly, I began to value more highly my own point of view. In composing my link text every day I carefully considered my own opinions and ideas, and I began to feel that my perspective was unique and important. [1]

Most scholars have compared weblogs to recent diary-writing [8], they've taken an ethnographical approach or discussed blogs in terms of education, marketing or other practical matters. Viviane Serfaty takes a literary and historical approach instead, connecting current day weblogging practice to the ways in which seventeenth century diary-writing was seen as a moral and spiritual task. We are perhaps more familiar with the Catholic tradition of autobiography, with Augustine's fifth century *Confessions* at the fore. This tradition builds on the Romans, who frequently published autobiographies under the canonical title *De propria sua vita*. These autobiographical traditions present the life as a whole and are written for a clear audience and for future generations. This is very different from the traditions Serfaty compares weblogs to, where autobiographies are written for the sake of the writer. For seventeenth century English Puritans, Serfaty writes [12], journals were "a requirement of religious self-discipline", recounting "a spiritual journey towards personal salvation." (5) During the same period the Libertines developed the idea of "an inner space devoted to internal deliberation" (5), which may be said to be one of the sources of the modern divide between the private and the public.

It is interesting that such self-reflection in writing is seen as a moral necessity, whereas visual self-reflection in mirrors is an enduring symbol of vanity and negative self-centredness.

Mirrors are a common motif in literature as in art. In *Herself Beheld: The Literature of the Looking Glass* [7], Jenijoy La Belle cites several dozen examples of fictional characters' use of mirrors, showing how mirrors are common motifs in stories of women analysing and creating their self.

The mirror connotes both passivity and self-understanding. Simone de Beauvoir described women gazing into mirrors as "captured in the motionless, silvered trap," (quoted on page 9), a description clearly referring to Narcissus, who became so infatuated with his own reflection that he could not move and stayed, staring at himself in eternity. Yet Narcissus, in the primordial myth of mirrors and their dangers, is a male, and his entrapment is not due to his own fallibility, but is the revenge of Echo, a nymph he had spurned.

Mirrors and veils both tend to be seen as feminine. Veils are use literally and metaphorically as seductive accessories or as emblems of women's shamefulness, and are never used by men. Mirrors in art and literature are largely held by or looked into by women. La Belle argues that mirrors mean something different to women than they do to men:

> [I]n European culture for at least the last two centuries a female self as a social, psychological and literary phonemenon is defined, to a considerable degree, as a

visual image and structured, in part, by continued acts of mirroring. (..) I think it is significant that in my search for mirror scenes I have found precious few in which men use the mirror for acts of self-scrutiny. Men look at their faces and their bodies, but what they *are* is another matter entirely–ultimately, a transcendental concept of self. (..) [W]omen explore the reaches of the mirror for what they really are. (page 9)

Surveys repeatedly show there are as many male as female bloggers. A recent content analysis of a sample of 204 weblogs found that "the blogs created by young males and females are more alike than different" [5], however, another content analysis study [4] found that a majority of journal-style blogs are written by young women, while a majority of filter-style blogs (about, say, news, gadget or politics) and "mixed" blogs (with both filter-style and personal content) are written by adult men. This fits the stereotype noted by La Belle, that in literary renditions of men gazing into mirrors, the man usually gazes for a practical purpose, such as to shave (page 21). A blog kept for a practical, external purpose, then, is more "masculine" than a diary-style blog. However, diary-style blogs, which are the closest to the self-portraits we've looked at in this paper, make up 71% of the total number of blogs, dominating all demographics of blogger [4]. That means that whether you're a man or woman, young or old, if you blog, you're statistically likely to be engaging in the kind of self-reflective practice the Puritans and Libertines saw as necessary moral and spiritual work.

8. After mass communication
The computer screen represents the connection between the self and society, Serfaty writes [12]. At the same time as we connect with society, we do the reflective work we used to do only in mirrors, in private.

Mass communication replaces the individual with the masses. Broadcast media created stories for a non-existent least common denominator of the millions of possible viewers or listeners. When we share our self-reflections with the world, we turn media on its head. The internet allowed the masses to communicate individually. Instead of one to many communication, we now have many to many, or few to few. In the age of mass communication, the individual's highest achievement was to be seen by the mass media, to be shown on television in what Andy Warhol called the "fifteen minutes of fame" that each of us felt almost entitled to. Today, as mass media rapidly become a thing of the past, we instead strive to be "famous for fifteen people" [10].

In an attempt to cling to the past, mass media try to fit in with this change by making everyday people the stars of the mass media. We have reality television, makeover television, contests like Idol and Survivor which all make miniature celebrities of people who fade quickly in and out of the limelight. The more powerful movement is on the internet, and it is controlled entirely by the everyday people themselves. These people write diaries, they publish photos, and most importantly: they write themselves. They don't allow others to represent them. They are in charge of the presentation of their own lives. That is something the mass media have never encouraged. Capturing our mirror images and our shadows is an exploration of what it means to be a subject in an age where masses no longer exist.

Perhaps our fascination with self-portraits in mirrors is an expression of our collective coming into being as digital subjects. We are subjects. I am a self. This is the first step in

learning how to express ourselves with digital technology, and the first step in choosing to express *ourselves* rather than simply allowing ourselves to be described by others.

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