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# Symbolic bordering: the self-representation of migrants and refugees in digital news

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## **Symbolic bordering: the self-representation of migrants and refugees in digital news**

### **Abstract**

In this article, I combine theorizations of the selfie as an aesthetic and technological practice of digital self-representation with a theatrical conception of spectatorship, inspired by Adam Smith, in order to argue that the selfie has the potential to operate as a significant ethico-political spectacle in the spaces of Western publicity. I exemplify my argument by using the remediation of migrant and refugee selfies in mainstream news as a case study of 'symbolic bordering' – as a technology of power that couples the geo-political bordering of migrants in the outskirts of Europe with practices of 'symbolic bordering' that appropriate, marginalize or displace their digital testimonies in Western news media.

### **Keywords**

selfie, digital, self-representation, remediation, journalism, ethics, performativity, theatrical spectatorship

## **Introduction**

Despite the extensive engagement of Western media with the 2015 migrant crisis, we saw little of migrants and refugees own personal stories and images (Gillespie et al 2016). An exception to this has been photographs of migrants taking selfies; selfies of migrants with Angela Merkel or the Pope; selfies of celebrities-as-migrants. What does it mean for the selfie to be used as a recurrent media genre for the representation of migrants? What news value do these selfies bear? And what do they tell us about the role of Western media not only as news platforms but also as political and moral spaces? In addressing these questions, I propose to re-theorize the selfie in line with Adam Smith's theory of public spectatorship as a moral invitation to witness, within a journalistic environment of digital re-mediations that organize Western structures of public visibility – of who we see, how and why. The aim of this approach is to construct a preliminary typology of the migrant-related selfie as an act of witnessing and to explore how such an act complicates existing narratives of the selfie as digital self-representation. The migrant selfie, I argue, expands existing literature, by showing how the selfie operates as a technology of power that contributes to orientalist agendas that 'other' migrants and refugees; it does so by coupling the geo-political bordering of migrants stuck in the outskirts of Europe (Vaughan-Williams 2009) with practices of 'symbolic bordering' that appropriate, marginalize or displace their digital testimonies in Western news media.

## **Theoretical and empirical context**

### *Definitions of the selfie*

When a 25-year old Syrian travelling to Europe was asked by TIME journalists what was the most important thing in his journey, he answered: 'Charging my phone'<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, as Gillespie et al (2016) assert, the migrant smartphone is the single most essential travelling tool for

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<sup>1</sup> <http://time.com/4064988/migrant-crisis-selfies/>

migrants. They use it to keep in touch with family, navigate unknown landscapes, communicate in emergencies, collect information and network with others like them: 'In this modern migration', the New York Times writes, 'smartphone maps, global positioning apps, social media and WhatsApp have become essential tools.... the first thing many do once they have successfully navigated the watery passage between Turkey and Greece is pull out a smartphone and send loved ones a message that they made it'<sup>2</sup>. Their social media use notwithstanding, however, the migrants' own photos and stories hardly figure in Western news - despite the celebration of citizen journalism as a driving force in contemporary crisis reporting (Allan, 2013). An exception to this has been the extensive visibility of migrant-related selfies. For instance, when migrants arrive at the European coast, wet, tired and often traumatised or when they meet with authority, politicians or celebrities, or when others photograph themselves as-if they were migrants in a spirit of solidarity.

It is this heterogenous genre of the migrant-related selfie that I focus on here. I draw on Levin's definition of the selfie as 'not a *self*-portrait ... but rather the *representation* of the *self* as a product of the system of interpersonal relationships though which it is articulated online' (Levin, 2014; emphasis in original)<sup>3</sup>. This definition enables me to approach the migrant-related selfie as a digital trace of self-representation by or about migrants, which circulates in undefined networks of digital publicity that constantly re-define its interpersonal relationships - who sees it, how and why (Baym & Senft, 2015). While such networks are usually conceptualized horizontally, as consisting of other equivalent users who may like or share selfies across social media (Dean, 2016), my interest lies in the vertical movement of migrant selfies from social to mainstream media - from their 'intermediation' across (relatively) symmetrical user circuits to their 'remediation' in the powerful spaces of global

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/26/world/europe/a-21st-century-migrants-checklist-water-shelter-smartphone.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/26/world/europe/a-21st-century-migrants-checklist-water-shelter-smartphone.html?_r=0)

<sup>3</sup> <http://search.proquest.com/openview/fdcfc19c34fb5ec574d1437bdafce1b3/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=2040498>

broadcasting (Chouliaraki, 2013b)<sup>4</sup>. What does it mean for migrant selfies to circulate on Western news platforms? In which ways are they inserted in 'our' dominant visual economies? How is their news value justified? And what do these justifications tell us about Western media not only as news platforms but also as moral and political spaces? I explore these questions by constructing a concise typology of migrant-related selfies on Western news, consisting of three categories: i) selfie-taking photographs, ii) solidarity selfies of migrants with Western figures of authority and iii) celebrity selfies of support to migrants; and by analyzing the communicative potential of this typology in terms of the affective and the moral connections each category seeks to establish with its news publics.

#### *Aesthetic and socio-technical approaches to the selfie*

Despite the significance of 'remediation' questions for our engagement with the ethico-political challenges of our times, including the migrant crisis, these have hardly been explored in existing work on digital self-representation. Rather, literature on the selfie, is divided in two strands: the selfie as performative practice and the selfie as socio-technical process.

The study of the *selfie as performative practice* draws on sociological accounts of linguistic self-presentation, by Goffman (Hess, 2015) and Austin (Jerslev and Mortensen, 2015) and on semiotic approaches to aesthetics (Koffman et al, 2015; Iqani & Schroeder, 2016) so as to foreground three dimensions of digital self-representation. The first focuses on the *self-reflexivity* involved in the public staging of the private self; this dimension draws attention to the civic, political and cultural potentialities of 'vernaculars of performativity' in social media (Papacharissi, 2011), approaching them as 'cultures of connectivity' - sites of individuation, bonding and memory rather than simply as 'networks' (van Dijk, 2013). The second focus falls on the *narrative* practices of users' self-representations in social media; this draws attention to new forms of 'digital story-telling' (Sonja & Burgess, 2013) and explore their implications for new forms of sociality and public connection - for instance in institutional

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<sup>4</sup> Even though I draw on Bolter and Grusin's 'remediation' (1999), I extend the term to refer not only to the embeddedness of one medium into another but also to the re-significations of aesthetic content that occur in this process of technological embeddedness.

contexts (Thumim, 2009) or familial relations (Vivienne & Burgess, 2013). The third focus is on the *historicity* of self-portraiture as an artistic genre that inscribes the selfie in long-term trajectories of aesthetic, technological and cultural change in the public presentation of the self (Hall, 2014; Tifentale & Manovich, 2015).

If this triple focus on 'performativity' situates meaning-making at the heart of what the selfie is and how it should be studied, the second theoretical strand offers a different, though not necessarily incompatible, epistemology of digital self-representation. It claims that, rather than approaching the selfie as a performative system of significations of the self, we should instead conceptualize it as a technological gesture - a material trace devoid of representational meaning (Gomez & Thornham 2015). In its capacity as techno-trace, the significance of the selfie derives not from its discursivity or its historicity but from its systemic simultaneity, that is by the very fact that it always-already appears within existing circuits of other traces like itself. Variations within this literature, consequently, reflect different research foci on the social and technological dimensions of the selfie. On the one hand, emphasis falls on *the political economy of the selfie*; research here highlights the selfie as techno-material process embedded in networks of consumption-driven communication that reproduce the power relations of neo-liberal capitalism – what Dean (2005) refers to as 'communicative capitalism'. Her more recent argument reworks Walter Benjamin's political economic view of culture into the selfie, reading the latter as a new 'auratic' object no longer endowed with 'exhibition' but with 'circulation value': 'accessibility and transportability' Dean explains, 'don't just increase, they become ends in themselves' and 'photos are less singular objects or images to be contemplated than they are temporary and replaceable elements'<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, there is literature on the relationship between *selfies and non-human agents*, such as software codes and digital affordances, focusing on the algorithmic dimensions of self-representation and their social effects (van House, 2009; 2011). This is because non-human agents do not only organize the vast quantities of online imagery into

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<sup>5</sup> Dean J. (2016) <http://blog.fotomuseum.ch/2016/02/iii-images-without-viewers-selfie-communism/>

enduring patterns of visibility but also shape the social practices through which such patterns open up to individualized consumption, for uploading, sharing, liking etc. A comparative study of the distribution of LGBTQ celebrity selfies on two social media platforms (Duguay, 2016), for instance, shows ‘the relevance of platforms in shaping selfies’ ‘conversational capacity’, insofar as different algorithmic configurations across the platforms ‘influence whether selfies feature in conversations reinforcing dominant discourses or in counterpublic conversations’.

Emerging out of these distinct bodies of literature is a dualist ontology of the selfie as either a meaningful practice of self-representation or a techno-economic practice of (re-)distributions. If the former highlights the textualities embedded in the performative acts of photographing oneself, the latter foregrounds the broader social and technological networks wherein such performative acts circulate. What remains marginal in both these strands of research is the ethico-political dimension of the selfie as a witnessing act that raises important questions of identity, voice and otherness in the digital media (but see, partly, Koliska and Roberts, 2015). It is the attempt to acknowledge this dimension that informs my dialectical approach to the selfie introduced below.

#### *A dialectical approach to the selfie*

Rather than exclusively focusing on either strand of research, I opt for a dialectical approach, which views the selfie as a meaningful trace of the self, moving across connected environments - as both ‘human connectedness’ and ‘automated connectivity’, in van Dijk’s terms (2013). In a similar move, Frosh’s theorization of the selfie as ‘gestural image’ conceives of the selfie as both an ‘aesthetic and representational innovation, requiring the analytical tools of visual communication’, and as a ‘technocultural circuit of corporeal social energy’ that gives rise to ‘kinaesthetic’, rather than hermeneutic, sociability. This approach, Frosh argues, challenges the traditional visual analytics of the selfie in favour of an integrated analytics of the body - the ‘broader somatic and sensory dimensions of cultural experience and practice’ that constitute the ‘mediated phatic body’ (2015: 1623). While I concur with the significance

of this dialectical approach, my study seeks to address a different, overlooked dimension of selfie analytics: the relationship of the selfie not with the somatic body and its kinaesthetic capacity but with the body politic and its ethical responsiveness. Without attention to the ethical nature of the selfie as a technology of power that regulates collective affect and judgment, I contend, it is impossible to address remediation as a question of digital visibility, publicity and power and to reflect on the stakes that remediation, as a key journalistic process, entails.

I next offer my theorization of the communicative environment of the migrant-related selfie: its *meaning-making capacity* as a testimonial act and the *media networks* within which it is remediated. I argue that such networks of journalistic remediation reclaim the contemplative quality of images, their capacity to be gazed at objects of emotion and evaluation, and inserts them into a nexus of theatrical relationships of viewing. These relationships, I claim after Adam Smith's theory of spectatorship, are primarily moral; that is, they stage the figure of the migrant into various testimonial narratives and thus invite a range of ambivalent engagements with her/his predicament. I subsequently present a preliminary typology of the theatre of the selfie in order to explore its theatricality both as a stage for affective engagements and a site of power relationships that produces hierarchical classifications of humanity - what I discuss as 'symbolic bordering'.

### **Conceptual context**

My interest in an ethics of the selfie and its remediations raises questions about the nature of the selfie not only as a form of self-representation but also as a techno-aesthetic component of digital journalism. What does it mean to make news about migrants through the aesthetic of the selfie? Which specific remediations of the selfie are deemed newsworthy and why? What do these selfies tell us about the human status of refugees? And what relationships do they seek to establish between 'us' and 'them'? Insofar as this set of questions involves a complex assemblage of mutually embedded relationships of viewing, including the selfie-taking migrant, their personal online circle and the publics of online journalism, we need to



develop an understanding of the selfie as a network of 'theatrical' relationships of viewing. Even though the theatrical metaphor has already been used to frame the selfie as a new form of 'the presentation of the self in everyday life', along Goffman's lines, what is still missing is an account of digital self-representation as an encounter with human vulnerability that requires a response. Let me outline this conceptual approach and its analytical possibilities.

### *The selfie as theatre*

The selfie interrupts the flow of mainstream news reporting in order to insert fragments of 'the other's' face into this flow. It is this fleeting encounter between them and us, framed by digital narratives on 'our' various screens, which introduces the structure of theatricality in the online remediations of the selfie. Theatricality here refers to a communicative structure that does not necessarily belong to the traditional scene of the theatre but operates in line with the conventions of theatrical performance - namely by distancing the spectator from the spectacle of the other through the objective space of a framing device and, at the same time, enabling proximity between the two through narratives that invite our emotion and judgment on the other: '*More than a property with analyzable characteristics,*' as Féral and Bermingham argue, '*theatricality seems to be a process that has to do with a "gaze" that postulates and creates a distinct, virtual space belonging to the other*' (2002: 97).

While for Adam Smith the theatrical metaphor conceives of society as a stage, where seeing others inevitably invites a moral response, 'who are they and who am I as a consequence of meeting them?', the selfie partakes this theatrical structure insofar as it fulfils two criteria of theatricality. First, it establishes a mode of spectatorship that is based on the staging and framing of the self for purposes of being seen and responded to by others - Smith's 'sympathetic spectator'; and second, this staging of the self simultaneously presupposes not only an immediate audience of intended addressees but also the imaginary spectatorship of an uninvolved public that is implicitly invited to take a stance towards this staging - what Adam Smith refers to as the 'impartial spectator' (Marshall, 1984).

In order, therefore, to understand how the migrant-related selfie operates in Western media landscape, we need to understand both dimensions of theatrical spectatorship: how the selfie produces meaning through practices of self-representation that stage the self so as to be seen and responded to by others (the aesthetic performance of the self); and how the selfie is inserted into broader institutional structures of news journalism that connect us all as undefined publics of 'impartial' spectatorship – the hierarchical remediations of the selfie in Western media. Let me examine each dimension, in turn.

*Sympathetic spectatorship: the selfie as performance of the self*

As performance, the selfie is inscribed onto two technologies: the oldest, the face and the newest, the digital screen (Pinchevski, 2016). The face operates as a testimony of our universal commonality and, in evoking what we all profoundly share, it gestures towards authentic presence<sup>6</sup>. The digital screen maximizes the reach of the face, enabling distant others to appear to us as fully present and to confront us with their own humanity. Through this performative duality of face and screen, the selfie articulates and circulates claims to the self as authentic presence and, in so doing, simultaneously acts as an invitation for us to engage with this presence in various modalities of sympathetic spectatorship: empathy, solidarity, suspicion or disapproval. It is in this capacity to confront us with the humanity of the other in its here-and-now mode that the selfie recovers its moral dimension - its theorizations as 'mundane' or 'narcissistic' (eg Lüders, Prøitz & Rasmussen, 2010) being part of this moral regime of sympathetic spectatorship that any selfie belongs to. For if, as Levinas puts it, 'the face to face' is the par excellence mode of ethical address, because it 'addresses humanity at large', then the selfie is a radical intensification of this address, both in that it digitally 'presences' the other's face to us (Senft and Burgess, 2014) and in that it expands the scope of our face-to-face relationships – through what Frosh (2014) terms the 'corporeal sociability' of the selfie (its likes, shares, comments etc).

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of selfie authenticity see Senft and Burgess (2014)

Migrant-related selfies, in particular, are a paradigmatic case of digital self-representation as ethical address, because they are aesthetic performances of the face under conditions of risk. Selfies of migrants who just reached the Greek shores perform authenticity through the affective grammar of the face and the body, which articulates euphoric affect. This 'being here' is a moral address insofar as arrival here also signifies survival from a deadly sea crossing in the Mediterranean. The digital screen brings, in this case, the face of the migrant closer through acts of 'presencing' that are, simultaneously, also appeals for sympathetic spectatorship – an invitation for us to connect to its affective grammar. In order to study the selfie as aesthetic performance, therefore, I propose to engage with its two dimensions of sympathetic spectatorship: the *authentication* of the selfie, through a semiotic reading of the 'face' as visual meaning-making that produces various narratives of humanity; and, the *presencing* of the selfie, through a reading of the moral relationships it enables between the subjects and objects of digital self-representation.

*Impartial spectatorship: the remediation of the selfie*

The global visibility of migrant-related selfies, however, depends on their circulation beyond horizontal networks, such as the social media, to vertical ones, such as professional news organisations (CNN, BBC, DW or The Guardian). This shift simultaneously means that the selfie gives up some of its 'circulation' value in favour of, what we may call, 'contemplative' value: a form of value that draws attention to the selfie as an object to be focused on, gazed at and responded to by an undefined body of 'impartial' spectators – the Western body politic.

In this 'contemplative' conception, however, the selfie cannot be understood simply as a diffused techno-trace accumulating meaning-free 'circulation' value. It should instead be seen as a matter of theatrical re-mediation, where multi-platform journalism selects, re-assembles and, importantly, re-signifies other media according to its own logics - impartial spectatorship here referring not to a position from nowhere but to the 'naturalized' visual narratives of 'us' and 'them' that routinely contextualize the selfie-as-news (Schudson, 1993). Whilst such remediations were, in the past, a matter of professional authorship, citizen

testimonies now turn remediation into an editing activity, where non-professional content is subject to processes of 're-contextualization' (editing, reframing, re-narrativizing) and 're-moralization' (re-investing it in moral discourses suitable to the news platform) (Chouliaraki, 2015). In contrast, then, to disintermediation accounts (Downey & Fenton, 2013) that link social media with the breaking down of news intermediaries, it is, I argue, precisely through the regulative work of journalistic remediation that social media news ultimately reach mass global audiences (Al-Ghazzi, 2014).

The analysis of the migrant-related selfie in the news, I propose, should thus focus on both dimensions of the theatre of the selfie: *the aesthetic performance of the self*, which constitutes sympathetic spectatorship through *authenticity* and *presence* and *its remediation* in news journalism, which constitute 'impartial' spectatorship through *re-contextualization* and *re-moralization*, in line with the ethico-political logics of various journalistic institutions. How do different types of migrant selfie perform the self as an authentic 'here I am'? How are these claims to authenticity and presence recontextualized in Western news sites? What are the moral discourses of such recontextualizations and what do these tell us about the news as moral and political spaces?

### **Analytical context**

My theatrical approach to the selfie draws on two key aesthetic and techno-social insights of the relevant literature, namely the narrativity of digital self-representation and the 'circulation value' of the selfie. It complicates the former by introducing vertical remediation as constitutive of the visual narrativity of the selfie, whilst it expands the latter by demonstrating that, far from free-wheeling, the 'circulation value' of the selfie is embedded in techno-institutional relationships of power, as in global news journalism.

The choice of the migrant-related selfie as the empirical material of this study is motivated by an interest in understanding how the visibility of migrants is regulated in Western media, during the 2015 migrant crisis. Studying how migrants appear in our news matters because it helps us better comprehend the broader communicative environment of the crisis. This was a

versatile environment marked by an originally positive rhetoric of reception that enjoyed a wave of compassion after the death of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi, but eventually turned into suspicion, following the November 2015 Paris attacks; it was the latter that legitimized Europe's exclusionary politics of bordering and blocked 58.000 migrants in Greece with mass deportations to Turkey on the agenda, in March 2016 (Gillespie et al 2016). Focusing, therefore, on the timespan of the crisis, June 2015-March 2016, enables me to analyze this period as a 'peak' moment in migrant self-representation, which has something important to tell us not only about migrants themselves but crucially about Western journalism as a site of regulation for 'our' moral sensibilities.

The choice of the term 'migrant-related selfie', instead of 'migrant selfie' reflects the fact that only a part of those images were actually selfies taken *of and by* migrants; the others were images *about* migrants, but neither *by* nor *of* them. Indeed, the three key types of migrant-related selfies that appeared in global news networks, such as BBC, CNN, DW or The Guardian during the 'peak' moment, were: i) migrants being photographed to take selfies; ii) migrant selfies with celebrities and iii) celebrities taking selfies as-if they were migrants. There are variations within each category, but they are all three characterised by, what Wittgenstein (1958) terms, a 'family resemblance' in their aesthetic and techno-social qualities. I examine each in the sections 'The selfie as performance' and 'The selfie as remediation' below.

### ***Selfie-taking photographs: self-representation as celebration***

Celebration selfies are almost exclusively shot on the beaches of Lesbos – one of the migrants' main entry points into Europe from the Turkey coast. They portray migrants taking selfies smiling and making the V-sign, alone or in groups. We never see these selfies as such, however. What we see is photojournalistic pictures of migrants taking selfies. The CNN's video link (there is a similar one by the BBC), for instance, is a one-minute long piece, entitled

‘The migrant selfie’, which begins with a migrant explaining the significance of celebration selfies and continues with a sequence of selfie-taking instances on the beach<sup>7</sup>.

**Selfie as performance:** Even though all selfies have a strong locative dimension, ‘I am right here, right now’ (Hess, 2015), this category of selfies with its smiling faces and V-signs situates the locative within a particularly intense *authenticity* of affect (Thumim, 2012): the euphoria of arrival; hence the term ‘celebration’ to describe them. ‘Of course yes, as you are VERY happy you’re here’, confesses the migrant interviewed by CNN, ‘the first thing that you did (*sic*) is a selfie yeah and we send it to our families yeah’. Having dreamed of reaching Europe against all odds, migrants extreme emotions upon arrival render these selfies not simply occasions for self-presentation but ‘visual proofs’ of the extraordinary event of reaching Europe– what Reading calls, ‘mobile witnessing’ (2009: 69). It is the force of emotion inherent in mobile witnessing that simultaneously foregrounds *presencing* as an ethical force in these selfies. This is insofar as the selfie’s locative claim (‘I am *here*’) also entail a strong existential dimension (‘*I am here*’). Far from indexing just any random location, the deictic function of the celebration selfie goes beyond arrival to connote survival, the fact of having endured a deadly sea-crossing in the Mediterranean. It is this deixis of arrival-as-survival, the selfie’s ‘I’ve made it’ moment, which mobilizes its corporeal sociability, its likes, comments and shares, as an occasion of online jubilation (Frosh, 2016). The theatricality of the celebration selfie, it follows, can be reduced neither to its purely locative content (‘I am here’) nor to a playful assertion of the self (‘this is me’). It consists in staging the euphoria of survival both as descriptive and as a normative moment. Beyond its denotative value of signifying survival, the selfie’s normative meaning connotes hope. It captures a moment of pregnant possibility, as projects of the migrant self that were previously unthinkable now come within reach – what Ernst Bloch has termed the utopian

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<sup>7</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2015/08/21/migrant-selfie-kos-mediterranean-orig.cnn>

'not yet' (1995: xxviii). The sympathetic spectator of the celebration selfie is invited to relate to the aesthetic performance of the celebratory selfie as a 'yet to come'.

**Selfie as remediation:** The remediation of the celebration selfie relies on estrangement, on turning the ordinary act of selfie-taking into extraordinary. By focusing on selfie-taking as curious or rare, Western news platforms *re-contextualize* the selfie from an occasion of corporeal sociability on social media to an invitation of ethical appraisal, open to public commentary and judgment: who are they? why are they owning mobile phones? why are they taking selfies? and should they be taking them? Situating these questions at the heart of their stories, 'our' news simultaneously turns mobile witnessing, into meta-witnessing: it is the fact that 'they' take selfies not their faces that we are invited to contemplate.

Two consequences follow from this. The authenticity and presence effects of meta-witnessing no longer reside in the deictic and existential functions of the selfie but in the narrativity of the news about the selfie. The moral mechanism of theatricality, consequently, also changes: no longer about the authenticity of euphoric affect, the selfie is now *re-moralized* as an ambivalent practice, suspended between sympathy, as in the CNN piece, and suspicion, as in a series of other press outlets. Authenticity, to begin with, relies on journalistic authority and is about attaching a professional jurisdiction of validity to the news; CNN, for instance, achieves sympathy through the inclusion of a first-hand testimonial (the migrant) and the sequence of selfie-taking visuals, all of which avoids overt judgment yet seek to raise awareness around the issue. By the same token, presence is no longer about existential deixis, the subjectification of space through the selfie's 'here *I am*', but about invitations to contemplate the migrants' selfie activity itself - 'see what they are doing'. CNN features the piece in its 'Edition', a series of brief videos for swift consumption without in-depth content. In contrast to the selfies' aesthetic performance of presence as survival, migrants are here recontextualized as 'present absences': rather than human agents reaching for their 'not yet', they are the objects of our curiosity and suspicion.

While empathetic curiosity informs the majority of mainstream news outlets, including CNN, TIME, BBC, The Independent and New York Times<sup>8</sup>, evidence of suspicion is present in certain right-wing outlets, such as The Daily Mail and The Sun, and social media platforms. Re-moralization here produces a more ambivalent narrative, where the use of headline language stirs xenophobia (... 'they are among the thousands to have *flocked to Lesbos*' Sept. 6<sup>th</sup> 2015<sup>9</sup>; 'smartphones are the *secret weapon fuelling the great migrant invasion*' Sept. 28<sup>th</sup> 2015<sup>10</sup>; 'Police discovered hundreds of *disturbing images of executions on phones images* included ISIS flags, dead children and victims of war and terrorism' Dec. 15<sup>th</sup> 2015<sup>11</sup>). Social media responses to this coverage are more explicit, pointing to an 'incompatibility' between being a refugee and being a social media user ('With an Otter Box! RT : Poverty stricken Syrian migrant takes selfie with her \$600 smartphone'<sup>12</sup>).

This hate discourse is evidently attached to extreme right-wing news, yet, I argue, the misrecognition of migrants is inherent in all remediations of the celebration selfie. This is for two reasons. First, because remediation as estrangement already presupposes that selfie-taking as digital agency can only be associated with people like 'us', not 'them'. Informed by this orientalist presupposition, narratives of estrangement ultimately represent the migrants' selfie-taking activity in ways that, at once, assert and undermine their humanity. Even though affirming the digital literacy of migrants may be useful, in that it challenges stereotypical views of 'backwards' non-Europeans (The Independent's 'Surprised that Syrian refugees have smartphones? Sorry to break this ...', 7 Sept. 2015<sup>13</sup>), the news status of such an affirmation is simultaneously an act of 'othering', insofar as such it invites us to contemplate migrants' selfie-taking as extraordinary. The meta-witnessing of celebration selfies could, in this light,

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWTFG-x1dnk> (BBC)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3224305/Selfies-shore-Refugees-lifejackets-celebrate-beach-reaching-Greek-island-thousands-waiting-enter-Europe.html>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-3251475/DOMINIC-LAWSON-Smartphones-secret-weapon-fuelling-great-migrant-invasion.html>

<sup>11</sup> [https://themuslimissue.wordpress.com/2015/12/15/?iframe=true&theme\\_preview=true](https://themuslimissue.wordpress.com/2015/12/15/?iframe=true&theme_preview=true)

<sup>12</sup> [https://twitter.com/near\\_chaos/status/640247516596842496](https://twitter.com/near_chaos/status/640247516596842496)

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/surprised-that-syrian-refugees-have-smartphones-well-sorry-to-break-this-to-you-but-youre-an-idiot-10489719.html>



be seen as the contemplation of those rare public occasions, when those who have no voice attempt to speak. And yet, our media give this voice no stage.

The second reason, therefore, why these remediations are a form of misrecognition is that no migrant selfies are present in our media. Migrants do not represent themselves in Western news, 'others do the representing for them' (Malkki, 1996). If selfies are, in Frosh' words, 'reflexive texts' where the self operates 'as a deictic shifter, fluctuating between the self as an image and as a body' (2015: 1621), then the remediation of migrants' selfie-taking in Western news chooses to keep its focus on the image, photographing the act that represents the body, not the body itself. At the same time, it is not just the corporeal being of the migrant that is missing but, crucially, also their historical existence. While the news may inform us on why refugees take selfies, it leaves out the core question of what might have driven them away from home (Gillespie et al, 2016). In keeping migrants' voice and historicity outside the regime of remediation, then, Western news may thematize their digital activity but ultimately fail to humanize them. The sympathetic spectatorship of mobile witnessing mutates here into an 'impartial' spectatorship of meta-witnessing that objectifies the figure of the migrant and puts their status as human at stake.

### ***Solidarity selfies: Self-representation as recognition***

This category consists of selfies that migrants have taken with celebrity figures standing in solidarity with them at detention camps around Europe. Celebrities are here defined as public figures with a surplus of symbolic capital that endows them with recognizable brand value (Chouliaraki, 2013a); for instance, Angela Merkel or Pope Francis<sup>14</sup>. Because of this symbolic capital, then, solidarity selfies, unlike celebration ones, are fully remediated in Western news.

***Selfie as performance:*** The *authentication* of solidarity selfies is established through a aesthetics of immediacy. Borrowing from the photographic snapshot, the migrant-with-

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<sup>14</sup> On the celebrification of politicians , such as Merkel, see Wheeler (2012); on the celebrification of religion see Lofton (2012).

celebrity selfie mimics the informality of 'kodak' family pictures (Iqani & Schroeder, 2015) and bears connotations of 'performed intimacy, authenticity and access' - all key markers of unstaged, imperfect self-expression (boyd & Marwick, 2011:140). The authenticity of spontaneity, however, primarily benefits the celebrity, whose public presentations suffer from, what boyd and Marwick call, an inherently 'indeterminate 'authenticity'' (2011:139): does celebrity mean what she/he does or is it all show business? This is because the selfie's compositional structure, which sets celebrity and migrant side-by-side as equals, conceives of solidarity as an arrangement of co-presence, where the celebrity's physical positioning next to the migrant is symbolically displaced onto moral positioning; she/he is seen to possess the emotional depth and virtuous character to stand by the migrant and commit to their cause.

If authentication is about the transfer of truth-value from migrant to celebrity, presencing is about the transfer of symbolic value from celebrity to migrant. While ordinary selfies largely generate 'phatic' exchanges, performative acts with little meaning transfer beyond the locative function of '*here I am*' (Frosh, 2016), solidarity selfies, I argue, tactically use the '*here I am*' of the celebrity to shed light on the presence of the migrant. It is, again, the compositional arrangement of co-presence that produces effects of presencing, as the side-by-side visually juxtaposes the migrant, unknown and powerless, with the celebrity, established and powerful, and, in an act parallel to product endorsement, associates the latter's brand value with the former - what Fuqua terms 'human branding' (2011).

Presencing here means that, even though the refugee does not become famous, he/she acquires a potential for 'recognizability' (Cavarero, 2000), for legitimate presence and for public acknowledgment in the spaces of Western news.

The combination of authenticity and presence in solidarity selfies establishes, what Schudson (1993) calls, the 'celebrification' of the migrant cause. Celebrification refers here to a synergetic configuration of theatrical relationships, whereby the selfie capitalizes on the figure of the migrant so as to stage the celebrity as a 'true' brand of benevolent activism, while it reciprocally transfers the symbolic value of celebrity onto the migrant, endowing

them with a potential for recognizability. The sympathetic spectator of the solidarity selfie is, thus, invited to engage in, what we may call, 'humanitarian' witnessing – a mode of witnessing that construes migrant news as a hybrid between the 'truth' of suffering others and the legitimacy of 'our' own public personas.

**Remediation:** It is precisely the theatrical relationship of celebrification, albeit now reduced from reciprocal synergies of value to a uni-directional transfer of value from the migrant to the celebrity, which renders the remediation of solidarity selfies in 'our' news possible. Newsworthiness, in other words, is attached to the authentic performance of humanitarianism attached to the celebrity brand, as she/he stands beside the migrant, and becomes evident in the systematic prioritization of Merkel or the Pope, in news stories that feature these selfies; a prioritization that is simultaneously correlative to the full silencing of the migrants' self-representation, in these same stories. Both CNN and BBC *recontextualize* the solidarity selfie as an illustration on stories about the politics of the Western figures: Merkel's open migration policy ('*Germany's Merkel stands by refugee policy despite "terrifying" attacks*'<sup>15</sup>, CNN, Jul. 26, 2016 'Migrant crisis: *How long can Merkel keep German doors open?*'<sup>16</sup>, BBC, Oct. 1, 2015), or the Pope's visit to the Greek islands in DW ('*Pope Francis to visit Lesbos to review refugee crisis*', Apr. 5, 2016<sup>17</sup>) and CNN's 'Edition' ('*Pope Francis poses for a selfie during his visit to a refugee center in Rome on Thursday March 24*', March 30, 2016<sup>18</sup>).

Even though news networks favour the promotion of celebrity-driven pieces for their own benefit, this celebrification of the solidarity selfie has, as I have already insinuated, a cost. Rather than placed at the heart of the migration story, as a victim of European politics and a potential carrier of rights to safety and residence, the migrant remains instead absent. Despite having important stories to tell about why and how he/she has turned up in Europe, he has, in Arendt's words, lost 'the relevance of speech' (1998: 297). The impartial spectator

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<sup>15</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/07/28/europe/germany-merkel-security-refugee-policy/>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34402001>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.dw.com/en/pope-francis-to-visit-lesbos-to-review-refugee-crisis/a-19165871>

<sup>18</sup> <https://twitter.com/i/moments/713421646883737600>

of the solidarity selfie news, consequently, is not invited to be the witness of a humanitarian story, where solidarity is about engaging with the migrant's face and taking responsibility to reflect on and act on the crisis, but the monitorial witness of 'our' own familiar public figures: following up on routine news stories of 'our' German Chancellor or the Catholic Church leader.

This celebrification of the solidarity selfie further *re-moralizes* the migrant cause in ambivalent news narratives: should we receive them or close our borders? Notice, for instance, CNN's headline 'Germany's Merkel stands by refugee policy *despite 'terrifying' attacks*' or The Independent that fuses migrant and terrorist in one headline (March 29, 2015 The Independent 'Angela Merkel selfie with *Syrian refugee* goes viral after he is wrongly named as *Brussels bomber*'<sup>19</sup>). Just as celebration selfies open up a space where the human status of migrants is ultimately undermined, even if it is rhetorically asserted, so solidarity selfies introduce a rupture in the symbolic status of migrants, whereby, even if they may be entitled to rights of residency and protection, they are ultimately denied public recognition. Recognizability, the universal moral right to be acknowledged as a legitimate public presence, is marginalized in favour of monitorial witnessing. The migrant, it follows, only figures in the news as a by-presence, a presence auxiliary to the stories about our leaders, our politics, our politics, our controversies.

### ***Celebrity selfies: Self-representation as erasure***

This category consists of a sequence of widely-circulated images from one particular event, a star-studded Cinema for Peace gala, part of the 2016 Berlin Film Festival. Organized by world-known activist artist Ai Weiwei, this selfie sequence was part of a series of solidarity tokens, such as covering of the building's façade with plastic life-savers from sea rescue operations, that the artist staged to protest against Europe's negative response to the migration crisis. The selfie depicts celebrities impersonating migrants by wearing thermal blankets - another emergency aid item used in sea rescue operations. As before, celebrities

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/syrian-refugees-selfie-with-angela-merkel-goes-viral-after-he-is-wrongly-named-as-brussels-bomber-a6958371.html>

are defined as public figures with a transferable surplus of symbolic capital yet, unlike the solidarity selfie, these are not political or religious figures of authority but film and music stars (eg, Charlize Theron, Pussy Riot's Nadya Tolokonnikova). Importantly, there is no co-presence to mobilize celebrity-migrant value transfers. The migrant is now absent.

***Selfie as performance:*** If solidarity selfies celebrify the migrant cause in contexts of co-presence, here the celebrification of the cause erases the presence of the migrant.

Authentication works instead through impersonation: celebrities act out the part of the migrant, by covering themselves in a thermal blanket while attending the gala. The selfie's truth claim, it's '*I am here*', is thus not based on verisimilitude, the claim to 'reality-as-it-is', but the 'as-if' of stage acting: the celebrity, bearing the blanket as an acting prop, stands for the migrant. Insofar as it relies on the suspension of disbelief, the authenticity of the celebrity selfie is thus par excellence theatrical.

In line with the theatrical model, presencing also presupposes an imaginative mobility of positions, insofar as the anguished refugee is evoked, not visualized, through the metonymic placing of a gala-attending celebrity in his/her position. The '*I am here*' claim, in other words, denotes the refugee only insofar as the symbolic meaning of the blanket momentarily re-signifies the celebrity as a sufferer. As with solidarity selfies, here, too, the performance of celebrity selfies works to 'celebrify' the migrant cause. Unlike solidarity selfies, however, celebrification now entails none of the reciprocal synergies of value between the two. Instead, given that the celebrity is the only one on stage, the symbolic value of acting-out the refugee through metonymical displacement onto the celebrity entails an ambivalent potential – it is both about 'human branding' and about a critique of inauthenticity. The sympathetic spectator of the celebrity selfie is, in this sense, invited to engage in, what we may call, 'ironic' witnessing – a mode of witnessing that, seriously as it may take the cause of refugee suffering, remains profoundly suspicious of the spectacles of popular culture and their 'ventriloquation' of human suffering through the glamorous voices of show business (Chouliaraki 2013a).

**Remediation:** It follows that, similarly to the solidarity selfie, it is celebrification that catalyzes the newsworthiness of the celebrity selfie, too: the presence of Charlize Theron, the glamorous context of the actors' gala and the occasion of a world famous cultural event. Yet, unlike the solidarity selfie, we no longer see the selfie itself but a photojournalistic shot of the act of selfie-taking. While this is reminiscent of celebration selfies, their recontextualization is different. If celebration selfies derived their newsworthiness from the estrangement of the migrants' digital agency, celebrity selfies are newsworthy precisely because they rely on intimacy-at-a-distance: a form of mediated agency that, according to Thompson, maintains the celebrity's proximity to her/his fan base, through the para-social interactions of mass and digital platforms (1995).

Each type of selfie was consequently remoralized in different narratives of ambivalence. Whilst the celebration selfie, let us recall, opened up narratives of curiosity and suspicion around the very legitimacy of celebration selfies (why are they doing it and should they be doing it?), the celebrity one is remoralized as a story of both fascination and critique. For instance, The Guardian's (Feb 16, 2016) title and subtitle on the subject is 'Celebrities don emergency blankets at Berlin fundraiser for refugees' and 'Charity event at art installation designed by Ai Weiwei outrages Berlin's culture secretary', while the rest of the article is about the 'obscene' aspects of celebrity activism: the thermal-blanket impersonations as well as Ai Weiwei's earlier initiative of photographing himself as a dead Aylan Kurdi. In contrast to the declared intentions of selfie activism, it follows, the impartial spectator of the celebrity selfie news is here invited to focus on an internal controversy of 'our' own popular culture: the inauthenticity of 'our' celebrity figures as communicative platforms for trans-national solidarity, rather than the troubling absence of the migrant face across news platforms. This, I argue, is a 'narcissistic' form of witnessing that, while it capitalizes on the glamorous voyeurism around celebrity culture, it simultaneously approaches celebrity humanitarianism as a terrain of 'our' self-reflexivity for its authenticity deficits, without, however, touching on a more fundamental question – the systematic marginalization and displacement of the migrant's face in Western spaces of public visibility.

Indeed, despite its reflexive critique, the implication of the remoralization of the celebrity selfie is the full erasure of the migrant from the news narrative. If earlier news narratives relied on the authenticity of the migrant to articulate either ambivalent discourses of compassion and suspicion or a potential for recognizability, here there is a full eclipse of the migrant as an agent in the celebrity selfie. In a manner reminiscent of both celebration and solidarity selfies, the impartial spectator of the celebrity selfie is, thus, also confronted with a fundamental ambivalence in witnessing the migrant face. Unlike the previous cases, however, this is a compound form of ambivalent witnessing. For it relies not only in the news' gesture to open up a space of visibility for the migrant only to immediately close it down, as before, but in doubling this process through the specific process of remoralization it embeds the selfie in - a process of 'post-humanitarian critique' where the misery of others is taken up but only in order to serve as the stage where 'we' debate 'our' own personas, events and moral practices. This is a form of 'post-humanitarian' witnessing that may increase the visibility of a cause but does not help us understand it or humanize its actors (Chouliaraki 2013).

### **Conclusion: The selfie as 'symbolic bordering'**

In August 2015, a BBC news story broke out. It was about an advertising campaign based on selfie-taking by an actor who posed as a refugee documenting his sea crossing to Europe. The story's featured illustrations of these fake selfies, pointing to signs of fakeness in the campaign and reflecting on the blurring of boundaries between authentic and non-authentic refugee self-representations. What is significance about this selfie story is that it is the only one where the migrant face appears in full frontal view<sup>20</sup>. It is, in my view, this impossibility, in our media, to encounter the face of migrants as staged and photographed by themselves, that is as a sovereign act of self-representation rather than as forensic material for the study of digital authenticity, which emerges as the most significant insight of this analysis.

It is this insight that I here define as 'symbolic bordering': the systematic elision of the other's face as an authentic and agentic presence in Western spaces of publicity. While 'symbolic'

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-33764636>

references the selfie as a techno-aesthetic practice of theatrical performance that articulates ethical proposals for connectivity as it circulates across platforms, 'bordering' refers to the geo-political regime of security that keeps migrants outside Western zones of safety and prosperity (Vaughan-Williams 2009). Symbolic bordering gestures to the doubling of this geo-political regime onto digital journalism, as a practice of the latter that consolidates the securitizing logic of the former, by consistently excluding migrant visualities from its spaces of visibility. Symbolic bordering can, in this sense, be approached as a regulative mechanism of global journalism that is operative in and through 'our' news platforms, thereby also regulating who appears, how and why in the spaces of Western publicity.

The migrant-related selfie, I have shown, produces effects of symbolic bordering insofar as it selectively participates in the circulation flows of 'our' news contexts. In so doing, it becomes embedded in different techno-aesthetic configurations of the other and the self, each of which enables different modes of witnessing between 'us' and 'them'. While the face of the migrant figures in digital self-representations of celebration and recognition, its journalistic recontextualizations situates these selfies in ambivalent and open-ended moral registers: empathy and suspicion, in celebration (why are they taking selfies? should they?) or doubt and fear (are our politicians right or wrong? should we open the borders?). Even though both curiosity and doubt may be regarded as legitimate concerns in the age of mass human mobility, their fully hegemonic status in the news allows for no other moral registers to contextualize and re-signify these selfies for us.

As a result, neither the triumph of survival and its politics of hope (the migrants' 'not yet'), nor their appeal to inclusion and its politics of legitimacy (the migrants' appearance next to 'our' politicians) have a chance to emerge as valid ethico-political claims, in Western media. What these media do choose to include and debate, instead, is celebrity claims that 'ventrilocate' the migrant, by 'speaking their voice' in glamorous self-representations of distant suffering. The ambivalent contextualizations of these selfies between voyeurism ('here is Charlize Theron looking good!') and disapproval ('it's wrong to 'play' the refugee')



granted, neither argument thematizes the voice and predicament of the migrant cause itself; both reproduce the local concerns of 'our' commodified popular culture. As a consequence, the remediation of migrant-related selfies in Western news confirms, what Arendt has long ago observed; as a marginal figure without rights, she has argued, the refugee ends up 'representing nothing but his own absolutely unique individuality which, deprived of expression within and action upon a common world, loses all significance' (1998: 302).

Symbolic bordering is, I would argue further, more than simply a regulative mechanism that operates through norms of journalistic appropriateness and newsworthiness about who, how and why we witness in the news. Rather, by selecting which faces, bodies and voices are 'appropriate' and 'newsworthy', I have also shown that symbolic bordering operates as a crucial form of sovereign power that defines the norms of humanity (who is human?) recognition (who is included?) and voice (who can speak?) in our public life; a form of power that, paraphrasing Vaughan-Williams (2009), we might call 'bio-political sovereignty'. If, as Hannah Arendt has put it, Western publicity is a space of world- disclosing action through which individuals reveal their humanness in the presence of equals (Arendt 1976), then the power of symbolic bordering lies in restricting precisely this fundamental act of world- disclosure. In so doing, it reduces 'our' spaces of publicity to 'post-humanitarian' spaces: ethico-political spaces that may allow for forms of empathic, humanitarian witnessing yet, at the same time, thrive in voyeuristic and ironic encounters of migrant others, which, while still claiming to care, are ultimately unable to move beyond the fears, doubts and concerns of ourselves.

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