THE ‘DEATH SELFIE’: ABOUT THE (IM)POSSIBILITY OF A SELFIE AS POST-MORTEM PHOTOGRAPHY

Abstract
In popular culture, particularly on news websites and blogs, the umbrella term ‘death selfie’ covers several selfie practices without further linking them to the well-examined relationship between photography and death. This article argues not only that the notion of the death selfie refers to the noema ‘ça a été’ introduced by Roland Barthes but also that, through a change of context, its interpretive possibilities are shifting from a snapshot to an object of a larger expression. Moreover, the paradigm of the unrepresentability of death needs to be discussed in relation to the selfie, as it relies on the tactile connection between the human body and the release of the camera. To consolidate these approaches, it is suggested that the selfie should rather be understood as a practice of memento mori in the context of post-mortem photography.

Keywords
Selfie; post-mortem photography; memento mori; death and photography.

1. Introduction

“2014 will go down as the year of the ‘death selfie’” is the title of an article published in December 2014 by the US blogger and journalist Chris Illuminati, in which he discusses the boom of the selfie as a cultural practice. Specifically, he focuses on a variety of this practice of self-portrayal that had been included in the Oxford English Dictionary in 2013. A so-called ‘death selfie’ has been taken immediately before the selfietaker has him- or herself become deceased. While the Oxford English Dictionary describes the selfie as “a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media”, several different forms of this photographic practice evolved, all of them carrying their own designation: the ‘welfie’ (a work-out selfie), the ‘relfie’ (a relationship selfie), the ‘belfie’ (showing the bottom of the person taking a selfie in front of a mirror) and, as it is now known, the ‘death selfie’, which due to its morbid reference fortunately did not receive any abbreviated proper noun.

The connection between the selfie and the selfie taker’s (and therefore the photographic referent’s) death in these examples certainly is not reflected within their

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theoretical background as analyzed by scholars in cultural thanatology, but serves in its
drastic appearance as a dramatic gesture of garnering attention and amazement. One ex-

4 “10 Selfies Taken Moments Before Death”, Likes.com, http://likes.com/weird/10-selfies-taken-mo-

5 D. Polosky, “9 Shocking Stories of People Posting Pre-death Selfies”, The Richest.com, November

term ‘ultimate selfie’ should not be mistaken for Jacquelyn Ford Morie’s outline of an ultimate selfie as
the process of creating an avatar as a technique of human enhancement (J. Ford Morie, “The ‘Ultimate Selfie’:
Musings on the Future of our Human Identity”, Proceedings of the 23rd Annual Conference on Behavior
Representation in Modeling & Simulation, edited by R.S. St. Amant et al., Washington DC: BRIMS Society,

sternd.de/panorama/gesellschaft/selfie-trend--junge-frauen-wagen-sich-auf-gleise---und-begeben-sich-in-le-

8 I. Därmann, Tod und Bild. Eine phänomenologische Mediengeschichte, München: Wilhelm Fink
1995, 58.
appearance as mentioned on popular websites; I will then turn to the relation between theory of photography and thanatology as inspired by cultural studies, and apply this relation to the case of the death selfie. In my conclusion, I would like to propose an understanding of the death selfie in the broader context of post-mortem photography, namely as a photographic memento mori, which enables us to think the selfie as an object oscillating between life and death.

2. #death #selfie #funeral #rip. The death selfie and its context

First of all, it is necessary to describe the death selfie and its discursive practices. The combination of the two words ‘selfie’ and ‘death’ suggests that there is a connection with regards to the content and the aesthetics between the cause of photographing and death as an “irreducible limit to our capacity”\(^9\). Hence, this concept is used for tagging images on Tumblr pages and social networking sites that bring together those two topoi in a similar way. Most of the images classified as death selfies show people taking a photographic self-portrait in a typical one-arm-length pose by using a smartphone and its integrated camera device. The descriptive text explains what has happened to the people shown in the photograph just a few moments later: a deadly car crash, a plane crash, a fall from a high altitude etc. Sometimes the act of taking a picture and uploading it is mentioned or marked as the cause for the demise of the selfie taker, for example when the selfie taker loses control over his or her car because he/she was too focused on the smartphone instead of paying attention to traffic. However, there are other selfie genres that touch on the topoi of death. Twitter user @bellaaadramatic, for instance, uploaded an image in March 2013 containing four selfies shot in a photo booth style, on which she smiles and duckfaces into the camera in the foreground of the picture – while in the background her dying or even already dead grandfather is lying in his hospital bed\(^10\). Under the headline “RIP Grampa Wu”, this selfie was picked up by numerous blogs and Tumblr pages, and was also shown on buzzfeed.com where the authors criticized the user’s behavior in an article titled, “How to Take a Selfie With Your Dying Grandparent,” answering it with “Don’t do it” and “Don’t put it on the internet”\(^11\). Similar to this, so-called ‘funeral selfies’, which had been uploaded on Instagram and tagged with #funeral and #selfie, were discussed widely in popular media as well as by media and communication scholars\(^12\).

They mostly show young people who mention in the short description of the picture that they are at a funeral service or on their way to a funeral, how they were related to the deceased person and at times how they feel about it (#sad). Those selfies are not marked as death selfies, but they certainly refer to a related problem, namely the actual unrepresentability of death itself. In very few selfies we can actually see dying people, with Grampa Wu being an exception. Rather, we see living people who are following the

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socio-culturally shaped practices of taking a selfie and sharing it on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, nothing more and nothing less. Disregarding the ethical component of this selfie practice we still have to ask: where is ‘death’ in a death selfie?

It seems as if we have reached a basic problem of photography concerning death; a problem that has been discussed widely by scholars of Cultural and Media Studies: death withdraws itself from the “regime of visualizations, of elucidations and occultations”\textsuperscript{13}; it is neither visible nor invisible, according to Thomas Macho and Kristin Marek in their anthology about the “new visibility of death”\textsuperscript{14}. Dead people are visible as well as their grieving families; doctors and gravedigger, coffins and graves are visible – but death itself is inconceivable and invisible\textsuperscript{15}. In the present, where in a gesture of Kulturkritik it is consistently lamented that death has been displaced from our societies\textsuperscript{16}, this inconceivability has rather promoted a “superabundance of images”\textsuperscript{17} instead of a movement of iconoclasm or aniconism. These images negotiate death between visibility and invisibility, representability and unrepresentability; but still, any visualization of death can only show the death of the ‘other’, not one’s own death, just as Heidegger discusses it in Sein und Zeit\textsuperscript{18}. Consequently, a selfie as described above cannot depict one’s own death – and this is not least due to a simple condition: the technical impossibility. We could say that death selfies and funeral selfies are not a subgenre of post-mortem photography because they are a specific form of the self-portrait which is produced by the tactile connection between the selfie taker and the release button on the smartphone; first when taking the picture and second when uploading the image. Technical devices for shooting photographic self-portraits without a mirror have already existed since the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century and quickly spread as part of the democratization of photography as a practice of amateurs. The autotimer, tripods and the development of the instant camera (e.g. Polaroid or Kodak Instant) dissolved the space between photographer and the photographic object and continuously transformed the aesthetics of the self-portrait and its distribution\textsuperscript{19}. But the selfie as a contemporary self-technology is especially characterized by a mutual fabrication of individuals, collectives and technical objects which seem to target the presence, liveliness, visibility and authenticity of the selfietaker who concurs here with the photographic object\textsuperscript{20}. The development of techniques and practices for taking a better or customized selfie – for example the compensation for a ‘short’ arm by a selfie stick, or tutorials which teach the advantageous visual orchestration of a selfie – circulate widely within our culture, but mostly rely on the immediate connection between body and camera in the moment of the shot. Not least is the practice of ‘selfing’ tied to an upload on a suitable website or social networking site and by that to a semi-public presentation of the image; something that, in theory, cannot be performed by the selfie taker after having become deceased.

Consequently, the notion of the death selfie seems to be imprecise in more than one

\textsuperscript{13} T. Macho, K. Marek, eds., Die neue Sichtbarkeit des Todes, München: Wilhelm Fink, 2007, 9-21 (9).
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} G. Di Foggia, “About the Anti-Figurativeness of #selfie. (Location of #selfie)”, Networking Knowledge, 8, 6 (2015).
\textsuperscript{18} Macho, Marek, Die neue Sichtbarkeit des Todes, 13.
\textsuperscript{20} Plohr, Otto, Selfie-Technologie.
way, if not paradoxical. Besides the determination on the side of Cultural Studies scholars that death itself is not representable, but that it can be connected to the self-portrait as a *topos* in a metaphorical as well as in a semantic way, a selfie in death is already technically impossible. The self-technology of the selfie, which relies on the causally determined connection between finger and release button, similarly refers to the authenticating presence of the selfie taker at a certain place to a certain time, verified by the upload on an application or website and the accessibility to a broader audience. There is no death in ‘death selfie’. Moreover, why is it so appealing for numerous blogs and news sites to post articles concerning the death selfie and its implicit tragedy? What is its appeal to spectators? And what makes it good click-bait?

3. BARTHES, THE SELFIE AND THE DEATH OF/IN PHOTOGRAPHY

Within the digital news coverage of the tragic accident of Collette Moreno, almost every article starts with an introductory phrase such as: “A weekend bachelorette party in Missouri ended before it began when the bride-to-be was killed in a tragic car accident, just minutes after snapping a selfie with her best friend, police said”[21]. Like most article headlines, this first phrase contains specifications on the place of the event, on the victim, on the proceedings of the accident – and here also in an apodosis, that the casualties took a selfie right before their car crashed. By straightening this sentence and putting the events into a chronological order, we can walk through the timeline of the accident: someone took a selfie and then had a fatal accident instead of celebrating a bachelorette party. It can be assumed that the real headline here is not the accident itself but what happened before it, something that happens countless times every second where there are smartphones and internet coverage – a digital self-portrait. But “[a]fter these photos were taken, the most terrible thing happened...”[22]. When reflecting a while longer, this fact seems somehow strange, because one starts asking whether the mere pushing of a release button and an accident that is not associated causally with it would really deserve special news coverage. But in my opinion it is not this (non-)correlation which produces the newsworthiness of the event. Moreover, it is because of the implicit reference to an important paradigm of the theory of photography that has been discussed, for example by Roland Barthes in his book *Camera Lucida*. Throughout this very famous late work of Barthes on photography, death runs like a thread and concentrates at two points: the pose and the reception.

Yet at the beginning of the first essay, Barthes points out the temporality of photography, because it can only repeat in a technical-mechanical manner what has happened only once and uniquely in front of the camera. This inimitable gesture of photography, its *noema*, is thus a gesture of a “ça a été”, a “that-has-been”[23], Barthes claims in the second essay of his subjective study of photography “in itself”[24]. The entanglement of the real and the live becomes almost perverted at this point, because it shows that some-

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24 Ibid., 3.
thing has been alive in a certain moment, but by the act of photography this point in
time moves back into the past and suggests that the photographic referent is already
dead\(^{25}\). By that, the recipient of a photographic image can only be reached by the rays
of the real object from a non-specific past and consequently determines this image as an
emanation of the photographic referent that testifies to its former existence\(^{26}\). But this
referent has already been overtaken by death within the photographic process, namely
in that very moment where he poses in front of the camera to be eternalized (\textit{sic}!): “I
constitute myself in the process of ‘posing’, I instantaneously make another body for
myself, I transform myself in advance into an image. This transformation is an active
one: I feel that the Photograph creates my body or mortifies it, according to its caprice
[\ldots]”\(^{27}\). Furthermore, Barthes describes the experience of a subject turning into an object
as a fatal transformation into an image: “I then experience a micro-version of death (of
parenthesis); \[\ldots\] when I discover myself in the product of this operation, what I see is
that I have become Total-Image, which is to say, Death in person \[\ldots\]”\(^{28}\).

Susan Sontag even sharpens Barthes’ statement about the relation between death and
photography in stating that “Photography is the inventory of mortality”\(^{29}\). And further:

A touch of the finger now suffices to invest a moment with posthumous irony. Photographs
show people being so irrefutably \textit{there} and at a specific age in their lives; group together
people and things which in a moment later have already disbanded, changed, continued
along the course of their independent destinies. \[\ldots\] Photographs state the innocence, the
vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction, and this link between photogra-
phy and death haunts all photographs of people\(^{30}\).

If we now accept these almost melancholic characteristics of photography for the case
of the selfie of Collette Moreno, the basic fascination of photography as a materialized
practice of objectification or reification becomes clear, even if in a strict sense the selfie
is a digital and not an analogue self-portrait as Barthes and Sontag would describe it.
But for this analysis of cultural practices (although strongly abbreviated), the supposed
ontological breach between analogue and digital photography is not too relevant for
the adscription of strategies and rhetorics of authenticity, as Bernd Stiegler points out\(^{31}\).

Nevertheless, the innocent vulnerability of the photographic referent toward his
mortality as mentioned by Susan Sontag also applies to Collette Moreno because of her
unforeseen accident after taking a selfie. This is what probably shocks the reader of an
article about ‘death selfies’ the most and entertains him or her in a quite morbid way: by
knowing that the practice of the selfie is a practice “of mediation (dissociation), but also
one of transmission, in which the selfie serves as a ‘real-time’ performance of self orient-
ed towards an audience situated elsewhere”\(^{32}\), the selfie leaves this context and is shifted

\(^{25}\) \textit{Ibid.}, 79.
\(^{26}\) \textit{Ibid.}, 82.
\(^{27}\) \textit{Ibid.}, 10f.
\(^{28}\) \textit{Ibid.}, 14.
\(^{30}\) \textit{Ibid.}, 54f.
\(^{31}\) B. Stiegler, \textit{Theoriegeschichte der Fotografie}, München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag 2006, 421. For the dis-
course about the relation between analogue and digital (photographic) images see for example W.J.T. Mitch-
\(^{32}\) Levin, \textit{The Selfie in the Age of Digital Recursion}. 
to a context which binds it to the noema proclaimed by Roland Barthes. The viewer who sees the selfie without knowing its context would probably put it into the category of numerous self-oriented practices of representing and producing a certain identity, but feels that because of the context of the accident the death of Moreno is shining through the selfie under the light of her photographic death. Her careless smile turns into a clownish grimace, the happy and animated selfie turns into a death selfie; it amalgamates death in terms of the pose with death in terms of her arresting within the photographic medium and embalms Collette Moreno as a photographic referent. She has just testified to her own existence by means of a selfie and authenticated it on Facebook by uploading and sharing it, and now she is absent in a twofold sense: dead by photography, dead in reality. The becoming of a ‘Total-Image’ in a multifold way transforms her testimony of presence by means of a selfie into a representation of her absence in reality, whose mediated flip side as a contextualized picture of memorization lets her rise from the dead again – as an image. This image is “something like a remainder, a legacy of the body”\textsuperscript{33}, and it seems to be able to tame one’s fear of death as a “logical void of phantasy”\textsuperscript{34} by gaining access in its context.

*Studium* and *punctum* as Barthes describes them could not diverge more than in the case of the death selfie. The construction of the self by the arrangement of the selfie as intended by the selfie taker is undermined by the gaze of the beholder who knows about the tragic death of the photographic referent in reality. By doing so, the selfie is transformed into an object of memory and admonition to the beholder’s own mortality and vitality at the same time\textsuperscript{35}. This is why I suggest an understanding of the death selfie as a part of the cultural practice of post-mortem photography. Furthermore I propose to consider it as a *memento mori*, which connects the beholder with the photographic referent and leads to technical-mechanical embalmment in an archival dispositive in terms of a digital photographic gallery.

4. THE SELFIE AS A MODERN PRACTICE OF *MEMENTO MORI*

Post-mortem photography as it has been analyzed, particularly by Thomas Macho, Katharina Sykora, Jay Ruby or by Mirko Orlando, is a practice of the 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century which stages recently deceased people in an everyday pose or amongst their family\textsuperscript{36}. These photos were mainly purchased by grieving family members who wanted to keep the memory of the deceased alive. Post-mortem photography presumes that the represented person is already dead, but by following the approach of Katharina Sykora it is possible that basically every photographic image can turn into an object of *memento mori*, namely as a permanent visualization of death in the individual’s as well as in the collective’s life\textsuperscript{37}. Sykora, first of all, stresses in her study about post-mortem photography as it has been analyzed, particularly by Thomas Macho, Katharina Sykora, Jay Ruby or by Mirko Orlando, is a practice of the 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century which stages recently deceased people in an everyday pose or amongst their family\textsuperscript{36}. These photos were mainly purchased by grieving family members who wanted to keep the memory of the deceased alive. Post-mortem photography presumes that the represented person is already dead, but by following the approach of Katharina Sykora it is possible that basically every photographic image can turn into an object of *memento mori*, namely as a permanent visualization of death in the individual’s as well as in the collective’s life\textsuperscript{37}. Sykora, first of all, stresses in her study about post-mortem


\textsuperscript{34} Macho, Marek, *Die neue Sichtbarkeit des Todes*, 9.


\textsuperscript{37} Sykora, *Die Tode der Fotografie*, 18.
photography the connection between memento mori and the photographic medium. The appealing character of photography as a ‘ça a été’ corresponds with the admonition towards the living: “remember that you have to die!”. Both practices ostentatiously exclaim in the moment of their enunciation that everything alive just got a little closer to death. Consequently, every photograph can serve as a memento mori. Their purpose as an admonition of the perishability of life interconnects individuals to a collective without the necessity of referring to a recent and acute case of death; it rather addresses all living human beings. In doing so, the gaze on the death of the other is transformed into an anticipation of one’s own death, cemented metaphorically by means of an image. This inherent invocation to the beholder, “remember that you have to die!” is not only limited to post-mortem photography but also includes portraits of the living, for example when appearing in the context of rituals of funerals or commemoration. If we consider the appearance of death selfies on the internet and their contextualization, or, moreover, their connection to the passing of the photographic referent in an attached description field, it seems as if this digital dispositive was acting like a ‘hall of memory’ in which the local ligation of commemoration yields in favor of a permanent disposability in virtual space. Hence, this photographic inventory of death, as described by Susan Sontag, also takes place on a level of the creation of a digital archive which provides an archival structure by means of lists or photo galleries, which orchestrates the real as well as the photographic death and fills the void of death itself with content and meaning. Photographic images, whether analogue or digital, serve here as “agents of one of the most important rites de passage, which releases an individual from his or her community and simultaneously reintegrates him/her as an imago”. On the one hand, these circulating images establish the concerted possibility of individual and/or collective commemoration; on the other hand, these images are unknowingly authorized by the selfie taker because of uploading and sharing it semi-publicly as part of his/her own identity management: “Some day, when you die, there will be a last photo of you floating out there somewhere. It’s crazy to think that some of those last photos were taken by the subject themselves, but that’s what happened to these people in a series of tragic events.” What the author on linkBeef.com describes here can be understood as an invocation of memento mori as well as the attempt to consider a congruency of the punctum and the studium as invented by Barthes, who described this congruency more as “a co-presence of two discontinuous elements”. “Remember that every time you take a selfie, this might be your last!” Accordingly, this would also change the meaning of the selfie as an actual snap-shot into a practice which would charge it as a ‘larger expression’ with some kind of temporality that would exceed its status as a “transitory message at a single moment in time”. And probably none of the death selfie takers had that in mind when they smiled into the camera.

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38 Ibid., 55.
39 Ibid., 54.
40 Ibid., 55f.
41 Macho, Marek, Die neue Sichtbarkeit des Todes, 15.
42 Sykora, Die Tode der Fotografie, 54.
44 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 23.
5. CONCLUSION

While contrasting the death selfie with assumptions of the theory of photography as well as approaches of thanatology, it became clear that this cultural practice of the self-portrait obeys to the noema of photography established by Roland Barthes. This is due to the attribution of certain characteristics of photography as authenticity, the representation of a dimension of reality etc., even though a selfie is a digital image and not, as mainly discussed in scholarly works about post-mortem photography, an analogue emanation of the photographic referent. But still, what we see on the image was present and alive at one certain moment in time and is now absent and maybe already physically dead. However, the nomenclature of the death selfie is already problematic because of the non-representability of death itself, and might rather refer to a journalistic rhetoric which intends to produce headlines and stories on entertainment and social networking sites by touching on the limits of life. Nevertheless, it is possible to think of the selfie as post-mortem photography when only considering its reception and ignoring the circumstances and intentions of the selfie-taking before any tragedy occurs. The beholder seems to be fascinated mainly by the transformation of a happy moment into a grotesque reflection of the perishability of the photographic referent as well as his/her own volatility. It is not smiling Collette Moreno and her innocent presentation of one aspect of her photographically shaped representation of identity who admonishes the beholder with an exclamation of “memento mori!” – it is the photographic dispositive and its medial intrinsic logic that purports to be able to preserve a person’s image for eternity. Death is still insuperable and unrepresentable, but the death selfie gives us at least a chance to cope with life in the face of death.