

The Selfie Gene

Nishant Shah, *The Indian Express*, Sep 22 2013

<http://www.indianexpress.com/news/the-selfie-gene/1171490/>



A selfie being taken

Could the explosion of self-images on the internet be more than narcissism?

Last month, the Oxford Dictionary added a new word to the English language — selfie. A selfie is a self-portrait taken by a camera within a mobile phone or a tablet, held at an arm's length or in a mirror. It refers to the incredible explosion of images of the self that have not only populated the social web but also inspired multi-million dollar applications like Instagram that offer quick-fix solutions to badly taken pictures. Whether it is the duck-faced pout, the tilted face with a smirk, the glowering eyes in a dimly lit room, or the full-length strut captured in a mirror, selfies are everywhere. Your profile picture on the social web or your avatar on your chat room or the last picture you uploaded on Twitter is most probably a selfie.

Many visual scientists and professionals have looked with disdain at the selfie. The critics have suggested that it feeds into the extraordinarily narcissistic cultures that the individualism and customisation of the internet offers. The selfie is a vanity shot — morphed, filtered, glossed and changed so that it comes close to our ideal of what we look like in our own heads. If the original function of the camera was to capture an exterior reality and document the world around us, the selfie is a perversion because it only focuses on the person with the camera rather than the contexts within which they might be located. The selfie also inspires many younger users to take inappropriate pictures of themselves, in public and in private and share them over the social web. Many complain that the selfie with its unimaginative visual vocabulary — if you look at one selfie, you have seen them all — also destroys the richness and creativity of visual language that has been established. The point-and-click cultures of the selfie encourage randomness and thoughtlessness, reducing the visual image to nothing more than a rehearsed act of serendipity.

Within visual cultures, it has long since been theorised that the photograph is not merely a representation of life. It is a logic through which life actually gets understood. It has an organisational principle, it gives us an entry point into mapping human relationships and social order. When you "compose" a picture, the frame of the picture tells you what can be included, what needs to be filtered out, where the different people and objects will be juxtaposed and positioned. The photograph is a living document, a repository of memory, and a social contract that shapes and forms our understanding of who we are and

how we see the world. Which is why, for instance, all family portraits almost always look the same and pictures of political figures are all taken from the same angle. The arrival of the camera and the ability to capture this framed reality has changed the course of human history — making us subjects of visual richness, capturing our lives in its minutiae and adding to the documentary impulse of human civilisation. One can easily see why the selfie, with its self-obsessed, low-brow proliferation can upset those who revere the sacredness and the artistic value of photographs and portraits.

However, if you rescue the selfie from this nostalgic rant that hankers for an older order of things where the world was without cellphones and friends were without Facebook, it might still be worth our time to dwell on this most prolific form of self-representation in contemporary times. The selfie might not be the pinnacle of high artistic achievement but it does give us a deep insight into how young people see themselves. In the privacy of their personal spaces, it allows them to experiment with their bodies, their looks, their sexual discovery and interaction with peers. The selfie is not merely an exercise in grainy narcissism — it is a series of experiments to figure out questions of self-image and sociality. Increasingly, counsellors are looking at selfies as good jumping points to talk about the physical and psychological welfare of the users.

Similarly, selfies are a good indication of the material that the user consumes online. Framing one's self in a selfie is often an exercise in self-identification and emulation. The aesthetic that the selfie is produced in, reflects the trends, celebrities and important profiles in the young user's life. Check out any Facebook post where a selfie has been uploaded and you will find a huge discussion which is not just about the image — in fact, selfies have now become a way of expressing emotions, mental states, and feelings of belonging. The selfie might seem to be an indulgent and "selfish" form of performance, but in its visibility and interactivity, it builds new social orders and conversations that are the glue to the everyday life of the millenials.