

'Speaking as': Selfies and Cybertyping

Jenny Gunn



Figure 1

Amalia Ulman's Instagram performance piece, *Excellences and Perfections* (2014), for example, exposes the circulation and investment (both monetary and affective) in white cis-gendered femininity as an aesthetic ideal within contemporary selfie culture (Figures 1 & 2). Tracking Ulman's breast implantation through a series of selfies documenting her post-operative healing process, *Excellences and Perfections* examines white femininity as a patriarchal technology achieved through violent and masochistic alterations to the body.ⁱⁱ



Figure 2

Such changes can run from the more innocuous like hair bleaching to more aggressive interventions like plastic surgery. Although the implantation was ultimately a pretense, Ulman's performance documents not only her self-construction in the ideal image of contemporary youthful white femininity but underscores the libidinal investments in this ideal through the comments her photos receive on Instagram. Through her work, Ulman interrogates female complicity in their own objectification within selfie culture at the same time that she opens space for empathy by drawing attention to the individual labor necessary to enact whiteness as a cultural and aesthetic ideal.

As Alice Marwick observes of "Instafame," i.e. the achievement of microcelebrity through Instagram, it can be difficult to assess the causal roots of an individual account's popularity. In the case of one account that Marwick tracks, Cayla Friesz, then a high school student from Indiana, her Instafame seemed to center around nothing more than her embodiment of all-American youthful, white cis-gendered femininity (Figure 3).

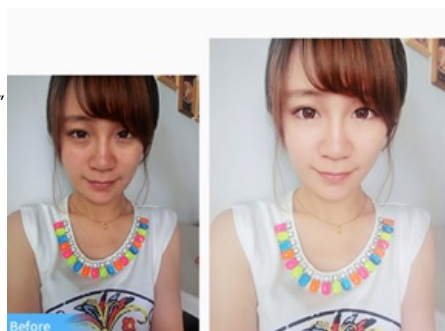


Figure 3

As the Twitter account fan page for her followers ("@Freeezfans") indicates, they love her simply "Cause she's gorgeousssss!"ⁱⁱⁱ But the increasing popularity and thus visibility of Instagram users such as Cayla Friesz are not merely innocuous. Instead, they contribute to the perpetuation and investment in culturally constructed ideals of white femininity materialized through selfie practices and microcelebrities.

Writing for *The New Yorker*, Jiyang Fan similarly traces the further entrenchment of white, European femininity as a cosmetic ideal in Chinese selfie culture through the overwhelming popularity of Meitu photo-editing applications. It's estimated that over one half of the selfies uploaded on Chinese social media applications are first filtered and cosmetically altered through photo-editing applications owned by the Meitu corporation, which additionally sells selfie-optimized smartphones. As Fan explains, "In nine years, the company—whose motto is "To make the world a more beautiful place"—has literally transformed the face of China.^{iv} The company has done so through the perpetuation of what is known as *wang hong lian*, or "internet celebrity face." As the blog "Digital Media Culture" argues, the image-based web 2.0 era has found internet celebrity evolve from an association with expert content producers in the blogging era to an association with celebrity earned solely through appearance.^v With the aid of Meitu's photo editing applications, more and more Chinese social media users—especially young women—now alter their selfies to appear more Westernized (Figure 4). These digital modifications include the single eyelid fold common in China altered to a more Westernized double fold, lightened skin, and widened eyes. These racial dynamics are further underscored by the popular "mixed blood" filter that adds a more Eurasian appearance to users.

Meitu thus clearly illustrates the perpetuation and exacerbation of whiteness as an ideal within selfie culture. In her interviews with China's Instafamous or "wang hong," Fan alludes to the harm that investment in this ideal can generate, as well as to the various types of physical, emotional, and psychological damage that can result from narcissistic self-objectification more broadly. Such damage is, indeed, not small as people continue to undergo excessive plastic surgery in order to embody their filtered appearance on social media. This problem appears rampant in the United States, too, with the increasing popularity of photo-editing applications and enhancements



such as those popularized by Meitu.^{vi}



Figure 4

The emergence of the selfie format is frequently analyzed in relation to the gendered construction of the gaze: does the selfie disrupt the hegemony of the male gaze or merely illustrate its further entrenchment and internalization?^{vii} Reaching a definitive answer concerning the ontological form of the selfie seems unlikely; however, evaluations of its gender politics appear to be most productive when responding to specific selfie practices. Further, it is certain that the initial framing of the selfie's significance in relation to the male gaze obscures attention to the function of race in the visual culture of selfies. The re-emergence of gender as an analytical category vis-à-vis the male gaze might, indeed, reproduce the earlier mistakes of second-wave feminism by inadequately attending to other intersecting identities.^{viii} As Kimberlé Crenshaw has proven, gendered oppression does not operate apart from class and race.^{ix} Exceeding questions of the gaze, the selfie has also been analyzed in relation to subjective narcissism.^x In these conversations as well, there has been little discussion of the inherent function of race and gender in the narcissistic process of identity formation.

While Frantz Fanon famously articulates the exclusion of blackness from the reciprocity of narcissistic identification, Judith Butler argues that post-Oedipal adherence to a gender norm also functions in relation to the development of the ego in the mirror stage.^{xi} Drawing from Freud's association of pain and hypochondria as well as homosexuality with narcissism, Butler states that, ". . . gender-instituting prohibitions work through suffusing the body with a pain that culminates in the projection of a surface, that is, a sexed morphology which is at once a compensatory fantasy and a fetishistic mask."^{xii} The post-Oedipal identification with a gender norm thus furthers the coordinating and repressive function of the ego.^{xiii} And yet, as Butler allows in her analysis of gender as performance, the resulting identity nevertheless remains a "compelling illusion, an object of belief."^{xiv} Butler's assessment of the investment placed in one's gendered ego thus soundly resonates with Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism, which the latter defines as "a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility."^{xv} The ego, in other words, may be the first and most formative object in this chain of cruelly optimistic attachments. Like Butler, Berlant emphasizes that cruel optimism often betrays an attachment both to the formal and the normative. She opposes this through the concept of "the impasse," where an encounter might occur that could lead to both "the dissolution of the form of being that existed before the event" and to a "radically resensualized subject."^{xvi} The impasse thus opens a potential and opposing force to the attachment of cruel optimism and its complicity with "the productive pace of capitalist normativity."^{xvii} If as Berlant insists, however, a critique of political economy inherently accompanies analyses of cruel optimism, then we must be attentive to capitalism's exploitation of our ego-driven attachments in contemporary selfie culture and the manner in which our narcissistic acts participate in the re-circulation of racial and gendered norms.

Writing in *The Interface Effect*, Alexander Galloway is attentive to the double-bind of participation in post-web 2.0 digital media. He asserts that given the hegemony of likeness and representation within social media sites, one is always interpellated through the matrices of race and gender. Galloway defines this problematic as "cybertyping":

There is a new kind of speech online, the speech of the body, the codified value it produces when it is captured, massified, and scanned by systems of monetization. The difficulty is not simply that bodies must speak. The difficulty is that they must always 'speak as.'^{xviii}

In such an atmosphere, one's individuality is less significant than one's value as an embodiment of a social type. So what form of action can be pursued in in response to the cruelty of always already 'speaking as' an embodied social identity?

Galloway's pessimistic solution is to decline participation altogether, but this advice seems insufficient seeing as the fulfillment of raced and gendered ideals need not even rely on embodied acts but is increasingly achievable through simulation or what Galloway might define as a "purely idealized racial coding."^{xix} This new reality was recently exhibited through marketing firm, Mediakix, and its experimental monetization of a simulated Instagram personality, Alexa Rae as *calibeachgirl1310* (Figure 5).

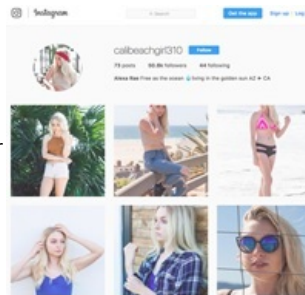


Figure 5

Utilizing a hired model and trafficking in utterly banal imagery of a youthful, white and blonde cis-gendered beach babe, the company was quickly able to monetize the account towards the selling of branded content.^{xx} Similarly if with more disturbing ethical implications and socio-political overtones, British photographer Cameron-James Wilson created a digital simulation of an African model, Shudu, (Figure 6) rather than hire black models.^{xxi} With over one hundred thousand followers, Shudu, similar to Mediakix's *calibeachgirl*, is now being sold to brands through Wilson's virtual modeling agency, "The Diggitals."^{xxii}

As these developments indicate, digital simulation alone can allow for the maintenance and enforcement of racial and gendered hierarchies. As such, how might we counteract this force by participating otherwise? While critical media theory should continue to consider the ideological function of new media forms, we must also be vigilant about the micropolitics of individual social media practices. Does the selfie necessarily remain attached to compromised conditions of possibility that reinforce gendered and racialized ideals, or can new practices help open an impasse and assert radically re-sensualized subjectivities?



Figure 6


Is such a suspension still possible in what Galloway refers to as "the spectacle playground" of post-web 2.0 digital media?^{xxiii} What might such impressive practices look like and are they achievable in mainstream social media and photo-sharing platforms? Given the overwhelming evidence to the contrary—only a few examples of which I have provided here—I, like Galloway, remain skeptical but refuse to become cynical. Instead, I am watchful for new horizons of possibility and radical acts of self-assertion.

About the Author

Jenny Gunn is a PhD Candidate in Moving Image Studies at Georgia State University. Her research interests focus on critical media theory, feminist media studies, and continental philosophy. Her dissertation, *Narcisscinema: Selfie Culture & the Moving Image*, analyzes the affects and aesthetics of the selfie and other self-reflective new media forms and their impact on contemporary film & visual culture. Jenny is on the Editorial and Social Media Staff for *liquid blackness*, a research project on blackness and aesthetics. Her writing has been published in *Film Philosophy* and *Cinephile* journal. She is also the recipient of the 2018 Provost's Dissertation Fellowship at Georgia State.

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ISSN 1558478X

