Bertrand Naivin, *Selfie, Un nouveau regard photographique*

Paris: L'Harmattan, 2016, 161 pages

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REFERENCES

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- 1 In the run-up to the presidential election in the United States, one photograph taken by Barbara Kinney during a Clinton meeting in Orlando went viral on social media. It showed a crowd of supporters all taking pictures of their grinning selves with their backs to the posing candidate. In the words of the photographer, it was a “massive selfie”. As the picture circulated, countless articles in the press commented that the picture evidenced the supposedly dramatic ways selfies have transformed relationships, with the young generation relinquishing eye contact and dialogue altogether, for the narcissistic pleasure of fake onscreen proximity. Information on the context of the picture soon helped clarify that the “massive selfie” had been staged by campaign organizers and Hillary herself and had taken place at the end of a rather traditional political meeting. However, the moment seemed to have upped the scales and achieved an industrialization of selfie-taking, allowing Hillary Clinton both to meet booming demands for selfies and to supply multiple posts supporting her candidacy.
- 2 The picture was taken after Bertrand Naivin’s book *Selfie*, un nouveau regard photographique went to print, but it seemed to confirm most of the author’s conclusions on this “phoneographic” practice. Indeed, Naivin considers the proliferation of selfies not as a simple trend but as a major shift in representation practices which heralds a new era for human relationships. Not only are selfies signs of more self-centered, self-obsessed times, but they are also ushering in a whole new way of “being”, of “inhabiting the world” (54).¹ Naivin’s project, however, is not to study this recent

practice from a psychoanalytical stance, as many have already done, reaching conclusions on the new narcissism involved in selfie-taking. Rather, his approach is a very personal mix of philosophy, art history, photographic theory, and history of photographic techniques. It posits that the deep transformations of photography at work in this selfie mania can be better measured by studying technological turns in the history of the medium, namely the invention of the portable camera by Kodak in the early 20th century and the invention of Polaroid. This view leads the author to take most of his examples from the field of American art and photography where the techniques first appeared and developed, which takes the reader through a wide-sweeping overview of visual culture in the United States. The argument is based on the overall assumption that taking photographs, including self-portraits, has always been a means for artists and amateurs alike to come to terms with transformations of all kinds, be it the social and cultural changes in early 20th century America or the more personal challenges of teenagerhood as far as *selfies* are concerned.

- 3 To begin with, Naivin examines what he calls the “first moment” of photography – roughly the first fifty years of photography– which climaxed with the invention of Kodak portable cameras in the 1890s, quite classically pinpointed here as the first technical turn in the history of photography. The author analyses the gradual transformations of the status of both the photograph and the photographer over the period. There was an epiphanic moment when photography shifted away from pictorial aestheticism towards more pragmatic concerns with the ordinary, and when practitioners –originally construed either as technicians harnessing the chemistry involved in daguerreotype processes or as artists intent on manipulating their pictures– were now acquiring the new autonomous status of photographers, with Joseph Strieglitz as a leading figure. In Bertrand Naivin’s historical overview, the first instances of street photographs by Paul Strand serve a demonstration of the Americanness in this coming-of-age of photography: the unplanned frontal views of common people and places encapsulate a typically American taste for the ordinary and for immediacy. This signalled a democratization of photography which was to bloom with the advent of portable Kodak cameras and rolls of film, as more and more amateurs could just “press the button” leaving Kodak to “do the rest” as promised in the adverts. It opened a “new era” for photography, and “the advent of what may be called ‘the American eye’ (...) which is characterized by a technical pragmatism, a taste for what is fast and convenient, and above all, establishing a culture of the ordinary.” (54).
- 4 The second technical turn was brought by Instant Photography in the 1960s, according to Bertrand Naivin. By abolishing the processing delay usually imposed on amateur photographers, Polaroid cameras even further reinforced the immediacy of photographic practices already described in the first part of the book as an American feature. They added a playful and consumerist dimension, as pictures could now be instantly produced, distributed or discarded. Visual narratives now amounted to a kind of “small talk” as opposed to the lyrical, dramatic narratives found in more classical culture. Naivin grounds his analysis of this second moment of photography on an overview of the uses of Polaroid by artists, the most famous of whom are David Hockney and Andy Warhol. A case-study of the latter’s *Self-portraits in drag* closes this section of the book and further clarifies what Naivin deems to be the “postmodern

regime” of photographs, where they are deprived of any Benjaminian sacred “aura” or any sense of Barthesian punctum.

- 5 Naivin sees some continuity between Instant photography thus defined and the more recent uses of “phoneography”. The third part of the book concentrates on the use of Smartphones as a hypermodern way of engaging with the world and with others. Deprived of any aesthetic intent or any truly introspective role, they are mainly meant to trigger online conversations. In fact, they may represent an entirely fictitious self, produced by the subject’s “slanted gaze” (136) on his/herself.
- 6 Recording and “imaging” every occasion of their lives, phoneographers are like “Hop-o'-My-Thumbs” (141). They produce pictures of their whereabouts that act as landmarks in an ever-changing and accelerating hypermodern world. Selfies are like “bottles in the sea” (152) in a very intimate quest for identity that has gone public. No wonder, argues Naivin, that teenagers are the main providers and consumers in this “mass production” of selfies (156), as they are particularly obsessed with themselves. The author finally suggests that the “industrialization” in this “third moment” of photography is another instance of “Americanness” in the development of photography.
- 7 This is where Bertrand Naivin leaves his narrative of the successive “regimes of the photograph”. On closing the book, it is quite obvious that one has read much more than just another discussion of the selfie mania. In fact, Naivin’s project is more ambitious than this, aiming to identify technological turns in the history of photography and to trace the ancestry of selfies in previous practices of self-portraiture over centuries of visual culture.
- 8 For that matter, it must be said the title of the book is rather misleading, as selfies, strictly speaking, are only discussed in the last third of Naivin’s essay. The title seems to suggest that the author extends the notion of “selfie” to periods and practices preceding the first use of the word in 2002, which he does not. Selfies as a visual practice only go back to the early 2000s when digital photography and social media combined to offer new access and visibility to a vernacular practice; consequently, any attempt to apply the name or the features of selfies to earlier practices would be misconceived. On the contrary, Bertrand Naivin carefully avoids this and clearly distinguishes between three notions: “a portrait of the artist by himself”, “a self-portrait” and “a selfie” (127). As a matter of fact, the word “selfie” is not used for a good portion of the essay (20-114), only to appear in the third part; but Naivin considers that the significance of the “third moment for photography” can be better embraced by digging up its roots in art history and theory. Thus, the first two parts of the book lay the ground for the author’s final contention: that selfies are “not a trend that is bound to disappear, but the expression of a new gaze on the self, combined with the advent of a new ‘self’”(159). They epitomize a deep shift in centuries-old representational modes, whose consequences are only starting to unfold.
- 9 Although they do not shed new light on the history of photography, the first two parts also offer useful reminders to readers already familiar with the history of American art and photography. There is a wealth of references throughout the book, from the world and theory of art, (ranging from Italian Renaissance theorist Alberti to Picasso and Man Ray to Warhol and contemporary artists like Anna Fox or Matthew Barney.) For that matter, the absence of index and bibliography at the end of the book is quite regrettable.

- 10 When the essay moves on to selfies *per se*, the point is easily driven in through comparisons with previous eras already examined –perhaps too easily, as the notion of technological turns or “moments” inevitably creates the sense of a teleological narrative. The essay, by focusing successively on Polaroid and selfies tends to narrow the scope of the study, while the first part had, quite commendably, adopted a broader view. This seems to imply that selfies are now the dominant form of picture-taking, which has not been established as a fact. It is true that there has been considerable media frenzy on the topic. Innumerable articles have reflected upon this new trend, often with undertones of moral panic, as noted by André Gunthert,² construing selfies as expressions of the narcissism of millennials or heralds of a new self-centred, vacuous era. Naivin’s analysis is more nuanced, but the extreme close-up on the philosophical, psychological and aesthetic aspects of selfies tends to leave out a discussion of the real scope and impact of this new practice. Are selfies more prominent than the equally proliferating food pictures for example? By any means, it could be said that the two partake in the same Hop-o'-My-Thumbs-like landmarking.
- 11 The argument of a transformation of representational modes through the selfie mania would require an inquiry into how *other* visual objects and communication practices may be connected to and affected by selfies. An exploration of the ways contemporary artists have engaged with selfies may provide clues to such connections,³ as suggested by Bertrand Naivin only at the end of his essay; but besides art, and to further assess the impact of selfies, the question could be raised on how the new “slanted gaze” involved in selfies might have spread to, or thrived in other walks of life. To a certain extent, the “slanted” mode of representation examined here epitomizes a new regime of truth so that we may wonder if and how this feeds into the current crisis of “post-truth”,⁴ “fake news” and “alternative facts”.
- 12 Indeed, the combination of selfies and social networks has turned selfie-takers into story-tellers of their own lives, spinning half-truths about their otherwise not-so-interesting lives. Filtered pictures on Instagram or Facebook walls build up fictitious selves. They are the media for alternative identities, making the alternative easily available and more enjoyable than truth. Not that this never happened in visual culture before, though – for instance, family albums have been shown to serve similar story-telling purposes.
- 13 There is indeed a degree of self-branding in selfies but the point for selfie-takers is also to entertain their online communities with stories which in turn idealize or dramatize ordinary situations. To a certain extent, selfies take the notion of spectacle to a further degree, or more exactly, to a broader scale, making everyone the actor and maker of their own reality show. Although Naivin never uses such terms, this is implicit in his analysis. From this viewpoint, the consequences are overwhelmingly negative, leading, on the one hand, to artificial and often contradictory versions of the self, and on the other hand, to a rather impoverished use of pictures, as desperate “wanted notices” (152).
- 14 This would perhaps require more qualified conclusions. It could also be argued that selfies often amount to people picking their day’s highlights and sharing a representation of them, as if writing about them in a visual diary. Could this be acknowledged as a form of creative agency, albeit sometimes (mis)directed to conform to unquestioned dominant models? This could even be regarded as a form of empowerment by offering selfie-takers a personal grasp on their image or by triggering

participation in a new cultural practice. There are certainly grounds to lighten up about selfies, which may lie beyond the mere territories of the gaze and would have to do with creation, expression, circulation and community, and which still need to be explored. One step towards such a reappraisal of selfies has been recently made by the Saatchi Gallery with the exhibition “Selfie to Self-Expression” (April and May 2017) meant “to celebrate the truly creative potential of a form of expression often derided for its inanity”.

- 15 For this reason, readers might be under the impression that *Selfie, un nouveau regard photographique* tends to fall prey to the very sort of self-centredness that is often attributed to selfies. After reaching out to multiple references in the history of art, photography and theory in the first two parts of the book, it seems that the analysis of selfies remains a little self-contained, where one could have expected tentative forays into other fields and contemporary practices, beyond photography itself. Paradoxical though it may seem, selfies imply connections, somewhat intrinsically. Thus, they raise multiple questions related to art and popular culture, media and communication, or even politics –as exemplified by the debate over Hillary Clinton’s “massive selfie”– which could help to account for the selfie craze and to put into perspective its significance in the history of image-making.

NOTES

1. All translations by the author of this review.
 2. André Gunthert, “La consécration du selfie”, *Études photographiques*, 32 | Printemps 2015, [On line] 16 juillet 2015, <http://etudesphotographiques.revues.org/3529>, last visited 23 March 2017.
 3. Laurence Allard, Laurent Creton, Roger Odin (dir.), *Téléphonie mobile et création*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2014.
 4. Jayson Harsin, “Regimes of Posttruth, Postpolitics, and Attention Economies”, *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 8 (2), 2015, pp. 327–33.
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