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The Visual Culture of the Selfie from the Perspective of "Culture of Narcissism": The Issues of the Selfie within the Art History of Self-Portraits

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the visual culture of the selfie through the lens of art history, particularly focusing on self-portraits and the "Culture of Narcissism." It examines key works such as Albrecht Dürer's *Christ as the Man of Sorrows*, *Self-Portrait of the Artist Holding a Thistle*, *Self-Portrait with White Gloves*, and *Self-Portrait in a Fur Collar*; Andrzej Dudek-Dürer's *Self-Crucifixion* and *Multiplied Metaphysical and Telepathic Self-Portrait III*; Caravaggio's *Narcissus*; Salvador Dalí's *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*; and Jacek Malczewski's *Christ Before Pilate*. The second part of the essay delves into Jacques Lacan's concept of the "mirror stage," a developmental phase occurring between six and eighteen months of age, where a child transitions from the real to the imaginary order. This stage involves a child's holistic inspection of their reflection, resulting in "primary narcissism" – a self-love rooted in autoeroticism before the formation of the ego. In the conclusion, the essay reflects on the selfie as a modern manifestation of these historical and psychological themes. By comparing the selfie to classical self-portraits and the Narcissus motif, the essay argues that contemporary self-photography revisits the same narcissistic mechanisms seen in art history. Caravaggio's depiction of Narcissus is the prototype of the selfie, which, through its embrace of self-reflection, continues the legacy of self-portraiture and it has become the icon of neuroaesthetics.

KEYWORDS: visual culture, the selfie, the "Culture of Narcissism," the history of self-portrait art, Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis, the "mirror stage," the primary narcissism

STRESZCZENIE

Kultura wizualna selfie z perspektywy „kultury narcyzmu": problematyka selfie w ramach historii sztuki autoportretów

Esej jest próbą nakreślenia problematyki kultury wizualnej selfie z perspektywy historii sztuki autoportretów. W tym artykule poruszam problematykę

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„kultury narcyzmu" poprzez odniesienia do obrazów i fotografii: „Chrystus jako Mąż Boleści", „Autoportret artysty trzymającego oset", „Autoportret w białych rękawiczkach", „Autoportret w płaszczu ozdobionym futrem" Albrechta Dürera, „Autoukrzyżowanie", „Autoportret zmultiplikowany metafizyczno-telepatyczny III" Andrzeja Dudka-Dürera, „Narcyz" Caravaggia, „Metamorfoza Narcyza" Salvadora Dalí i „Chrystus przed Piłatem" Jacka Malczewskiego. Druga część tego eseju skupia się na pojęciu „stadium lustra" w psychoanalizie Jacquesa Lacana, opisującego zjawisko zachodzące w rozwoju dziecka między szóstym a osiemnastym miesiącem życia. „Stadium lustra" rozumiane jest jako przejście od porządku realnego do wyobrażeniowego. Spojrzenie na siebie w lustrze, czyli całościowe oglądnięcie ciała, wywołuje u dziecka „pierwotny narcyzm", polegający na „zakochaniu się" we własnym istnieniu i czerpaniu przyjemności z tego działania. Jest to stan autoerotyczny poprzedzający ukonstytuowanie się ego, w którym niemowlę widzi swoją osobę jako przedmiot wyłącznej miłości. W zakończeniu eseju omawiam selfie z punktu widzenia historii autoportretów i historii sztuki, gdzie koncepcje Narcyza są prototypem selfie i formą zamkniętą. Ta ostatnia forma sztuki została przedstawiona przez Caravaggia w jego „Narcyzie", który stał się ikoną neuroestetyki. Selfie z perspektywy historii autoportretu odwołuje się do tych samych mechanizmów, które tworzyły autoportret w historii sztuki.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: kultura wizualna, selfie, kultura narcyzmu, historia sztuki autoportretów, psychoanaliza Jacquesa Lacana, stadium lustra, pierwotny narcyzm

> The selfie resonates not because it is new, but because it expresses, develops, expands, and intensifies the long history of the self-portrait (Mirzoeff, 2016, p. 29).

Introduction

The concept of the "visual culture of the selfie" can be examined through the lens of the "culture of narcissism" in various ways. Derek C. Murray, in his paper "Notes to Self: The Visual Culture of Selfies in the Age of Social Media," suggests that selfies are often perceived as a manifestation of narcissism in the Freudian sense, where individuals experience long-term sexual satisfaction through self-referential behavior (Murray, 2015, p. 511). Sigmund Freud describes that

> The term narcissism is derived from clinical description and was chosen by Paul Näcke in 1899 to denote the attitude of a person who treats his own body in the same way in which the body of a sexual object is ordinarily

> treated – who looks at it, that is to say, strokes it and fondles it till he obtains complete satisfaction through these activities (Freud, 2012, p. 73).

Nicholas Mirzoeff, in his work "How to See the World: An Introduction to Images, from Self-Portraits to Selfies, Maps to Movies, and More," aligns the selfie with the tradition of self-portraits. Mirzoeff characterizes the selfie as "digital performances" (Mirzoeff, 2016, p. 68). He argues

> The selfie is a fusion of the self-image, the self-portrait of the artist as a hero, and the machine image of modern art that works as a digital performance. It has created a new way to think of the history of visual culture as that of the self-portrait (Mirzoeff, 2016, p. 31).

This perspective links the selfie to the history of self-portraits, framing it as a contemporary extension of social practices. Michel Foucault's analysis of Diego Velázquez's "Las Meninas," as discussed in "The Order of Things," reinforces this viewpoint by suggesting that self-portraits, including modern selfies are "depicting not just what could be seen within it but the very means of ordering and representing a society" (Foucault, 2002, pp. 14–15, as cited in Mirzoeff, 2016, p. 33).

The Selfie from the Perspective of the "Culture of Narcissism"

Narcissism is a term frequently explored in the humanities, but understanding its relevance to the selfie phenomenon requires a discussion of the "culture of narcissism." Contemporary scholars view narcissism as a central feature of digital culture, characterized by a pursuit of vain self-gratification and egotistic admiration of an idealized self-image. This includes traits such as self-flattery, perfectionism, and arrogance. The term originates from Greek mythology, where Narcissus falls in love with his own reflection in a pool of water.

Psychoanalytically, narcissism was introduced in Sigmund Freud's 1914 essay "On Narcissism: An Introduction" (Freud, 2012, pp. 1–32). Freud's concept describes how individuals develop a self-image distinct from reality, driven by the need to maintain an attractive appearance. The "Culture of Narcissism" has given rise to a new archetype, "homo narcissus," as discussed by Slavoj Žižek (2000, pp. 234–255). This modern figure thrives in a social media-dominated society, where he performs for a vast online audience. In the face of various existential threats, homo narcissus

is deeply concerned with preserving his personality and remains fixated on the present. This contemporary narcissist often experiences a sense of purposelessness, fear of aging and failure, and a strong desire for achievement, fame, and omnipotence. For him, true existence is contingent upon being recognized and perceived by others.Christopher Lasch's identification of narcissism is not only an individual ailment but also as the contemporary burgeoning "narcissism epidemic"[1] which is at once a window into the consequences of narcissism, a prescription to combat its widespread problems it causes the "Culture of Narcissism." It is at once a riveting window into the consequences of narcissism,a prescription to combat the widespread problems it causes in the "Culture of Narcissism." In his book, *The Culture of Narcissism*, Lasch argues that, in the contemporary consumer culture,

> Narcissism appears realistically to represent the best way of coping with the tensions and anxieties of modern life, and the prevailing social conditions therefore, tend to bring out narcissistic traits that are present, in varying degrees, in everyone. These conditions have also transformed the family, which in turn shapes the underlying structure of personality. A society that fears it has no future is not likely to give much attention to the needs of the next generation, and the ever-present sense of historical discontinuity – the blight of our society – falls with particularly devastating effect on the family (Lasch, 1991, p. 50).

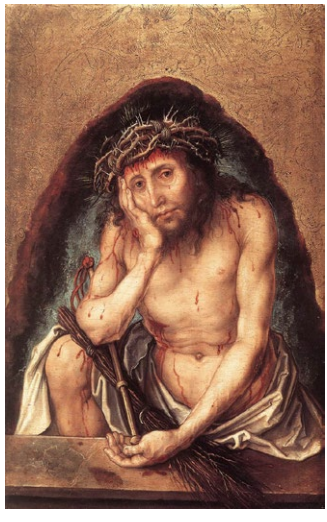
The term "narcissism" remains one of the most complex and ambiguous concepts in psychology and art history, with its origins not entirely clear. Although Paul Näcke is often credited with coining the term, he was not the first to address the phenomenon. Notable artists who have explored self-portraiture include Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), Caravaggio (1571–1610), Rembrandt (1606–1669), and Gustave Courbet (1819–1877). Among these, Dürer stands out for his particularly introspective self-portraits, which showcase a striking degree of self-awareness and perceived divine stature. Dürer's works include *Self-Portrait of the Artist Holding a Thistle* (1493). In this painting, Dürer presents himself with a thistle,

1 In the "narcissism epidemic," the rise of narcissistic personality traits parallels the increase in obesity from the 1980s to the present, with a particularly notable shift among women. The authors examine the pervasive spread of narcissism in contemporary culture and its detrimental effects across all societal levels. Narcissism, characterized by an inflated self-image, is now ubiquitous. This "narcissism epidemic" influences public figures to stray from their relationships, encourages teenagers to craft their personas on social media, and has elevated narcissism to an art form among celebrities. This pervasive focus on self leads to widespread depression and loneliness. Additionally, the global surge in debt, fueled by collective borrowing, will have enduring consequences (see Twenge & Campbell, 2009).

a symbol of male fidelity during the 15th century, which may also carry religious connotations as seen in its inclusion in his earlier work, *Christ as the Man of Sorrows* (1493–1494). The inscription next to the date in this work, "Bridegroom puts his future life in the hands of God," underscores the philosophical and Christian intent of the piece. In *Self-Portrait with White Gloves* (1498) Dürer, at age 26, depicts himself as a dandy in noble attire, highlighting his elevated self-image. The white gloves and opulent clothing reflect his self-perception of artistic superiority and social status. His later work, *Self-Portrait in a Fur Collar* (1500), portrays Dürer with an aura of divine nobility. The fur collar and the confident, almost arrogant expression contribute to his presentation as an artist of exceptional talent.

These self-portraits transcend personal representation, serving as reflections of Dürer's social ambitions and artistic identity. They embody elements of narcissism by emphasizing self-presentation and an elevated sense of grandeur.

Figure 1. Albrecht Dürer, *Christ as the Man of Sorrows* (1493–1494), an oil painting reproduction on panel. The Staatliche Kunsthalle in Karlsruhe



Note: This painting has been reproduced with permission and used in this paper thanks to the courtesy of the Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe.

Figure 2. Albrecht Dürer, *Self-Portrait of the Artist Holding a Thistle*, *Self-Portrait at the Age of 22* (1493), an oil painting reproduction on vellum. The Louvre Museum in Paris

Note: This painting has been reproduced with permission and used in this paper thanks to the courtesy of the Louvre Museum in Paris.

Figure 3. Albrecht Dürer, *Self-Portrait with White Gloves, Self-Portrait at the Age of 26* (1498), an oil painting reproduction on wood panel. The Prado Museum in Madrid

Note: This painting has been reproduced with permission and used in this paper thanks to the courtesy of the Prado Museum in Madrid.

Figure 4. Albrecht Dürer, *Self-Portrait in a Fur Collar, Self-Portrait at the Age of 28* (1500), an oil painting reproduction on panel. The Alte Pinakothek in Munich

Note: This painting has been reproduced with permission and used in this paper thanks to the courtesy of the Alte Pinakothek in Munich.

In Dürer's self-portraits, he often adopts a seductivel lover, exemplified by his rakish hat and flowing, almost effeminate blond hair. His cool, ironic gaze engages the viewer, adding a layer of complexity to his self-representation. In the third self-portrait, "Self-Portrait in a Fur Collar," Dürer presents himself as a 28-year-old demiurge, dressed in bourgeois attire that evokes the physicality of Christ. This portrayal places Dürer within the tradition of religious art (Koerner, 1993, p. 74) and allows him to showcase both his artistic prowess and his own perceived beauty. The signature "AD 1500" on the left side of this painting provides insight into religious attitudes and artistic philosophy. Though Dürer did not depict Christ directly, this self-portrait serves a dual role, both as the painter and as a model for Christ (Jurkowlaniec, 2009, p. 212). The painting is marked by deliberate symmetry, dark tones, and a direct confrontation with the viewer, as Dürer raises his hand to his heart. This exaggerated symmetry and Christ-like imagery underscore the narcissistic underpinnings of his self-representation.

The Bible asserts that humanity is born with a sinful nature, inherently focused on the self – a concept akin to egocentrism observed in infants.

Narcissism, similar to this egocentric focus, reflects an adult's tendency to engage with the world from a self-centered perspective, often hindering personal growth and meaningful relationships.It should be remarked that privately Dürer was indeed very concerned about his appearance; his concealed narcissism was evident in his insistence on an unfashionable hairstyle with long and curled hair, which – when combined with a light beard – made him look like Jesus (at the time considered the most beautiful man who had ever lived on the world). Christological allusions are a recurring motif in Dürer's self-portraits (see Bainton, 1974, pp. 269–272; Koerner, 1993; Smith, 1975, pp. 26–36). Grażyna Jurkowlaniec (2009) claims that

> It should suffice to consider features of Dürer's physiognomy or the frontality and symmetry of his likeness, all reminiscent of such Christological iconographic types as the Pantocrator, Salvator Mundi, or Vera icon. Even two inscriptions on both sides of Dürer's face vaguely remind us of a cross nimbus surrounding Christ's likeness (p. 209).

Bestowing such qualities on *Self-Portrait in a Fur Collar* has elicited varied interpretations among scholars. Some view it as an act of blasphemy (see Woods-Marsden, 1998), while others see it as evidence of Dürer's deep piety (see Bainton, 1974), indicative of the *imitatio Christi* (see Panofsky, 1955) or reflecting the image of God imprinted in man at the moment of Creation ("Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" cf. Genesis 1:26). The painting bears the inscription: *Albertus Durerus Noricus/ ipsum me propriis sic effin/gebam coloribus aetatis/anno XXVIII* (I, Albrecht Dürer of Nuremberg, portrayed myself in everlasting colors, aged twenty-eight years). This artwork depicts a man (Dürer himself) in a fur collar, who, while beholding the viewer, touches the fur trim near his heart. This gesture can be interpreted as a symbolic act of Christ's benediction (see Panofsky, 1951, pp. 34–41). The painting's symmetrical layout and strictly frontal presentation are reminiscent of the iconographic type representing Christ as "the Savior of the World." The self-portrait stands out as an art form precisely because it mirrors many representations of Christ. Another interpretation suggests that the artwork acknowledges artistic talents as divinely inspired gifts.

In the following years, Dürer evolves from a young man of remarkable beauty into a mature individual, fully aware of his own aesthetic appeal and social standing. His attractive physicality, highly valued during the Renaissance, aligns him with contemporary artists who, through their self-portraits, created visual diaries and pictorial autobiographies that meet enduring aesthetic expectations (Lehner, 2021, p. 5). Following Dürer, this

tradition would be carried on by artists like Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), and Gustave Courbet.

According to a narrow definition of "autobiographical art," an image is autobiographical if it features an obvious self-depiction by the artist alongside figures representing protagonists from the artist's private life. A broader definition, however, includes several paintings from the established genre of "history painting," as defined by Leon Battista Alberti (2011, pp. 39–84) as "istoria." These paintings can also be considered autobiographical if they feature self-portraits of the artist, often depicted in full figure.

While it would be a stretch to equate a smartphone "selfie" with Dürer's self-portraits, there is a shared underlying impulse. Despite the differing mediums and pictorial quality, both forms of self-representation likely originate from the same narcissistic source: the human need to express and capture one's self-image.

In 1969, Andrzej Dudek-Dürer began creating artworks inspired by Albrecht Dürer, drawing from iconographic representations and biographical elements of the German painter's work. Dudek-Dürer explored various levels of art themes, from the spiritual and artistic connections between himself and Dürer to a striking physiognomic resemblance. One of the most recognizable motifs in Dudek-Dürer's performances, echoing the master from Nuremberg, is the self-portrait, which he used in diverse ways.[2]

Since 1973, Dudek-Dürer has produced significant works, including the series *Ukrzyżowanie* (Crucifixion). These photographs, taken after the deaths of his brother and father, reflect on suffering and the meaning of life. Another important cycle, *Autoukrzyżowanie* (Self-Crucifixion) (see Sobota, 2006, pp. 27–28), was created between 1973 and 1974, featuring the artist's naked body in the pose of Christ on the cross. Unlike his previous works, this series incorporates everyday items that seem to appear by accident.

In 1977, Dudek-Dürer created a series of photomontages with the artist's head depicting himself as the crucified Christ. Dudek-Dürer's artworks became a personal statement about multiplying the figure of the crucified Christ which can be considered self-portraits and artistic prototypes of contemporary selfies featuring the crucified Christ that circulate on social media. In his work, photographs, with their inherent ability to

2 See photographs of performances from the Culture.pl website in English that is available at the website address: https://culture.pl/en/artist/andrzej-dudek-durer, (access: 7.05.2024. The most crucial area of artworks by Andrzej Dudek-Dürer is the art performance. He represents one of the most consequent and, at the same time, radical approaches in Polish art – for him, art is tantamount to life. The complex approach of Dudek-Dürer is characterized by religious and spiritual syncretism. His artworks allude to religious and philosophical systems of the East and the West, and shamanic practices. The artist is one of the most prominent representatives of the art performance.

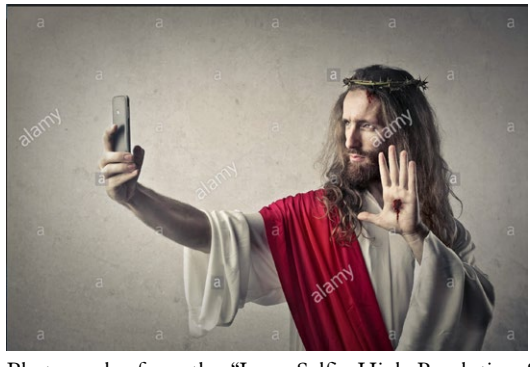
process reality and multiply images, became tools for questioning realness. Dudek-Dürer increasingly combined various spacetime contexts in his reality concepts.

Currently, selfies featuring the figure of Christ can be found online, such as on the "Jesus Selfie High-Resolution Stock Photography and Images" website, which offers numerous high-resolution stock photographs of the "perfect Jesus selfie.[3]"

Figure 5. Andrzej Dudek-Dürer, *Autoukrzyżowanie*, (*Self-Crucifixion*), (1973–1974)

Photography from performance at the Single Person Gallery, Wrocław. Note: This photography has been reproduced with permission of the artist and used in this paper thanks to the courtesy of the Single Person Gallery in Wrocław.

Figure 6. *Jesus taking the selfie of his wound*



Photography from the "Jesus Selfie High Resolution Stock Photography and Images" website.

3 See the "Jesus Selfie High-Resolution Stock Photography and Images" website that is available at the website address: https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo/jesus-selfie.html?sortBy=relevant (access: 07.05.2024), where you can buy the "perfect Jesus' Selfie" with the 40% discount using code: "SAVEIMAGE40%". Offer ends soon.

Throughout various stages of his artistic career, Andrzej Dudek-Dürer focused on the manipulation of images. This is most evident in his series that exploiting multiplication, such as *Autoportret zmultiplikowany metafizyczno-telepatyczny III* (Multiplied Metaphysical and Telepathic Self-Portrait III) (1994) (Jurecki, 2006, p. 36). By exhibiting serial, only slightly modified images, Dudek-Dürer emphasizes not just a richer aesthetic effect but also draws attention to the self-image.

In his photographs, Dudek-Dürer utilized the medium's capacity to document reality and create new images to convey his performance vision, which he refers to as "the road of art" (see Saj, 2006, pp. 32–33). Dudek-Dürer believed himself to be the seventh incarnation of the Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer, a belief reinforced by their similar beards and hair. Since 1969, Andrzej Dudek-Dürer has maintained that in his body contains the consciousness of Albrecht Dürer.

Figure 7. Andrzej Dudek-Dürer, *Autoportret zmultiplikowany metafizyczno-telepatyczny III*, (*Multiplied Metaphysical and Telepathic Self-Portrait III*), (1994), photography and selenography on canvas at the Single Person Gallery, Wrocław

Note: This photography has been reproduced with permission of the artist and used in this paper thanks to the courtesy of the Single Person Gallery in Wrocław.

Dudek-Dürer's artworks are replete with numerous allusions and references not only to Albrecht Dürer but also to the Crucified Christ (Jurecki, 2006, p. 34). Consequently, the artist – centered his art on his persona. In his most radical approach, Dudek-Dürer himself becomes an object of art, equating his life with his artistic expression. Jurecki claims, that "An important premise of his creation is focused on himself, which may be identified as egocentrism, and even narcissism" (Jurecki, 2006, p. 34). His appearance, particularly his beard, is key to his artistic identity, making him resemble Dürer's figure. He treats the objects accompanying him as personal attributes. For many years, he has consistently worn the same

shoes and pants, elements of his "costume" that contribute to his concept of a "living sculpture."

Dudek-Dürer photographs his surroundings and belongings in various configurations as records of his presence during his travels (see Kostołowski, 2006, pp. 24–25). Throughout his life, he has been surrounded himself with collected artwork, creating a series in which he preserves reproductions of Dürer's artworks, such as his self-portraits in jars, forming a unique archive of his life.

One of the most significant paintings with narcissistic connotations is Caravaggio's *Narcissus* (1597–1599). This artwork can be seen as a kind of treatise on the essence of painting, embodying the concept of *ut pictura poesis*.[4] This Latin phrase can be translated into English: "As is painting so is poetry," which occurs in Horace's *Ars Poetica* (see Horacy 2018). In *On Painting* (1435), Leon Battista Alberti (2011) writes:

> Things being so, I have taken the habit of saying, among friends, that … the inventor of painting was, according to the opinion of poets, that [famous] Narcissus who was transformed into a flower (see Ovid, 2014, pp. 339–362). As the painting is in fact the flower of all the arts, thus the whole tale of Narcissus perfectly adapts to the topic itself (p. 47).

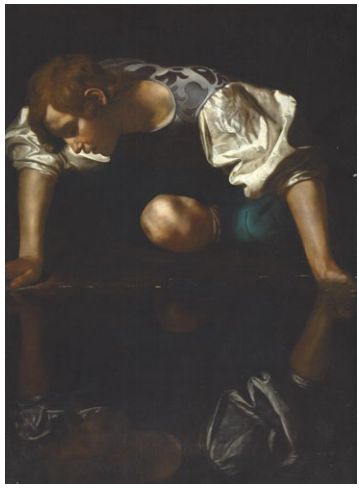
Alberti creates a new myth of Narcissus, depicting him as "the inventor of painting." This reinterpretation makes the story of Narcissus particularly appealing to artists. Instead of being merely a self-obsessed tragic lover from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (see Ovid, 2014), Narcissus is reimagined as the prime mover of the art of painting. In his *Notes*, Alberti (2011) adds that after Narcissus died of lovesickness, his body was transformed into the flower that bears his name (p. 106). Long after Alberti, Caravaggio would bring this myth to life in his painting *Narcissus*.

Cristelle L. Baskins points out that Alberti does not simply retell the "story" of Narcissus but rather allegorizes his myth. In this interpretation, "Alberti conflates two aspects of Narcissus' transformation; the flower and the reflection in the pool (which – note K.C.) both seem to signify the

4 In the article, *The Mirror in Art: Vanitas, Veritas, and Vision*, Helena Goscilo claims that "one may interpret the myth of Narcissus as an allegorical 'tribute to the illusionistic power of the artist to create a duplicate world' ('Caravaggio')" (Goscilo, 2010, p. 291). Unsurprisingly, an analysis of Caravaggio's *Narcissus* has assigned this painting attributes that may be viewed as the painter's gesture proclaiming the divine power of art, which strengthens the belief in the power of art can transform lives and build understanding across humans. The divine power of art is the power to shake us into revelation and rip us from our default mode of seeing. In Caravaggio's time, it was believed that the divine power of art was revealed among artists who were given a talent by God to create art.

mimetic surface of painting" (Baskins, 1993, p. 25). Caravaggio's *Narcissus* can thus be seen as a portrait of "the supernatural or 'divine' capacities given to art in its resolutely pagan and profane form, Alberti introduces the theme of resurrection, or at least survival, for which the portrait can be an instrument" (Damisch, 2010, p. 304).

Figure 8. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610), *Narcissus* (1597–1599), an oil painting reproduction. The National Gallery of Ancient Art in Rome



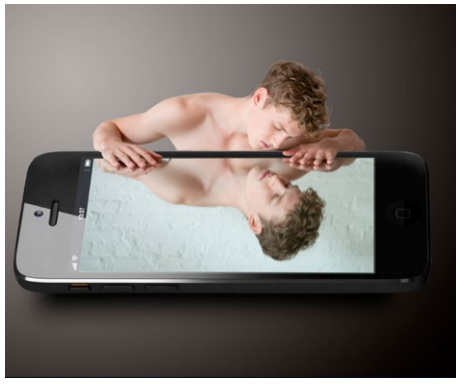
Note: This painting has been reproduced with permission and used in this paper thanks to the courtesy of the National Gallery of Ancient Art in Rome.

Caravaggio's *Narcissus* showcases tenebrism – the strong contrast between very dark and bright spaces. By using this technique, Caravaggio entirely obscures the background, leaving nothing but Narcissus and his reflection, which emphasizes the obsessive focus on his figure. This obsessive self-focus mirrors the narcissism often seen in contemporary selfies taken with smartphones. Nowadays, the common understanding of narcissism ranges from an excessive interest in oneself, one's physical appearance, and body to selfishness, involving a sense of entitlement, a lack of empathy, and a need for admiration. Freud explained the mechanics and dynamics of narcissism, its relation to libido, and its role in the psychosexual development of the individual person (Freud, 2012, p. 4). However, from this viewpoint, I do not support that opinion and I argue that today we are given an incorrect understanding of the Greek myth of Narcissus. Freud's psychoanalysis called the nomination of narcissism an autoerotic penchant for his own superficiality: here it may be added that Freud was mistaken in this issue. Ana Peraica (2017, p. 46) analyzes Caravaggio's

Narcissus who "falls in love with an image without a body" (Bal, 2004, p. 241), as Ovid (2014) writes, "He loves an unsubstantial hope and thinks that substance which is only shadow" (p. 153), unaware that his face dies from longing for the unattainable object of his affection. We, unlike Narcissus, do recognize our reflections in the pool of water as a self-identification and self-image (Jones, 2006, p. 1). Murray claims that

> The selfie does not simply comment upon a narcissistic need to see oneself in an idealized state, rather it makes one aware of the predatory nature of looking: the voyeurism in gazing at others and the implied pleasure in knowing that one is being gazed upon (Murray, 2015, p. 512).

Figure 9. *Narcissus in the selfie age* photography from the "Dervish Whirling" website



In this sense, we are engaged in a "visibility game" and the "dialectics of the gaze," where the distinction between the observer and the observed has become blurred. Social media platforms, such as the website Narcissus in the Selfie Age,[5] frequently display images of Narcissus, symbolizing this dynamic. Although most people understand the concept of narcissism, they often mock it, especially in light of terms like "selfitis," coined by the American Psychiatric Association (APA). "Selfitis" is classified as a new mental disorder, sometimes referred to as "selfie syndrome." According to the APA, if a person takes and posts more than a couple of pictures of themselves daily on social media, they may have psychological issues. "Selfitis" is defined as "the obsessive-compulsive desire to take photos of oneself and post them on social media as a way to make up for the lack

5 See the photography *Narcissus in the selfie age* from the "Dervish Whirling" website that is available at the website address: https://dervishwhirling.tumblr.com/post/69818005207/narcissus-in-the-selfie-age (access: 07.05.2024).

of self-esteem and to fill a gap in intimacy" (Vincent, 2014, p. 1, as cited in Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2018, p. 722). This term serves as a modern, less sophisticated analogy to the story of Narcissus, illustrating that narcissism manifests in various forms on social media today.

According to Jacques Lacan,

> We have only to understand the mirror stage as an identification, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image – whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytic theory, of the ancient term imago (Lacan, 2002, pp. 1–2).

This visual operation of the imaginary order is one of the three foundational elements in Lacan's psychoanalysis, alongside the symbolic and the real orders. The material picture suggests a basic identification with this sphere, which Lacan termed the "imaginary." This concept builds on the relationship to the mental image, encompassing the domain of images, whether conscious or unconscious, perceived or imagined.

The imaginary order is crucial in normalizing the libido level during the early stages of a child's life, when the personality is particularly unstable. It acts as a visual matrix – a point of support for subsequent processes – when the subject enters the social and symbolic orders. Thus, this process is not only early stages of the life of a child but also essential; without it, identification would not be possible.

The concept of the "mirror stage"[6] (French: *Le stade du miroir*) in Lacan's psychoanalysis describes a phenomenon occurring in a child's development when he or she is between six and eighteen months of age. Then the child begins to recognize himself as a separate subject system from his or her mother, shaping his or her subjectivity, (ego), and identifying his or her body as one integrated image. In Lacanian terminology, "the mirror stage" is understood as a transition from the real to the imaginary order. Looking at oneself in the mirror, i.e., a holistic inspection of the body evokes in the child, the so-called "primary narcissism", consisting of "falling in love" with one's own being, and taking pleasure in this activity. Lacan claims that

6 The concept of the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan called the "mirror stage" can be referred to as social media which acts as the role of a mirror in which an individual recognizes himself which induces apperception (see Lacan, 2002, pp. 1–6). The users of these media create their visual identity and an image of themselves e.g., on their private profiles and the avatars of Facebook, suggesting an effect of reflection in the mirror, like Jacques Lacan's "mirror stage" (see Değim, 2011, pp. 111–118).

> the term primary narcissism, by which an analytic doctrine designates the libidinal investment characteristic of that moment, reveals in those who invented it the most profound awareness of semantic latencies. But it also throws light on the dynamic opposition between this libido and the sexual libido, which the first analysts tried to define when they invoked destructive and, indeed, death instincts, in order to explain the evident connection between the narcissistic libido and the alienating function of the *I*, the aggressivity it releases in any relation to the other, even in a relation involving the most Samaritan of aid (Lacan, 2002, p. 4).

In the 1950s, Lacan's concept of the mirror stage had evolved: he no longer considered the mirror stage as a moment in the life of the infant, but as representing a structure of subjectivity, and the paradigm of "imaginary order." In *The mirror stage: an obliterated archive*[7] Elisabeth Roudinesco claims that

> Primary narcissism is a first state, prior to the constitution of the ego and therefore auto-erotic, through which the infant sees his own person as the object of exclusive love – a state that precedes his ability to turn towards external objects. From this ensues the constitution of the ideal ego. Secondary narcissism results from the transfer to the ego of investments in objects in the external world. Both primary and secondary narcissism seem to be a defence against aggressive drives (Roudinesco, 2003, p. 29).

During the "mirror stage," the child not only constructs their self-image but also begins to develop a negative dimension of self, marked by a sense of both omnipotence and vulnerability. This stage is pivotal as the child's ego is formed, incorporating a narcissistic self-image that reflects their burgeoning sense of power and control, as well as the potential for self-destruction and insecurity. Salvador Dalí (1904–1989) in *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* (1937) also confronted the motif of the "mirror stage"[8] but he

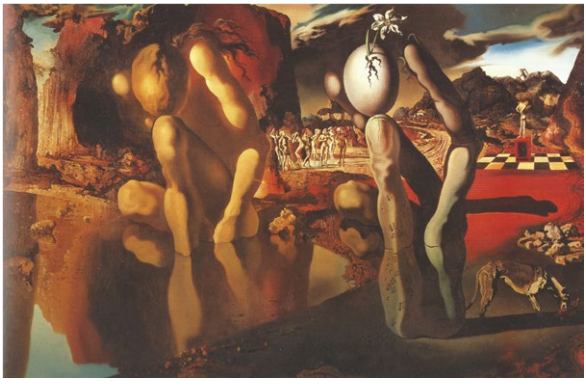
7 In her paper, "The mirror stage: an obliterated archive," Elisabeth Roudinesco (2003, pp. 25–34) refers to Lacan's essay on "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the/as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" (see Lacan, 2006, pp. 75–81), and she examines the issue of which Lacan was struggled during his whole life, entering in exercising an impossibility of taking control over time, as evinced by the masterful analysis presented in his essay on "Logical Time" (see Lacan, 2006, pp. 161–175). In his essay, "Logical Time," Lacan shows that the kind of temporality involved is not specifiable by reference to the clock but is itself the product of certain logical articulations. This distinction between logical time and chronological time underpins. Lacan's essay on "Logical Time" enables us to make a series of distinctions between the subjective, the intersubjective, and the trans-subjective dimensions of subjectivity.

8 The use of the "mirror stage" in art has a long history. Jacques Lacan's essay on this topic came into the general discourse of art because "this form (the ideal-I, if we wished to incorporate it into our usual register, in the sense that it will also be the source of

depicted it as a processed reflection. Narcissus's development stopped at Lacan's "mirror stage", a crucial moment of self-identification in a child's development. For this painting Dalí used a meticulous technique which he described as "hand-painted color photography" to depict the transformation of Narcissus with a hallucinatory effect, kneeling in the pond, holding an egg and a flower in his hands. This conclusion remains in accord with what Hans Belting argues, in *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*:

> Already in antiquity mirrors represented bodies as they were not. The mirror presents us with a flat surface of metal or glass, a medium in other words, and one that, although it is in fact the blank opposite of our bodies, yet returns our body as image (…). We receive an image that we take for a body (on the mirror, see Baltrušaitis, 1986; Haubl, 1991; Marin, 2001, p. 40 and follows; on the topic of Narcissus, see Belting, 2003; and Belting, 2011, pp. 227–238). Alberti's 'symbolic window:' which symbolizes the Renaissance picture, became – as a transparent surface – the ancestor of the screen. Mirror and easel pictures both serve to 'translate' three-dimensional bodies into a medium whose flat surface contradicts the body (Belting, 2014, p. 17).

Figure 10. Salvador Dalí, *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* (1937), an oil painting reproduction. The Tate Modern Gallery in London



Note: This painting has been reproduced with permission and used in this paper thanks to the courtesy of the Tate Modern Gallery in London.

secondary identifications, under which term I would place the functions of libidinal normalization – note K.C.) situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will only rejoin the coming-into-being (*le devenir*) of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as I his discordance with his own reality" (Lacan, 2002, p. 2).

Lacan argues that through the process of self-identification with the mirror image, children develop their subjectivity (Lacan, 2002, p. 5). Unlike the mythological Narcissus, who fell into a self-destructive obsession with his reflection, the child engages with their mirror image (he kisses his mirror image) facilitating integration into society and culture. Narcissus's tragic end stems from his realization that the reflection he adored was merely his own image, leading to self-aggression. In contrast, the child's engagement with their reflection is a positive step towards self-formation and socialization. According to the "narcissistic logic," when the subject feels aggression, it is often directed at an external entity, symbolically removed, destroyed, or killed (see Faucher, 2018, pp. 87–108). In *Social Capitol Online: Alienation and Accumulation*, Kane X. Faucher (2018) writes that "Narcissism and aggression are arguably more extreme symptoms of the dogged pursuit of online social capital. However, it does call up the existential question of what these counters actually mean" (p. 107). Nevertheless, Narcissus encounters only himself, and the narcissistic self ultimately turns its destructive tendencies inward. Salvador Dalí's visage became the focus of intense fascination, overshadowed by the emergence of his darker, self-destructive instincts. The artist, known for frequently capturing himself in photographs, illustrates this obsession with his own image, as seen in the Dazed Digital website, which features Dalí taking selfies and engaging with his audience through his unique, self-referential lens.[9] Dalí was a true master of the "selfie" long before the term existed. With his iconic upturned mustache and dramatic expressions, Dalí has left an indelible mark on visual culture. His influence persists in the digital age, particularly through the Salvador Dalí Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida, which created a life-size "deepfake" version of the painter for their "Salvador Dalí Lives" exhibition. This innovative installation brings Dalí's distinctive persona to life, blending historical and contemporary forms of self-representation.

9 See the photography *Deepfake Salvador Dalí wants to take the selfie with you* from the "Dazed Digital" website that is available at the website address: https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/44415/1/deepfake-salvadordali-takes-selfie-lives-exhibition-florida (access: 07.05.2024). Thanks to this photo, the artist – Salvador Dalí, who died in 1989, would be "brought back to life" in the exhibition called "Salvador Dalí Lives" at the Salvador Dalí Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida. This exhibition provides visitors an opportunity to learn about Dalí's life through the message of the artist himself.

Figure 11. *Deepfake Salvador Dalí wants to take the selfie with you*, photography from the Dazed Digital website

Jacek Malczewski (1854–1929) holds the distinction of having created the largest number of self-portraits in Polish art history (see Rottermund, 1984, pp. 35–38). His artworks often feature him in various guises, reflecting his fascination with transformation and self-representation. In his painting *Christ Before Pilate* (1910), Malczewski depicts himself as Jesus, complete with a wig and long hair, which led to accusations of egotism, megalomania, and, predictably, narcissistic tendencies.

In this particular painting, Malczewski presents a distinctive version of Pilate – calm, detached, and unconcerned with Christ. Pilate's attention is focused solely on the small stick he is holding, which he places between himself and his fingers. The scene captures a fragment from the Gospel of John, describing Christ's final interrogation after his scourging and crowning with thorns. Pilate's words, "Do You refuse to speak to me? Do You not realize I have power either to free You or to crucify You?" are met with Jesus' response, "You would have no power over Me if it were not given to you from above" (John 19:10–11). Pilate's relaxed demeanor suggests he believes Jesus' fate is entirely within his control, much like the stick he casually holds.

At the bottom of the painting, Malczewski includes the hand of a servant holding a bowl of water, referencing the Gospel of St. Matthew's account of Pilate washing his hands before condemning Jesus to death. In this portrayal, Christ is depicted as a suffering, martyred figure, his pain sharply contrasted with Pilate's indifference. Malczewski giving Christ his own face, evokes interpretations of megalomania and narcissism. Alternatively, this self-representation could be seen as an invitation for viewers to empathize with Jesus' suffering, potentially seeing their own face in place of the artist's. The painting's somber mood and the recurring theme of self-portrayal reinforce the depth of narcissistic undertones present in Malczewski's work.

Figure 12. Jacek Malczewski, *Christ Before Pilate* (1910), an oil painting reproduction. The Borys Voznytsky Lviv National Art Gallery

Note: This painting has been reproduced with permission and used by this paper thanks to the courtesy of the Borys Voznytsky Lviv National Art Gallery.

However, Jacek Malczewski's narcissistic painting has yet another dimension which may be called depressive or melancholic. Julia Kristeva[10] describes the depressive as one who perceives the sense of self as a crucial pursuit and a nearly unattainable goal and explains how the love of a lost identity of attachment lies at the very core of depression's dark heart. In her book, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, Kristeva writes that: "Depression is the hidden face of Narcissus, the face that is to bear him away into death, but of which he is unaware while he admires himself in a mirage. Talking about depression will again lead us into the marshy land of the Narcissus myth" (Kristeva, 1992, p. 5). This assertion, which agrees with Freudian psychoanalysis, presents melancholia as a "somber lining of amatory passion" (Kristeva, 1992, pp. 5–6). Kristeva uses "passion" in a double sense, as ardor and agony. However, an interpretation of Freudian melancholia sharply done by Judith Butler contrasts with Kristeva's proposition. Butler in Freud's discussion of melancholy thinks that its source in an individual is primarily social. In this sense, melancholy is something much more primitive, typical for non-heteronormative identities (gay and

10 Julia Kristeva considers that Sigmund Freud's concept of psychoanalysis is marked by three heterogeneities: (unconscious/conscious, semiotic/symbolic, imaginary/symbolic) that expose the historical emergence, significance, demise of human psychic structures, and present obstacles to our progressive political thinking (see Beardsworth, 2005, pp. 54-77). In Freud's psychoanalytic theory possible, it is to conceive of the language concept characterized by heterogeneity "because of the gap between the representation of words and the representation of things" (Kristeva, 1996/1997, p. 1).

lesbian) because "Melancholy can work … within homosexuality in specific ways that call for rethinking" (Butler, 1997, p. 148). In her theory, Butler parts from Freud's melancholy concept and modifies, it to criticize the societal norms that force each member of society into a heterosexual gender identity.

Conclusions

In this paper, I examine the selfie through the lens of the "culture of narcissism," where "Narcissus is the prototype of the selfie" (Folga-Januszewska, 2017, p. 196). This perspective can be expanded to consider what might be termed the "culture of digital narcissism," in which taking and sharing selfies on social media serves as a primary indicator of narcissistic behavior. This phenomenon reflects a cultural fetishism for digital photography and a compulsive obsession with documenting and publicizing every moment of one's life. By making photos public, individuals seek to assert their presence and continually remind others of their existence on the Internet.[11] An equally important issue of this paper is the perspective of the history of a self-portrait in which the selfie functions just like *Narcissus*, who, "the history of art … is a closed form. This form is convincingly depicted by Caravaggio (Fig. 8); his *Narcissus* has become the icon of neuroaesthetics" (Folga-Januszewska, 2017, p. 197). In this situation, Peraica argues that:

> Taking into account the history of self-portraiture, the relationship to the Other via images can be defined in three distinct relationships; knowing oneself as the Other, mirroring or identifying with the Other, and self--inventing oneself as the Other. I will name these relationships as; the relationship of subject to the objectified self, the inner psychotherapeutic relationship with oneself, as a cure for oneself, and a pathological cultural phenomenon of narcissism, being also the ideology of the Self (Peraica, 2017, p. 50).

11 Magdalena Szpunar argues that "The Internet is a narcissistic medium enabling the eruption of behaviors directed on the own self. Dozens of applications serve many purposes, but above all, they support the celebration of oneself itself. This medium, like no other, strengthens and sustains the narcissistic inclinations of individuals, making that crucial become self-presentation and appropriately the prepared creation of oneself itself. By intensifying the extremely clear tendencies of visual culture which is becoming the source of the narcissism epidemic. Narcissism, the scale of which, thanks to the digital face, seems to have no end" (Szpunar, 2016, p. 146).

Examining the selfie through the lens of the culture of narcissism requires an understanding of its psychological nature, which influences its proliferation on social media. The selfie, much like traditional self-portraits in art history, taps into similar mechanisms of self-representation and self-obsession. This urge to control and curate one's self-image, evident throughout art history, is now vividly manifested in the selfie shared online.

Additionally, this paper explores the portrayal of Narcissus in contemporary culture and it suggests that modern individuals often identify with Narcissus models within society. According to Carolyn C. Morf and Frederick Rhodewalt, authors of the narcissistic self-regulation concept, the narcissistic "self" is perpetually under construction, grounded in an "unstable personality." Narcissists base their self-esteem on inflated beliefs about their own grandeur, which is supported by a fragile sense of self. Their self-worth fluctuates with external validation, and their self-esteem is highly sensitive to deviations from their perceived ideal. This instability often leads to insensitivity towards social norms and a view of others as inferior. Narcissists' self-regulatory efforts can be counterproductive, undermining their attempts to maintain a stable self-image and preventing them from achieving positive feedback (see Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001, pp. 177–196).

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