

# THE SELFIE AS A RESPONSE TO THE EMPTINESS OF CONTEMPORARY LIFE

by Serge Muscat

The advent of digital photography has made the process of creating images the very definition of simplicity. Armed with just a basic mobile phone, the whole world of shot-taking opens up. And it is out of this profusion of photography that the selfie has emerged.

The selfie (a self-portrait created with a photographic device) is symptomatic of an epoch in which everyone is a star (echoing the types of television programmes in which ordinary individuals become minor celebrities) and reigned over by the kind of emptiness that has come to characterise these early years of the 21st century. By the 1980s, French philosopher and writer Gilles Lipovetsky had already talked about this phenomenon in his essay *L'Ère du vide (The Era of Emptiness)*, observing that postmodern society is characterised “by a divestment from the public sphere” and by the particular type of hedonism advocated by fellow French writer and philosopher, Michel Onfray.

Within this context of heedless self-love, the selfie has flourished on social networks, with practically everyone, right up to the very top echelons of society, participating in the practice. This is the selfie as neo-individualism, representative of an almost complete loss of any sense of the

social and occurring in a climate of increasingly intense competition between individuals. Displaying oneself on Facebook via a selfie has become an activity participated in by millions of people. If Freud were of our era, he would view this mass of individuals behaving like turbo-charged Narcissi with perplexity.

The selfie is an image reflected by a techno-scientific mirror and which reveals a hypertrophy of the 'Me'. A world is thus taking shape in which individuals are increasingly irresponsible and every act is becoming a game. The selfie integrates perfectly into the endless round of contests and competitions in which the happy winners are very often rewarded with a trip to a remote location, such as an island, for example, the very symbol of a kind of antisocial narcissism.

The frequent use of selfies may also be a way for those who take them to find reassurance in the face of the breakdown of traditional social ties in our competition-based society. Furthermore, researchers have found evidence of a relationship between sexuality and the production of images of the self. The less strongly established an individual's sexuality, the more that individual is likely to post 'ego-portraits' on social networks. The selfie is therefore revelatory of a contemporary crisis between the sexes in which people spend more time posting photos online than they do engaging in erotic pursuits.

How long will this 'fashion' last on social networks? It is impossible to say with any precision. We are of the opinion, however, that the selfie still has plenty of life left in it yet ■