

## The *I* in Object: Selfie Culture and Object-Oriented Philosophy

The emerging concept of a selfie culture necessitates the development of a critical media theory that provides ontological attention to the selfie as a larger cultural phenomenon. While in popular media the selfie has typically been treated as a novel form of self-representation, what has been less recognized is the selfie's profound impact on contemporary visual culture. Since 2010 and the invention of the forward-facing camera on the iPhone 4, visual culture has become increasingly saturated with a variety of reflective photo and video technologies. Whether referring to Skype, FaceTime, or the selfie per se, in the selfie's visual culture our experience is frequently mediated by a heightened state of self-awareness or what popular media has diagnosed as exacerbated narcissism. And yet, in spite of a desire to link the selfie to the concept of narcissism, the philosophical implications of this link have been underdeveloped. At the moment, there seems to be a reticence or even an inability to apply the methodology necessary to accurately assess the selfie's relationship to narcissism, namely psychoanalysis, given its diminishing status in the past half-century. In film studies, psychoanalytic theory began waning beginning in the 1990s as new scholarship increasingly turned instead toward film phenomenology and affect theory's methodologies. As this essay will suggest, however, the selfie's narcissism need not be explicated via a naïve return to Freud, since in fact, the most radical implications of narcissism's theorization are being suggested by the wholly contemporary movement of object-oriented philosophy (OOP hereafter). OOP's claims are useful as a diagnostic tool for examining modes of being such as selfie culture's object-oriented subjectivity, which de-prioritizes external relations and is instead preoccupied with self-relation—that is, the affective experience of oneself as image and as object. Similar to selfie culture, OOP registers a change in sentiment toward the condition of objecthood or,

more specifically for our purposes, toward the thinking of the self, or the subject, as object.

As a branch of speculative realism, OOP emerged somewhat organically from a series of blogged conversations and debates shared by young, contemporary philosophers that most notably included Graham Harman, Levi Bryant, and Ian Bogost (Bryant et al. 1-18). Similar to speculative realism, OOP rejects the anti-realism of post-structuralist and postmodern philosophy, more summarily referred to as “the linguistic turn,” which acknowledges human thought as a proper, structural limit (2-5). In response to twenty-first-century developments such as global climate change and the increasingly blurred boundaries between humans and technology, speculative realism rejects the notion that the subject-object, or human-world binary, which philosopher Quentin Meilloux deems *correlationism*, should strictly delimit philosophical speculation (3). As Meilloux states, speculative realism rejects “the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other” (3). What distinguishes object-oriented philosophy from speculative realism more generally, however, is its investment in the integrity of objects and its refusal, unlike other philosophers of becoming such as Bergson, Whitehead, or Deleuze, to reduce objects to their relations (9). Instead, in formulating OOP, Harman, and later Bryant, Bogost, and their followers, were inspired by the implications of Heidegger's tool-analysis, maintaining that there is a withdrawn dimension to any object that exceeds its relations and remains integral despite them (8). To explain this fundamental premise, Harman develops a taxonomy of the quadruple object, which postulates that any given object is divided between its sensuous or manifest qualities and a real or withdrawn dimension (Harman 69-81).

Interestingly, while Levi Bryant recognizes that

OOP's split object is not unlike the split subject of psychoanalysis, divided between the withdrawn unconscious and the apparent ego (Bryant 281), Harman analogizes his concept of the object to the Freudian dream, which is divided between the latent and manifest (read: real and sensuous). Furthermore, in the concluding passages of *The Quadruple Object*, Harman explicitly links his metaphysics of object relations to Freudian psychoanalysis as metaphysics of consciousness (Harman 143). Similarly, Levi Bryant was trained as a psychoanalyst, identifies as a "resolute Lacanian," and in *The Democracy of Objects* utilizes Lacan's graphs of sexuation as a model for contrasting anti-realist and realist ontologies in the explication of his philosophy of object-relations, which he has deemed *onticology* (Bryant ix, 20). However, the indebtedness of OOP's theory of the object to the psychoanalytic theory of the subject remains implicit.

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According to OOP, psychoanalysis as a theory of human subjectivity can only represent a sub-category of a more macroscopic system. However, more practically, the logic of object relations as elaborated in OOP draws primarily on the psychoanalytic concept of narcissism, and in so doing, establishes a new and more radical extension of the narcissistic relation that curiously echoes the contemporary salience of self-reflective technologies in today's selfie culture. However, neither Harman nor Bryant admit that the psychoanalytic concept of narcissism is an influence on their theories. While Harman's *The Quadruple Object* overlooks addressing narcissism, Bryant addresses it in conjunction with his rejection of human exceptionality, analogizing the correlationism of the linguistic turn to a form of narcissism, which over-emphasizes the human dimensions of being: language, culture, mortality, and so on, at the expense of objects (Bryant 257-58). However, Bryant does not acknowledge that narcissism is a foundational idea within OOP, yet this relationship becomes apparent if we consider OOP's emphasis on the impossibility of true object relations.

As formulated in Freudian psychoanalysis, a certain amount of narcissism is normal, even necessary, in the formation of the ego. Although Freud's theory of narcissism

became more nuanced over time, in his 1914 essay "On Narcissism: An Introduction," he viewed the libido as divided between ego and object libido, arguing that a healthy individual develops toward an outward-directed object libido with sexual maturation (Freud 67-102). Although Freud viewed the small child as generally narcissistic, in some cases this narcissism pathologically persists into adulthood at the cost of forming proper object relations. However, Freud also observes that pathological narcissism makes one impervious to analysis, due to the resulting impossibility for establishing proper object relation with the analyst (i.e. transference). In fact, Freud links pathological narcissism to the condition of schizophrenia, in which the individual lacks adequate object relations to the outside world. For this reason, people with schizophrenia were likewise considered psychoanalytically untreatable. Moreover, Freud argued that ego libido exists in an inverse relation to object libido. The establishment of the ego is a necessary precondition for the establishment of object relations in the maturation of the healthy individual. Freud attests to this by differentiating between two phases of narcissism: primary and secondary. In the case of secondary narcissism, in which the ego is already established, the subject's ego libido is rewarded no longer strictly through self-relation but through identification with others as ego ideals (Freud 67-102; LaPlanche and Pontalis 255-57).

Similarly, Lacan's mirror stage brilliantly summarizes narcissism's necessity in the establishment of the ego. For Lacan, narcissism is caught up in the lure of the Imaginary (i.e. in the play of mirror images) ("Mirror" 75-81). As Lorenzo Chiesa argues, it is within this relation to the Imaginary—or, in other words, the subject's foundational construction of the ego in an alienating and alienated image—that Lacan's early work locates the unique drama of human subjectivity (12-34). In Lacan's return to Freud, which is fundamentally opposed to the American tradition of ego psychology, psychoanalysis aims to reveal the illusory nature of the ego and to puncture the

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subject's narcissistic relation to it (Chiesa 13-14). At the same time, however, Lacan is ultimately more invested than Freud in expanding the theory of narcissism because of his conviction in the lure of the Imaginary ego, as evidenced by his proclamation that the mirror stage is an identifiable and fundamental instance in childhood development. Much more pessimistically than Freud, Lacan utilizes his theory of the *objet a* to argue that following the foundational establishment of the subject's relation to the ego in the mirror stage, true object relations become nearly impossible given the function of the *objet a* as a narcissistic remainder, which interferes in any given inter-subjective relation (Chiesa 156-66). This function of the *objet a* as a narcissistic remainder, which stymies proper object relations, is pessimistically if also pithily summarized in Lacan's insistence, *il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel* (Lacan "Seminar" 58-63).

While Lacan relies on the concept of the *objet a* to explain the difficulty of inter-subjective relations, OOP similarly and perhaps more drastically insists on the fundamental impossibility of unmediated inter-objective relations tout court. For example, Harman argues that in any given encounter, there is only one perceiving real object encountering an entirely sensuous realm, any sense of which can only be garnered through metaphor, or what Bryant refers to as translation. In other words, there is no meeting between real objects, which instead remain withdrawn from one another. Similarly, Freud insists that the pathological narcissist is untreatable through the methods of psychoanalysis, given his utter independence from external object relations. According to the terms of Freudian psychoanalysis, this withdrawal from the external world can make an individual psychotic. Following this logic, OOP's object world could be characterized as populated by free-floating psychotics, or what we may otherwise identify as pathologically narcissistic objects. Additionally, and more consistent with the psychoanalytic theory of narcissism, as indicated by Harman's concept of allure, OOP's proposed failure of external relationality corresponds to a libidinal fixation on self-relation.

OOP affectively communicates its investment in the failure of relationality through the rhetorical device of the list, or what Ian Bogost refers to as the "Latour litany" (38-39). Mimicking Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory as a stylistic device, OOP appropriates the aesthetic of the list, in which a variety of objects democratically coexist but only limitedly interact (Bogost 38-39). Latour's Actor Network Theory deprioritizes human, social, or institutional agency, proposing instead a network of influence composed of objects, technologies, ideas, and a variety of other human and non-human

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components, and reiterates the premise of a flat ontology so that "all objects equally exist although they don't exist equally" (Bogost 11). Underlining the philosophical conviction of a true democracy of objects and the belief that the human is only different in degree and not in kind from any other object, OOP's lists are often populated by both the mundane and the exceptional. Objects emphasized in the list of Bogost's *Alien Phenomenology*, include DVD players, automobiles, kudzu, and a variety of foodstuffs. The democratic list's aesthetic is akin to photo-sharing social media platforms such as Instagram, where a variety of objects from the grand and geographical to the small and domestic are all rendered alike in scale and significance by the square photo format of the application software's photostream. On these platforms, objects appear alongside one another and are perused via a scrolling action, which creates what Bogost might refer to as a flat "compendium of collocation" (38).

Similarly, the recent work of contemporary artist, Chloe Wise, which frequently alludes to social media



Figure 1. Chloe Wise, *Virgo Triennial*, 2017. Oil on Canvas.



aesthetics and selfie culture, relies on the aesthetic of the list or the compendium. For example, the academic-style paintings and installations included in Wise's 2017 exhibition *Of False Beaches and Butter Money* provocatively represent the human subject amongst an odd consortium of objects including eighteenth-century silver tea sets, papayas, and cartons of Almond Breeze brand label almond milk, amongst other items. The frequently female figures featured in Wise's oil paintings, such as *Virgo Triennial* (fig. 1), exhibit a noticeable flatness of affect in their illegible expressions—this serves to undermine their subjectivity, making them appear as objects. Not unlike OOP's lists, Wise's practice treats the human figure as one of many potential and enumerable objects, as something to easily insert into the still life, a genre of classical painting traditionally bereft of the human form. In addition, one of Wise's contemporary still life installations included in the exhibition and used as promotional material on Wise's Instagram account, *Void-of-course Probiotic Promise*, recognizably engages with the iconography of Ovid's Narcissus, and more specifically with Caravaggio's well-known painting of the myth. The installation includes a female face on the surface of a mirrored pedestal, where her image appears as if in reflection, which is both beneath and among the other still life items that surround it.

While Wise's *Void-of-course Probiotic Promise* provocatively alludes to narcissism's libidinal taking of the self as object, this relation is made altogether plain in Kanye West's recent music video *Famous*. For *Famous*, West commissioned several exacting, anatomically correct sculptures of contemporary celebrity icons including himself and his wife Kim Kardashian-West (Zara, par. 7) (fig. 2). The nude sculptures, which appear together in the video sleeping in the same large bed, also have the animatronic capability to heave as if breathing, and thus seem to hover in the uncanny valley between life and death, subject and object. Yet, if anything, West seems less interested in convincing spectators of the sculptures' animacy and lifelikeness than he does in insisting on their durability as objects. This interest in the object's condition is especially underlined in West's decision to later exhibit the sculptures as an installation at the Blum & Poe gallery in Los Angeles (Zara, pars.1-2). While the sculptures commissioned for *Famous* certainly comment on the extension of contemporary celebrity culture caused by social media and function as a type of wish fulfillment that literalizes each celebrity's iconic status, a photograph circulated by the media during the summer of 2016 underscores the project's grandiosity and unabashed narcissism. Similar to Wise's *Void-of-course Probiotic Promise*, the photo of Kim Kardashian-West



Figure 2. Kanye West and DONDA, Installation View, *Famous Sculptures*. Blum & Poe Gallery, Los Angeles, 2016.

leaning over the sculpture of her likeness in admiration recalls Caravaggio's *Narcissus* and underscores what Lacan's mirror-stage only intimates; it shows that narcissism should likely spread with the proliferation of self-reflective media in selfie culture, which not only produce but also further sustain the self as an external object for contemplation (fig. 3).

In *The Democracy of Objects*, Levi Bryant seems convinced that rejecting correlationism and disavowing human exceptionalism is a strong enough gesture to escape accusations of narcissism. However, as psychoanalytic theory, and particularly Lacan's mirror stage proves, narcissism, like OOP more generally, is preoccupied with the image (*imago*) of the subject as an object. Tellingly, Harman's concept of allure prioritizes the object's relation to itself as the aesthetic instance par excellence, which is also the moment of the object's existence that the philosopher most effusively imagines. According to Harman, the aesthetic instance of allure is the object-state in which, once removed from the controlling perception of any other external real object, the sensuous qualities of an object begin to orbit around their own



Figure 3. Kim Kardashian-West visits *Famous* Installation. Blum & Poe Gallery, Los Angeles, 2016.

withdrawn real object and in the process become charged with its essence (103-04). While Harman's choice of the word *allure* may be suggestive enough of the privilege that he grants to this instance of self-relation, it seems worth quoting him at length to further illustrate this point:

A real object and sensual qualities will meet only when *fused*. In such cases the sensual qualities are stripped from their current sensual overlord and appear to orbit a withdrawn *real* object, an invisible sun bending them to its will. The very invisibility of the object makes it impossible to compress the object together with its sensual qualities into a bland purée, as often happens in boring everyday experience. This fusion occurs for example in artworks of every sort ... Instead of the direct sort of contact that we have with sensual objects, there is an allusion to the silent object in the depths that becomes vaguely fused with its legion of sensual qualities. As a general term for the fusion of withdrawn real objects with accessible surface qualities, we can use the term *allure*. (103-04)

As this pivotal passage of *The Quadruple Object* illustrates, the self-relation, or the event of allure, is privileged as quintessentially aesthetic in Harman's ontology. However, as shown by psychoanalysis or Ovid's myth, narcissism is always already aesthetic. Befitting to today's selfie culture, Harman's concept of allure points to the need to better define and describe the otherwise undertheorized aesthetics of the narcissistic instance or the self-relation. In so doing, OOP and particularly Harman's concept of allure are useful to cognitively map and conceptually refine the stakes of today's selfie culture.

As a result of the proliferation of self-reflective digital technologies in the increasingly visual social media culture of post-Web 2.0, the subject in today's selfie culture may be increasingly object-oriented. However, the libidinal object of preference remains the self. In light of this conjunction, OOP's emergence in blogs and its status as a digitally native philosophy seem crucial (Kotsko 35-36). In her critical media theory of blogging, Jodi Dean ascribes an inherent narcissism to blogging and notes it as a precedent for later largely image-based social media practices of which I would add the selfie as a most climactic development. Dean not only observes that blogs promise, reward, and traffic in "the unique production of singular bloggers" but also comments on the narcissistic feedback loop of the blog, which may be less addressed to an audience than to a blogger's ego (64). Similar to other social media technologies that followed, the ostensible social networking of the blog functions as a mask for a more selfish satisfaction, in which likes, shares, and comments on blogs and other social media

sites have less value as the marks of external interaction than as indicators of an internal surplus value. Recalling the trivial details of the day-to-day that often clutter any given blog entry, it is worthwhile to note how often the objects utilized as examples in OOP intentionally underwhelm readers. While this tendency is seemingly methodical in order to emphasize the radical flatness proposed by OOP, it is also noteworthy that OOP's exemplary objects—Bryant's "beloved" blue coffee mug or his cats, Harman's dream or Bogost's childhood—do not fall much further afield than the philosopher's arm's reach—a limited range not coincidentally akin to that necessary for narcissistic rumination before the mirror or likewise, the snapping of a selfie (Bryant 172).

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Within the academy, the claims of OOP are often taken as a provocation: greeted as radical, even ungrounded, but from the perspective of visual culture studies, they seem to be a natural conceptual extension of selfie culture. The theory of an object-oriented subject preached by OOP is, in other words, also actively produced by reflective digital media technologies. OOP and selfie culture both register a shift in the subject's relation to the object. While Slavoj Žižek insists that the essence of human experience is connoted by the hysterical question—what am I as object?—(79) one may doubt the universality of this analogy, or at least its characterization as hysterical, in an age in which experience is now saturated by self-reflective technologies and media forms that provide nearly constant opportunities to contemplate both the self and the subject as image and object. In his assessment of the emergence of the modern art movement of minimalism in the late 1960s, art historian and critic Michael Fried's essay "Art and Objecthood" registered a certain subjective shock in the experience of being among objects in a minimalist installation, which he described as a sort of confrontation and an affront (155). However, if selfie culture and OOP are any indication, the implication that the subject is itself an object seems today to have lost a good deal of its sting. While we indeed should continue to quarrel with the political and ethical implications of this thought, this essay has



intended to illustrate that thinking of an object-oriented subjectivity (as represented by OOP) is particularly salient in relation to contemporary visual culture. When self-reflective media, such as the selfie, are increasingly reaching a saturation point given, for example, the inclusion of facial-recognition technology on the iPhone X, it seems only logical that contemporary philosophy finds itself preoccupied with a narcissistic contemplation of the condition of our own objecthood.

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