

**Smartphones, social media and
the rise of the Ultra Narcissist - a case of Lacan's lament?**

**"I'll be your mirror,
Reflect what you are, in case you don't know".**

*Lyric from 'I'll be your mirror' sung by Nico.
From the album 'The Velvet Underground + Nico (Andy Warhol)'
1967 - Verve Records, New York.*

Contents

List of illustrations	3
Introduction	4
What is narcissism?	5
How do we define Ultra Narcissism?	6
Selfie or self portrait?	8
In conclusion	12
References and web sources	12
A personal note/addendum	12

List of illustrations

Figure 1 - 'Untitled' Cindy Sherman, undated Instagram post on @cindysherman (official)

Figure 2 - 'A dream in green' Juno Calypso, 2015.

A brief anecdote_(this really happened). *Some time ago, travelling on a train to London from Oxford, I shared a near-empty carriage with a young woman, perhaps in her mid-twenties, immaculately dressed and beautifully made up (please note - the gender, colour and age of this person is not of importance, I mention it simply as a statement of fact to better describe the scene). The duration of the journey on that day was 1hr 4mins and she spent the **entire** time photographing herself, taking 'selfies' on her smartphone, checking the image and re-photographing herself, over and over again; so totally engrossed was she in this 'exclusive' activity that I was able to watch with impunity ... and wonder ...*

Introduction.

Ever since humans found ways to depict themselves graphically in cave paintings and drawings they have, literally, *exposed* a desire to visually self-examine and subsequently communicate these images to others in as public a way as possible. This desire has been explored, exploited and to some degree sated, over millennia, by artists producing self-portraits in all media and materials contemporarily available to them; whether that be fire-produced charcoal and natural dyes on cave walls, the earliest of which are now widely believed to be found in Indonesia (not Europe as previously understood) these are beautifully preserved handprints discovered on a cave wall, creating a very direct and pure self portrait, dating back around 40,000 years, 'There was some idea that early Europeans were more aware of themselves and their surroundings. Now we can say that's not true.' (Aubert et al, 2014: 223–227); or more recently through traditional paints, pencils and other media on papers and canvases to the emergence of (chemical) photography in the late 19th century and, naturally, digital in today's computer-led environment.

However, where this self-expression, introspection and subsequent publication and dissemination of these most personal and (often more recently) *intimate* of images has formerly been the preserve of the privileged professional or working artist; the ability to share one's image with the *entire* (online) world is now constantly and, perhaps most pertinently, *conveniently* available to anyone with a smartphone and an internet connection; images can be made and immediately distributed, globally, in barely more than the operational shutter duration of a traditional camera. The *relative* affordability of this technology has provided those possessing a strong narcissistic tendency with all the tools necessary to fulfil their wildest and most

confessional of fantasies and the world is then free to consume them with as much voyeuristic avarice as it wishes.

This essay will discuss narcissism in general, the emergence of Ultra Narcissism on the web and investigate two notable contemporary artists exploiting this ego-ridden digital space to interesting and often very confessional effect; the most well known probably being American artist Cindy Sherman with her relatively recent Instagram account¹, and a younger British artist I have also been researching, Juno Calypso, who grew up with digital media rather than transitioned from chemical photography.

What is Narcissism?

In the Narcissus and Echo story, from ancient Greek mythology, Echo falls in love with Narcissus, however when Narcissus happens upon a pool of water in the woodland and sees his own reflection in the stilled and tranquil surface he becomes transfixed with his self-image, staring at his own glory to the exclusion of all around (including the beautiful Echo) until he dies, quite literally, in love with his own image, whereupon the vernal ubiquitous and eponymous yellow flower bloomed in remembrance on the banks of the lake.

Narcissism or Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is a recognised pathophysiological personality disorder and was first proffered as a theory in psychoanalytic practice by Sigmund Freud in his essay '*On Narcissism*' (Freud, 1914). Narcissists traditionally exhibit certain well-documented and medically-accepted psychological traits such as 'an expectation of special treatment', 'an insatiable appetite for the attention of others' and 'extreme sensitivity and a tendency to be easily hurt and to feel rejected with little provocation'; and perhaps the most damaging of all being the resulting 'difficulty in forming and maintaining meaningful relationships'.

There are widely understood to be four psychologically-classifiable subtypes of Narcissistic Personality Disorder: '*Unprincipled Narcissist*' - exploitative, fraudulent and deceptive, '*Amorous*

¹ Sherman created an 'official' @cindysherman instagram feed in August 2017 but has since never made any comment on the work in public

Narcissist' - attention seeking with a strong emphasis on gaining affection for its own sake, *'Compensatory Narcissist*' - aims to improve social standing by using passive-aggressive strategies and the *'Elitist Narcissist*' - having a supreme belief in one's own superiority (Soeiro: 2019); to which I feel today we can confidently add the new term I have created to categorise this new breed of Smartphone-enabled compulsive selfie-takers - enter, the *'Ultra Narcissist*'.

How do we define *'Ultra Narcissism*' and what differentiates the Narcissist from the *Ultra Narcissist*?

Jacques Lacan, French psychiatrist and psychoanalyst (1901 - 1981) and often called the most controversial psychoanalyst since Sigmund Freud found, after extensive research into the *mirror stage*², the moment in the development of human babies when they exhibit the ability to recognise their own specular image at around six months of age. Lacan posited the notion that this was more than simple 'recognition' of 'self' but in fact far more significant, proposing as he did that this moment of visual self-awareness was 'formative of the function of the *I* or *ego* as revealed in psychoanalytic experience' and therefore 'formed part of the permanent structure of (one's) subjectivity'. He concluded that In 'the imaginary order', the subject's own image permanently catches and captivates the subject in a way that 'typifies an essential libidinal (sexual) relationship with the body-image' (Lacan: 1949, 1-8) or put more simply, for some this formative moment could just be the start of a very beautiful relationship.

Since the global proliferation of what has become the now ubiquitous and 'affordable' smartphone technology, coupled with near-global, fast, internet connectivity and the complete acceptance of social media platforms such as (for example) Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat to infiltrate our daily lives, the Ultra Narcissist has risen, and emerged smiling, preening and pouting into the digital gaze. It is my belief the Ultra Narcissists have always been with us in society, and that *these people were the babies* Lacan observed showing more than the normal understanding and recognition of self in the 'mirror stage' work and exhibiting reactions more akin

² A phrase originally coined by Lacan as 'Stade du miroir' (French) to explain his theory relating to the responses of infants to their mirror image.

to love and obsession with their specular image; it's simply that they have just, often literally, *revealed themselves* using this recent technology.

This new breed of digitally-empowered *Ultra Narcissist* takes all of the normally understood narcissistic behaviours a stage further by not just wanting to gaze upon themselves, and being satisfied with the specular reciprocation, in perhaps some kind of private sexual and masturbatory appreciation, but rather now desiring to share and exhibit these images with whomsoever they can, *anyone*, making their images freely available to all who wish to look; in online terms, their desired, indeed *craved for* and unmediated audience is the whole world.

It is this extra dimension of the *Ultra Narcissist's* behavioural traits, of the desire to *be looked at*, to exhibit (themselves) to receive comment from others as much as to singularly look at oneself with an inquisitive and enquiring eye as the traditional artist would with the self portrait; it is this addition of the truly and unapologetically-sought exhibitionistic element to the behaviour that sets the *Ultra Narcissist* apart from the *traditional Narcissist*; "Look at me, me, me!".

Selfie or self-portrait?

24 Billion selfies were uploaded to Google servers in 2018³

The question '*Selfie or self portrait?*' becomes intrinsically important to this brief discourse and investigation into the influence technology has had on *the way we see ourselves* and equally, or possibly more importantly, how we want *to be seen by others* at the decisive moment we decide to put these images to the exterior, to let them free; free to be consumed, copied, altered perhaps and disseminated maybe a million times over. This differs dramatically from professional artists creating self-portraits who historically share these images in the codified and controlled gallery space where the expectation from those who view is to extrapolate some kind of message or insight into the artist's psyche, their state of mind, their motivation; what was the intention of the artist in exposing themselves to such scrutiny and offering themselves to such open

³ Source Google 2019

interpretation? What is the artist trying to tell us? For surely these are the thoughts that would be considered by the artist themselves when making these self portraits. These artists' self portraits also often utilise their own visual metaphoric language offering further insight through inclusion of props and imagery deliberately placed to give clues as to their character or motive or desire; a depth of meaning is often to be found below the varnished sheen of the canvas.

However in many ways there is a comparability to be observed in the construction of digital online selfies taken by the non-artist; perhaps not so tutored, the exponents are also trying to tell us something about their lives or their character; often, it has to be noted, the direction and force of narrative is usually firmly pointed towards images of success, beauty and wealth in an open and conspicuous display that is designed to communicate how wonderful their lives are; are we supposed to feel envious?

So, one could argue that there are indeed similarities of conception and production of these amateur digital selfies but where the two disciplines part company is clearly in intent, purpose and dissemination. The artist makes a self portrait to find out more about *themselves* and then shares this with the viewer; whereas the fanatical selfie taker usually produces a selfie to *tell us* how wonderful they are.

One artist who has moved into this online world to examine the issues it raises regarding our own image and relation to self is Cindy Sherman (American b.1954). Sherman became widely known for her manifold series of (chemical) photographic self-portraits in which she often assumed characters in very direct and informed replications of cinematic settings from Hollywood movies, making her photographs more artifice and fiction than self-portrait; as Sherman has often proclaimed "I feel I'm anonymous in my work. When I look at the pictures, I never see myself; they aren't self-portraits. Sometimes I disappear." (Sherman, interview quote 2010) - however in view of her more recent work, disseminated purely online via her Instagram feed, this quote has started to feel a little disingenuous as, in her Instagram work, she has now been addressing these very issues I have been examining in this text. Instead of creating in the style of her more well known 'character portraits' she is using her personal Instagram account to exploit the immediacy of the

digital medium and its myriad tools of alteration to make herself almost unrecognisable and



always in a most unflattering, unglamorous way; distorted, ugly, ageing.

Fig.1 "Untitled" Cindy Sherman, undated Instagram post on @cindysherman (official)

These pictures are diametric subversions of the norm of *selfie language*; whereas the goal of the Ultra Narcissists is to create their image as god/dess-like as possible, to push the limits of digital enhancement to create a physically impossible unreality that suits their internal narrative, feeds their narcissistic desires and sates their personal ambition to make themselves as desirable as possible: and to then share with whomever wants to look.

Juno Calypso (British b.1989), on the other hand, as a contemporary artist working purely in digital media, has a far more recent and millennial take on the use of this confessional medium and explores more directly the ways that narcissists of all hues are using this technology. Calypso does this in a most intimate way by putting herself into imaginary, dramatic psycho-scenarios in *real* locations, often playing out a fantasy that is alluded to in some, but not all, titles.



Fig.2 'A dream in green' Juno Calypso, 2015.

A work of still images and video entitled 'Honeymoon' would on the face of it sound like a straightforward concept except that in Calypso's case here we see her in extremely intimate poses in a hotel location setting and she is totally alone; there is no partner, she is the only character in the work revelling, and revealing, in her very own fantasy narcissistic honeymoon. She appears to be saying to us this is actually about her relationship with herself and her own image and nothing to do with anyone else; so why is she showing us this all so graphically? In many of the images she is naked or very deliberately erotically dressed in see-through garments and some in poses clearly designed to provoke thoughts of total self-adoration and masturbation, particularly in front of walls of mirrors. Is she using the medium to explore her very own fantasies or, by producing the very images that the Ultra Narcissist would consider making, is she simply turning the mirror on them?

In conclusion.

The fundamental question posed by this text '*Has technology enabled the rise of the Ultra Narcissist?*' is an interesting one and I think the answer has to be a straight and unequivocal 'yes'.

The selfie is now well and true culturally-embedded worldwide and here to stay and there will always be those who take their own narcissism just *a little bit further* and now anyone with the requisite tools (smartphone) and necessary connections can make and distribute images with impunity, sending these self-versions out into the digital ether; hoping to hear back from their own digital Echo?

A personal note/addendum.

I have long been fascinated with this topic and endlessly interested in the way non-artists use this technology so freely and easily. On a wider issue I have for some time been working on creating a body of work based around my research and findings into the proliferation of the narcissism in contemporary culture and plan to develop my practice to include some of this work in my final MFA degree show.

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