"Here's Looking at You": A Theory of the Self and Its Image

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"Everyone has three lives: a private life, a public life and a secret life."

Gabriel Garcia Marquez

"Anyone turning biographer commits himself to lies, to concealment, to hypocrisy, to flattery, and even to hiding his own lack of understanding, for biographical truth is not to be had, and even if it were, it couldn't be used. Truth is unobtainable…"

Sigmund Freud

In interiore homine habitat veritas (truth resides within the person)

St. Augustine

The Image and Our Selves

There is a black and white photograph of my late father (as a young man in his 30s), myself and my brother (as children), which I have propped up on my desk. The photo originally rested in the obscurity of an album or an envelope stuffed with family photos. When my father passed away I appropriated that particular photo to remind me of him. It was a form of homage. It also came to symbolize for me his youthful male virility (he is in swimming trunks) rather than his aging and dying, which I had experienced directly. I have no visual memories of him as the youthful father captured in the photograph. The photo carries so many nuances and interpretations for me that every time I look at it, it says something that raises an emotional reaction within me. It also signifies the power of memory, of personal history, and the emotional baggage that we all carry in our deepest selves.

The word "self" appears in Old and Middle English, having been adopted from the Danish term "zelf" and the German "selb." It can be a simple reference to an embodied individual or to that person's consciousness or to something even more general, such as the idea of "selfhood." I like the word's elasticity and plurality of meanings, all relating to an individual human being. One can see this in its wide use as a prefix to form numerous words from "self-esteem" to "self-interest." For the purpose of this essay I define the self as one's sense of personal identity, whether applied to oneself or to others. The idea of the self is a response to the question "who am I" or "who are you?"

When I speak of our "deepest selves" and the emotional baggage that the self carries I am referring to the complex response that we have to images that represent people with whom we have a relationship. In the case of the photo of my father, my brother, and myself the image awakens the essential history of our lives together. I am filled with memories and feelings about them and how I related and relate to them. Because the self as a concept refers to both a physical presence and a consciousness it works well in relationship to images of people. In the image the self is represented through a face, clothing, or a location that reflects "who we are." Because we are aware of our own representations and how much we have invested in our images we read the image of others in a similar way. In this essay I try to explain how images of ourselves and of others awaken a sense of selfhood in the viewer. Why do images have this power to make us self-aware and where does that power comes from? I also want to understand how our relationship to these images goes about constructing a certain reading of the self in the image and the relationship of the self that we have constructed to the actual person it represents.

Understanding the relationship between the self and images begins with the importance of representations in human culture, in particular, images of human beings. My early attraction to

biographical images comes from my origin as a dis-inherited and conflicted self. Coming from a refugee family in which physical property and family images were located in whatever could be carried in a suitcase or a backpack, I learned to be inordinately fond of small, portable, and highly personal objects like photographs, jewellery, or diaries. Each carried a story that gave substance to the past, which was lacking in concreteness because there were no flesh-and-blood relations like grandparents or tangible structures like an ancestral home or piece of land. The stories associated with each object made them precious. I was drawn to the stories suggested by each biographical image rather than their artistic merit. The story mattered; it made the image of value to me.

While the story added to the power of the image, the knowledge that I as a viewer had of the image was always limited. I never had a full knowledge of what the image was about and often, such as the one of my father, my brother and myself, I did not even know who took the photograph or when. The identity of the creator of the image, the cultural values (both specific and general) out of which the image is created, the relationship of the creator to the subject of the image, and finally the history of the image to its present viewing/understanding influence our interpretation of it. The viewer's lack of full knowledge of the person that is being represented makes the image a partial construct of that person's self. Just as a child has a very narrow view of one's parent, so too, a photograph of that parent at a particular moment and in a particular place or situation is a very narrow representation of that person. I believe that exploring images of ourselves and of images of others whom we know in one way or another ought to result in a better sense of who we are. By interpreting these images we reveal something of ourselves.

Every biographical image is an interpretation (its own truth) that also gives rise to interpretations (other truths). The creator of the image creates an initial interpretation of the self in making the image. A later viewer then creates an interpretation of that image of their own accord and also makes a judgement about the initial interpretation created by the image-maker. This emphasis on interpretation and its equation with truth refers to the view of truth presented by Augustine—that it is within us. For example, the subject of the image may have desired a certain effect in the representation, then the creator of the image was also seeking to make a certain interpretation of the self in the image, and finally there is the later viewer who provides further interpretations of both the subject and the creator, as well as judging the medium/technique/style of the image because the medium used, the technique that is applied and the artistic style also have agency in creating interpretation.

Even when dealing with an autobiographical image, an artist may have desired to say one thing when creating it, achieved something else that pleased him or her, and now on reflection years later sees something altogether different because s/he is no longer the person or self that created the image long ago and the medium/technique/style is viewed in a different way. Engagement with an image whether as a subject, a creator or a viewer, occurs between numerous selves at different historical moments and locales. It is a hermeneutic act encompassing the image-maker, the subject, the image created, the medium/technique/style used and its status for

the viewer. This means that there are at least four distinct selves involved: the self of the person who is being represented; the self in the image; the self of its creator; and the self of the viewer. All four selves are framed by the cultures in which they exist and the cultural grammars generated by those cultures. Cultural grammars are the public (and sometimes private) discourses about human identities and their attributes that exist in a particular society at a particular historical period.

Viewing generates a dialogue with the image. This constitutes the construction of a personal truth that is ordinarily expressed in thoughts one has, in words spoken to others about the image, or in a written text. Because each person creates their own sense of truth that person needs to know who they are in order to understand their own interpretation. However, self-knowledge is limited and so limits the truth I am offering. It also reminds us that we are the interpreters/creators of the self we see before us. Normally, a text embodies concealments authored by both the creator of the image and the interpreter of the image. Why concealments? Because the creator of the image and the interpreter/viewer bring both conscious and unconscious elements into the interpretation. The unconscious elements are not necessarily known and yet they have agency. Only when we bring self-consciousness to what was formerly unconscious can some of these hidden aspects be revealed. All of this relates to the "opacity of the self", which is a condition faced by those trying to gain insight into the selves of others and also a condition faced when the self is seeking insight into itself.[1] The opacity of the self is a result of each of the four selves involved in the hermeneutic act bringing both conscious and unconscious elements to bear. The way these eight factors (4 selves x 2 levels of their psyches) may interact with each other and with the medium/technique/style of the image makes for a complex exercise.

We tend to feel that our true identity is hidden from others and also in an image and that may be the way we want it. The hiding is a direct result of our playing social roles demanded by our culture or any subcultures we belong to. In the case of images or representations the hiding also comes from the limits associated with the intentionality of the creator and with our own need for hiding our true selves. Our hiding of what we consider to be our true selves serves as a rampart against the reading of others. We might be hiding an exalted view of our public roles that we secretly harbour or some other aspect that is deeply personal and that we do not wish to reveal. It is also true that we ourselves are not aware of certain aspects of our identity, that we need the views of others to round out our own interpretation. As agents in the world we are constantly interacting with others and this interaction produces numerous interpretations to which we are not privileged. Freud warns that our own truth about ourselves (and by extension our truth about others) is a truth based on hypocrisy, self-flattery, survival instincts, and a lack of understanding. I am drawn to the lies, the hypocrisy, the flattery, and the unspoken elements that visual images of the self embody. And yet the image can be a portal to a fuller understanding of other selves and myself. The negative description that Freud uses about the biographical and the autobiographical may seem harsh but it is based on his view that illusion and delusion are

integral to what passes as truth. I agree. For three decades I have been writing books of essays, which have a strong autobiographical element and so I am fully aware of the game I have played in self-representation. I "read" my texts as a process of creating a self for public consumption that revealed very little of my "true" self. When I wrote about myself (illustrated with images) in my essays I interpreted my narrative as more a concealment than a revelation. By clothing myself in a certain public persona that I myself had created I was in control of my public image. I worked to create an understanding that would make sense to the reader. Yes, it was personal, but it was a narrative constrained by the public domain, whose expectations I was painfully aware of. The game that I played as I wrote those essays was one of personal preservation and the conscious desire to express literary prowess. These goals resulted in self-hiding.

The meaning of a particular painting or a particular photograph varies considerably for historic, cultural, and social reasons. Not only did the creator of the painting and the creator of the photograph speak in their respective creative acts out of the values that they carried in their own minds and had been informed by their world, but the values of a later viewer will be so different from that of the creator and her time that they constitute an alien perspective. Likewise, the role of the medium in framing a response should not be underestimated. How I view the same image when it appears as a photograph in a book or in a museum is different. Not only is the photo itself a different medium but also the significance of the book and its meaning to me affects my response. Also my situation as a visitor to a museum is completely different from the myriad of situations and spaces that I may inhabit as I see the image in the book. Likewise what the photographer has done in the photograph to represent the original image may be quite innovative or iconoclastic, so that my direct personal viewing of the image in the museum will not be comparable to what the photograph of the image says to me. In the case of the book I will react differently to seeing the photograph at some other time because I may be in another mood or possess a different attitude from my previous reading of it. The meaning I attribute to the image is always shifting based on who I am in the moment of viewing, the nature and location of the artefact, what I may have learned about it since last seeing it, and finally, the privacy or sociality of the moment of interpretation. Only when I ground myself in a more long term sense of who I am and why I respond as I do, can I understand why my reading is what it is at that point. Searching for the thread in the continuum of my responses provides me with a stronger sense of myself.

Viewing the visual pushes me to develop different strategies of engagement and to seek within myself some basis for authenticity. While Freud warns us off biographical statements as a definite falsehood, I see the same falsification of the self in the image as in the text. This understanding is rooted in my strong sense of the artificiality of social roles. Because of this awareness I have a desire to search out the truth of a person and that person's life. I sense that both the people I meet and their images are full of convention and style. I do not accept the self that is represented. When I think about any person in an image I am creating a self for that person. Sometimes it is my experience of the flesh and blood person behind the image that

matters, and sometimes it is my engagement with the creators of the image and the culture in which they operated that is central. When I engage with a representation of someone I immediately feel I am dealing with intermediary factors and that my directness is being deflected.

Because the same image can appear in various formats and media the process of re-creation only adds more layers to the hermeneutic fabric. If the reader is made aware of the how a biographical image is re-used, re-contextualized, and re-interpreted through the eyes of commentators, either through personal knowledge or through the information in a text this awareness reveals the pre-occupations, obsessions, and prejudices of the agent, who initiated the narrative. The writer and intellectual, Alberto Manguel, described the story-telling energy of images in the following way:

> When we read pictures—in fact, images of any kind, whether painted, sculpted, photographed, built or performed—we bring to them the temporary quality of narrative. We extend that which is limited by a frame to a before and an after, and through the craft of telling stories...we lend the immutable picture an infinite and inexhaustible life...the elements of our response...are determined...by a vast range of circumstances, private and social, casual and obligatory. *We construct our story* [italics mine] through echoes in other stories, through the illusion of self-reflection, through technical and historical knowledge, through gossip, reverie, prejudice, illumination, scruples, ingenuity, compassion, wit.2

The above quote from his introductory chapter to *Reading Pictures* titled "The Common Viewer: The Image as Story" confirms that the only truth an image or its interpretation can reveal are subjective truths, unless of course, one wants to limit one's observations to how an image reveals the costuming, hair styles, or weaponry of a particular historical period. The more someone in dialogue with an image is open about their autobiographical self the fuller and more authentic is the resulting text. The interaction between "who-am-I" and the "who" of the biographical image is the nexus of the relationship I am exploring. It is a messy, multi-faceted relationship. In creating a self for the imaged person we create a self for ourselves. The audience for whom the image was created and the pose of the subject of the image were meant to project certain characteristics that were of value and current in that society at that time. But our reading of the image is constrained by our own social values. The image carries the intentionality of its creator, the historical circumstances of its creation, the passage of cultural time, and the self of a current viewer which is distinct for every viewer. To break this hermeneutic chain the viewer of an image needs to engage with their own self. Only then will our interpretative role become fully self-conscious. Without that self-engagement one is creating an interpretation where theory or literary conventions or even self-aggrandizements of various kinds, are the main projection of our thoughts. By adding an explanation of one's own self in the interpretation of an image we acknowledge our culturally circumscribed worldview. My own personal attachments, psychologically-based predilections, desires, and neuroses configure my rational interpretation

based on whatever level of knowledge I have accumulated. The image is reflection of my reflections on the image.

The Self

All selves are mediated when they are constructed as images, but some selves are more mediated than others or more constructed in their representation. Some imaged selves are highly artificial (commerce); other selves are fluid and ambivalent (art); and still other selves are created within a framework of obvious, comforting stereotypes common in a culture (journalism). The more mediated a self is (the medium dominates the image as in television commercials or on billboards) the less "real" the self becomes. An example of this unreality may be found in an advertisement for hair shampoo in which a well-known actress lends credence to the claims for the product by displaying an amazing head of flowing hair, flouncing in slow-motion, which the viewer has never seen even in the most made-up versions of her film roles. Her "self" of the ad does not compare to the "self" of her roles or her public persona. What matters is the product endorsement by a successful, beautiful woman with hair that moves with special effects—fantasy hair.

The nature of public (an ad) and even private (family snapshot) representation involves a conscious repackaging and positioning of the self in a discourse determined by others. In contrast to representation and image, when we present our self in the world, that self is existentially embodied in the moment, in a place and in a situation. It quickly disappears because it is a lived experience, while representation continues beyond the direct moment of creation. It lives on and on as the unchanging face of the actor in an unchanging film, while the human subject that is that self has changed, evolved and adapted to endless new presentations. We present ourselves in the real world, but we represent ourselves in a mediated one. The "re" in represent is a curious form of the present or presentation. The image is present to the viewer in real time, making it present, but it displays a self in it that is no longer real in the present. The image offers us an illusion of presence.

The self exists normally on three major levels. On the conscious level there is the **persona** of the self, which is associated primarily with our formal or occupational roles in life. The persona of the doctor, for example, dictates certain public requirements of behaviour and attitude. The **personality** of that self-same doctor is an individual variant that is expressed in social relationships with others. The rigid image of the persona cast by a culture, its language, and historical period is softened by the diversity of personalities that reflect a wide range of emotional being. But even more individual and emotional is the **person.** The person tends to be the hidden self that engages in an inner dialogue with its personality and its persona. This inner dialogue produces a reading of the self that differs from both the readings offered by the persona and the personality because neither of these two levels of the self is meant to express the depths

of individual motivation, history, and trauma found inside a person. While the persona and personality aspects of the self exist in public and social domains, the hidden, private dimension of the self does not. This means that readings of the person, as compared to personas and personalities, involve an inward-looking eye that is looking for elements beyond public and social discourse about someone. Because the personal self is meant to be hidden or secret, it is very difficult to discover. The personal aspect of the self, as compared to its persona and personality aspects, is necessary to psychological well-being. We cannot operate in the world without having a secret self. If we had no secret and fantasy selves our own identity would be formed completely by others and by society. We would be puppets of social pressure.

To use classic psychological Freudian categories one can say that the persona is the superego, the rational, planned self which is most often an expression of one's livelihood or public identity and is associated with income and the marketplace. The personality is associated with social relations and the emotional energy that these relations require. The personality can be thought of as the ego. The person is a curious mixture of the personal and collective unconsciousness. One's personhood resists the demands of one's public persona and chaffs against the limitations of one's social personality. It is a form of the id that is always "underneath" one's persona and one's personality. This hidden self seldom sees the light of day because it is constructed in secret and meant to be hidden. If it becomes exposed it is turned into either a persona (what a diarist does) or a personality (what an egotist represents). The reason that an "exposed" self must be either a persona or a personality comes from the public nature of those two aspects. Whenever we learn some "truth" about a persona's person, we can only read it in public categories. In the process of exposing personal truths a movie star becomes tarnished; a regarded athlete a cheat; a noble figure becomes a psychological mess or a criminal. What is exposed enters the lexicon of common cultural types. In public and social discourse there can be no personhood, only labels commonly associated with roles and personality types. When the self reveals aspects of its person that are normally hidden it must contend with what the viewer brings to the image. When the personal becomes the subject of a dialogue with a viewer/reader it loses its inner quality and becomes part of the outer world. It is transformed into another aspect of the self. The self, because it is constructed by others as well as ourselves, is never really our own. It is a spectrum of identities, the majority of which are determined by the culture we live in and the people who interact with us. Even the avatar masks of digital gaming are meant to express our reading of "human" attributes that others, who are in the game, accept as a common conceptual currency.

There is a fourth aspect of the self that I term **personification**. This is the fantasy self that everyone projects for themselves. I wish I were this or that, like so-and-so. It is an otherness that we desire for ourselves but which we know we can never have. The fantasy self is about what we lack; it is a projection that we imagine for ourselves and it is a fantasy because it is unachievable. Personification can involve a different persona than the one we have, a different personality, and even a different person. It is the positing of an opposite to what we are or think we are. It can be

about new qualities or a total makeover. Personification in the self is closest to the personal aspects of the self since it is usually secret or hidden. It is not something easily shared because it can bring us into disrepute with others and undermine whatever public or social image that we have acquired or created.

The four aspects of the—persona, personality, person, and personification—work as two groups. The persona and personality are visible to others. The person and personification are invisible to others. They are closest to the repressed id and are suppressed from public view. The existence of these two grouping of our identity suggests a split or division in the self—one for others and another for ourselves. Because of the demands of public and social roles and the restraints that are placed on them, the self finds escape from these restrictions through this secret grouping. It is this inner self that gives meaning to our individuality and self-expression. Without it we would simply be characters in a socially determined drama without any content of our own. There could be more than four aspects of the self. I might talk about a subconscious self and a self that is dreamt. We can "see" and "hear" some version of ourselves that we identify as our self in a dream. The dream self is part of the continuation of the person and personification. They are not part of our daily consciousness and rational behaviour in the real world but they can inform our emotional life.

The divisions or components of the self (persona, personality, person, personification) generate portals to differing realities within the self, all of which are manifested in biographical images. Of course, the persona and the personality are most typically found in images. The person and personification are not easily imaged and are expressed primarily through symbolism that is attached to the image. I like to think of the four aspects of the self acting like billiard balls that strike each other, head in different directions, eventually re-uniting in the basket. This happens because the self is an integrating system, unifying these different gateways, which appear and disappear and then re-appear.

The Image

Historically images belonged to kings, emperors, various rulers, and deities. Whether in public fora, temples, or on coinage, their representation extended their power and importance. Likewise images of deities that are carved, painted, or drawn have existed throughout historical time, some being a form of reminder, while others were accorded powers of existence in their own right by which a created figure of the deity and the deity itself were not separated. The image created a presence for its viewers through its representation and was revered, venerated, or idolized until iconoclastic religious traditions like Judaism appeared that forbade religious representations. The entity, whether king or deity, is imaged in the medium of stone, ink, etc. The result is an elemental transfer in that the characteristics, whether realistic or stylized, of the deity are imaged into the material of the art (a living king becomes a piece of gold or a bronze).

Each image has a self that is conceived and framed by a certain understanding that can be read by an audience because the artist or artists who created that work were steeped in the same culture as their audience. But our reading of a Roman statue in a museum is different from a reading by a Roman audience of its day. Likewise a contemporary Italian's reading of that statue differs from that a contemporary Chinese. In our reading of the image what is important is not the referent that the historian seeks to evoke (the king whose image it is), but what is signified to us by the image. What is the significance of that ancient coin or statue to numerous and varied contemporary audiences? These audiences carry certain stories of that image in their minds and the stories change through the priorities of particular cultures, which discount certain aspects, while glorifying others. The story is most often our story which comingles the public and private. "What we see is the painting translated into our own experience" writes Alberto Manguel.3 And that experience is more than just some broad cultural-temporal context like Roman versus Italian; it also refers to the context in which the image is viewed. It could be a church, a museum, a desk, a fireplace mantel, a computer screen. Viewing can happen anywhere and that anywhere is a powerful influence on an individual's construction of the image's meaning .

I will illustrate this point with an example from my own experience. When I was going to an elementary public school in Canada in the 1950s the classroom was dominated by a picture of the then young Queen Elizabeth, which hung over the blackboard at the front of the classroom. It watched us from above the head of the teacher. When I later went to a parochial Catholic school the front of the classroom was dominated by a crucifix. Both images bespoke authority, loyalty, and public piety. Both oversaw our personas as students. The same picture of the Queen in an ethnic hall or the same crucifix above the altar in a church carried a different meaning. The self of each image, while being the same, shifted with the context in which they were viewed. The context was a determining factor, which moved the viewer's interpretations in different directions. In the classroom the Queen was a sign of Canada's British identity and civil authority, while in the ethnic hall the same standard photo signified the immigrant's loyalty to a new country. In the classroom the crucifix was a reminder of Catholic identity, while in the church the same crucifix had a sacred power and purpose.

What was and now is our relationship to that self that is represented? As soon as the image is created it becomes something "other" to us and so demands that we name it, read it, explain it to ourselves in some way. That explanation is my own explanation, even when based on the official explanations proffered by others. In the case of the classroom crucifix there was an interpretation offered by the nuns, but every student had her or his own understanding based on their personal history with the Church and religion. These individual interpretations are translations of the image's meaning that are equal to the original representation's act of translation. So each image is a translation made by the viewer of the image's meaning. One's own reading is based on any personal historical relationship to the image and its significance. Only when biography and autobiography enter the picture, as it were, does self-consciousness happen.

My persona, my personality, and even my person challenge each other over which interpretation is the more valid. Which aspect of myself becomes dominant depends on the image and my relationship to it. An image of someone else's home does not carry the same resonances as my own home does, nor does the image of a person with whom I have had close dealings mean the same to me as a stock publicity image of a celebrity icon. In all cases the meaning that I assign to the image changes over time. What my mother meant to me at age five is different from what she meant to me at age fifty-five. If I write about an image in a way that reflects my public persona that writing will be different from my writing about the same image in which my personality is reflected. It is simply a choice of which part of the self that I want to express.

The revealing of the image that the text attempts is more a revelation of the author of the text than it is of the image itself, and that revelation is more concealment than revelation. The author of the text begins as a kind of archaeologist eagerly seeking to dig up the authentic person of the imaged/imagined self contained in the image, but as the difficulty of that project becomes obvious, there is a natural inclination to move upward toward the surface level of personality, which is a bit easier to access by drawing on eyewitness accounts or other referential texts, but the inevitable contractions in these narratives of the other push the author to finally embrace the well-lit field of the public persona, where there is a narrative footing established by "canonical" accounts, whether they be those of experts or family members. ~~.~~How much easier it is to describe the recorded achievements of a king or a scientist than to delve into their "real" personhood. Besides, isn't the public role and actions of a person the only thing that matters because that is what made an impact on others? I can challenge that by saying that the secret lives and inclinations of these figures might very well be influential on their actions. An ancient example of this is that of the Byzantine historian Procopius, who wrote several official histories of the reign of the Emperor Justinian, but then produced a secret history that was scandalous in its revelations. It can be argued that the private life of the emperor was a significant expression of himself and how he carried out his official role. The collisions of the public self and the private self and the social self that I referred to earlier as billiard balls in motion produce an overall image, which is fluid, mobile, contradictory, and even uncertain. However, what is emphasized in one narrative or another is determined by the intent of the narrator. As the philosopher Paul Ricoeur stated in *Memory, History, and Forgetting*, "the being of the past can be said in many ways." 4 While the image remains unaltered, every saying about it is an alteration.

The profound complexity of the dialogue between object and consciousness, between representation and translation can be sketched in the following list of possible topics:

image and the current moment

image and its intended purpose

image and the skilfulness of its creator

image and its later reception

image and its distortion

image and recollection

image between past and present

image as medium

and so on.

The list is like a tree with innumerable branches on which the observer can stand and so connect to the main trunk, which is the image itself. Every branch offers a slightly different perspective. But the main linkage between the audience and the image is the audience's imagination. The *idem* (idea) that it conjures up about the image is a narration that recreates the image, giving it a new life. It bestows living qualities, such as emotion and personality onto the image, claiming "to see" them in the image. For example a publicity shot of a famous actor, which appears on the cover of a journal viewed by multitudes, is readily recognised by that audience as a pose, as a false representation, as complete persona. While some will be pleased to have this iconicity reaffirmed by the image, there are others who have a yearning for something more "real", something closer to a "true" personality, if not an insight into the person. That is why there is such a market for "candid" or "action" shots of celebrities caught unawares while carrying on their normal, non-persona lives. The one-dimensionality of most personas gives rise to revelations, exposés, tell-all memoirs, etc. Drawing on our own experience of our own lives and how we conduct them, we know that the self is least available in the persona because it is the most circumscribed by public values. It is primarily about role-playing. But even the revelations of one's life beyond one's persona are such that they often re-inforce the persona. Why? Because we who are trapped within the persona's boundaries want to read revelations that in some way re-inforce the persona—the bad boy, the star musician, the super athlete, etc. The narrator knows that and creates an appropriate narrative.

Personification and the Digital Self

If we ask the question of the self's relationship to its images we are asking how the persona, the personality, the person, and personification are or are not expressed in an image. There are real boundaries between the private, the social, and the public spheres, and the intended use of the image will be grounded in one or more of those spheres. But there is also a fourth boundary that has emerged as a cross-over of the other three boundaries. This is the

boundary of digital identity, which can be a "social" sphere when the images are meant to express one's personality to a social circle, or a public sphere, when the images are meant to express the gravitas of persona(e), or the private sphere when some form of intimacy is implied in the image. The "highest" form of digital identity is that of personification, when someone projects desires and illusions about oneself usually in response to cultural norms of attractiveness (beauty, virility, power) in order to adopt a false persona. The masking of one's self, in particular one's persona, by transforming oneself into another has always been part of costuming, disguise, and masks. Religious rituals and social rituals have often called for such adopted roles. Since so much of our public persona is a play or game in which we try to meet the demands of social or professional convention, it is not surprising that some choose to adopt radically different ones. In the digital universe, especially that of gaming, the fourth dimension moves from the masking of our own physical bodies to a complete makeover, including a new digital body of whatever gender, age, or colour. This dimension of the self exists beyond the three physical dimensions of privacy, sociability, and publicity because it is our own mental construct. And yet that mental construct is based on the other dimensions of the self—public, social, and private—which are culturally approved and now embodied in digital form. The fantasy self (personification) is a projection on the internet that is meant to fit whatever alternate reality it participates in, but the fantasy self is ordinarily most genuine when it also acknowledges the deficiencies in ourselves it is meant to correct or compensate for. The fantasy self is an unrealized or desired self, while the internet self is a form of realization, a pretending that fits with the pretending of others. The fantasy self is usually hidden from any form of social interaction, so when it does make its appearance in a digital universe, it is often meant only for those already in that universe, whose physical being is hidden like that of the players. Those who interact publically or socially with the physical human being probably know nothing of this alternate identity, which is why personification is to closely allied to the secret person.

The philosopher Jean Baudrillard is a leading theorist of images, who claims that in the digital world the simulated self is more real (hyper-real) than the physically embodied self. The image does not appear as a representation of the self the way it did in earlier media, when it was based on a real human being, but as a new digital manifestation that is intended to be entirely "unlike" the person manipulating it. Baudrillard created the term *simulacrum* to describe this entity. In the digital universe this image is a superficial persona, much like a contrived advertisement, but as this simulacrum acts in the game it comes to display the repressed aspects of the avatar master's personality and the hidden person embodied in the physical self. The role-playing behind the avatar is one that imitates our understanding of certain roles and actions in the embodied world, because the desires behind the fantasy self are framed by the social mores and public discourses of that world. A warrior acts this way, an athlete acts this way, and so on. The game is played out by using the known constructs of the social sphere that are then transferred to an imagined arena. The digital self is driven by what we lack. That is why we call it "a game" in which the imagined is primary, the way it is with children who, in playing, adopt numerous

identities beyond themselves. Yet those identities are based on stories, images, and identities that they view or learn about in their lives.

The digital self has expressions other than personification. The persona appears on sites like Linkedin, that promote one's professional accomplishments, and the personality appears on social networking sites like Facebook. And the person can appear on restricted sites that appeal to the hidden aspects of the self. In other words the digital self is made up of the four dimensions of the self. This does not mean that the digital self does not acquire aspects specific to a digital medium in the same way a photograph is different from a painting. Since cultures create expectations around different media that differentiate how we relate to them, the different platforms and technological expressions of the digital universe will affect how we read the images. But in general, because the digital world is humanly constructed it bears the imperatives of the embodied world. In the digital world the four dimensions of the self have the same dynamic relationship with each other as they do in the non-digital world of embodied, physical relationships. For example, the public sphere in the digital universe is most often an extension of the physical realm, such as online newspapers copying the format of their printed copies or online resumes are often copies of print versions. The public sphere has a great deal of influence on how we judge ourselves and others, while each individual's social realm is unique since it has certain relationships that others do not have. While our private worlds carry interior narratives constructed far from public or social arenas, these private worlds are often reactions to what the social and public spheres have imposed on us. That includes the fantasy self. The four areas of the public, social, private, and fantasy self co-exist in the digital world much in the same way as they co-exist in the physical universe with different audiences for each self. The question is how far the four spheres of the self in the digital universe, if they were assembled into one, would reveal a complete picture of that self. I suspect that something would always be held back because each individual posts their identity in various fora in a way that "fits" the parameters of that digital forum. There are limits everywhere in how we can represent ourselves and what information we post. The numerous subcultures that inhabit the real world and also the digital world create their own mores and codes of conduct that are meant to be emulated by those who identify with that subculture. Because we carry numerous identities any person has multiple personae that are acted out during the course of a lifetime or even a single day. One person can be a mother, a daughter, a therapist, a lover, a chef, a teacher, and a devotee during the course of a few hours. All these identities can be frozen individually in an image or an identity that comes to be viewed as our dominant or singular one.

Our Image as Other and the Narrative Flux

The image of a self, if it is our own, generates a sense of otherness to us because it is outside ourselves, so that one can say that all mediated selves (human images) are de facto an other even if they are of ourselves. Their non-changeability displaces time, meaning we have

gone beyond that image as soon as it is created, and so makes them "alien" to us, as does their being in another medium than our bodies makes them not us. Identifying these images as representatives of us gives them an ambassadorial role. We may have an intended message that the image is meant to embody, but we know that may not be the way it will be received. The representation of the self that appears in the image is then fixed, so that our coming across it later on displays how we were rather than are. Judgement immediately arises within us and the image is turned into a site where our attitudes, memories, and modes of assessment become active. This is the innate historicity of an image. Its agency is always previous to now and its representation of us only increases a sense of otherness because we have evolved beyond it. Because every human image has this quality of otherness we question autobiographical images. Is that me? Did I really look like that? These normal questionings of the image allow us to play with the representation and critique it and its agent by creating our own translation of it. This maintains the primacy and currency of our own agency in regard to self-images. The questioning begins with whatever knowledge we possess of the making of the image, whether meagre or full. From this seedbed of knowledge we build an understanding that is personal, historical, and communicable. But this understanding stands as only one possible meaning. While the image itself remains static, its observer is in flux and so is the observer's narrative. The narrative appropriates the image to itself, seeking to dominate the visual with story. Just as an archaeologist can bring an object to light, that object does not have a meaning until the archaeologist creates a narrative explanation of the object. The object and its text, while contradictory forms, are also intimate. They need each other.

The philosopher Paul Ricoeur talks about "the dialectic of representation" in which the image is a thesis or a presence, and its antithesis is the absence of the referent or what is being represented in the image, while the synthesis is our putting the two together in an interpretation.[5] The narration is a synthesis of an autobiographical image (myself as image), myself outside that image (me), and my interpretative narrative (the image as story). That interpretative narrative treats the image as a historical artefact trapped in time, as an object that we approach through our senses, and as a sign of a different self. Imagine a childhood photo or moving film image taken by a parent. It carries the intended narrative of the parent. When the child, now an adult, views the image it either accepts or rejects the intention of the parents, but is always aware of that outside intentionality. The dialectic of representation includes the now absent childhood self (image), the absent parent (creator) and one's current self (the viewer). The whole history of the child/adult's relationship with the parent(s) comes into play in the interpretative moment. As that relationship evolves and changes the interpretation also changes. This is its narrative flux.

The image, if it is not on constant display, is entombed in some place. Ricoeur calls it the "sepulchre" from which it is arisen and returned.[6] If an image is in constant display it is probably ignored most of the time, even though it was originally some sort of statement of its importance and meaning to its curator. It is also available as a statement to others who see it as a representation of our piety, our love, our taste, etc. These vestigial aspects are associated with the

persona we want to project to others or to ourselves...the devoted son, the loving spouse, the caring parent, the successful professional, etc. Our original attraction to and our ignoring of the image as we pass it day after day are representative of the range of relations we have with the image, which are mostly fleeting and cursory. We seldom dwell on any image for long. Its evocative power is one we prefer to pass over quickly.

The meeting of the self and its image becomes a kind of contest, where the static image that has no consciousness except that of its author and now its viewer engages in a slightly one-sided dialogue with our gaze. That static or moving image is engaging for us, otherwise we would not look at it or think about it. It has a power even though it is an inanimate object, a construction. It carries its own story as well as our "in-the-present" interpretation that we are searching to discover. That story, let's say it is a wedding photo in a bedroom, can be created daily if the viewer wishes, depending on the state of the marriage at that moment. That story can involve a public persona in regard to what one looked like on one's wedding day; a social persona in regard to any bridesmaids or groomsmen that may be in the photo and what may be the current relationship to any of them; a private thought about oneself or one's partner then and now; and finally a personification such as "I wish…''

According to John Berger and Jean Mohr the image is "...a meeting place..." where the interests of its creator, its viewers, and its users are contradictory.7 The result, they say, is an ambiguity produced by the temporal and spatial discontinuities that the situation of viewing an artefact produces.8 An image on a mantelpiece can be transferred to an album or a closet shelf and then re-hung in another space, perhaps more private, or relegated to an attic for a long time. The image as artefact has this mini-history of all its discontinuities, storages and displays, which only the user of the image knows. That history changes its meaning for the user. The range of emotions that come with viewing any images are based in our personal histories and those histories are fluid and malleable.

Becoming a spectator of oneself is fraught with danger. The danger arises because the image has been encoded from the start by the circumstances of its creation, but it also carries a disturbing anti-code that sets up a struggle between its dark (*obscura*) and its light (*lucida*) sides. The anti-code consists of the omissions that were made in order to create it. For example, if an image comes to be viewed as an unwarranted glorification of the person it refers to, the omissions in the image become amplified, where once they were hidden. We are constantly modifying our narratives about our self-image, awakening deep issues in our psyche that we prefer to avoid in the course of daily life. As our situation or circumstances change and as our self evolves we discard previous readings of our own image, if we can even remember them, in favour of the latest and the newest version. In this way we express who we are at that moment. We emphasis our aliveness rather than what is past.

In 2010 the venerable *New Yorker* magazine published a review of the Rolling Stones lead guitarist Keith Richards' autobiography.9 The review was illustrated with a full-page photo

of the bony-faced Richards with his signature cigarette in his mouth, dark sunglasses, and bare-chested with a snake's-head staff in the crook of his arm. His facial expression is standard cool. He is instantly recognisable in his stance as well as his visage. Underneath the photograph is a caption taken from his autobiography that reads, "Your persona...is like a ball and chain," Richards writes. "It's impossible not to end up being a parody of what you thought you were." By this comment he acknowledges the static nature of one's public persona when one becomes a celebrity and its tendency to disallow any other persona to emerge. He indicates how absurd it is to imagine that anyone is simply that singular, static image over a half-century of life. That statement juxtaposed with a representation of his persona as a rock musician is addressed to the reader of the magazine, to me as spectator. Here is the persona, it says, and here is what Keith Richards, himself, thinks of his persona—a parody. The manufactured persona comes from his own creation of the role, of the fans' attachment to an unchanging persona as something they want and desire, and from the commercial imperative that the star and his fans together produce through the agency of his publicity machine. The public self is a fantasy since he only plays that role on stage when he performs. In a 2016 documentary film titled "The Rolling Stones: Olé, Olé, Olé" about the rock group's South American tour, Keith Richards is presented (along with his fellow musicians) both on stage and off stage. There is a difference. No wonder he calls his stage persona a parody. His success as the lead guitarist of one of the iconic musical groups of the 20th century has turned the image of rebel into a successful brand that generates great wealth. Richards presents his autobiography as a counterbalance to the on-stage persona and its illusion of perpetual anti-establishmentarianism. His text is meant to be the antidote to the poison of celebrity fixation. It is supposed to offer a revelation of an individual humanity (but surely one that will not diminish his saleability and attraction to his fans). It is meant to bring forth aspects of the person beyond the superficial, but in the end it is a construction that is meant to make sense to the reader, who is aware of the iconic image and holds it dear. The documentary film achieves the very same end.

The fourfold nature of the self that I have described may seem too prescriptive to some. It is not meant to be exhaustive. It is simply a starting point, a schema on which can emerge a rich individuality for each image. For Keith Richards to experience the public persona he created as a parody of who he was means that he cannot escape the sense of entrapment that the public realm often imposes on the self. By offering aspects of his private life and his personality in a narrative that challenges his iconic image he is seeking to free himself from the persona he has created and fostered over the years. Whether he achieves this depends not so much on his revelatory powers as it does on the reader and who they may be and what their historic relationship to the image (now parody) is.

The multiple levels of the self are in conflict with each other. It is this conflict that underlies the more overt battle between the visual image of the self and the narrative that is created by the viewer. Every reading emerges from a conflicted universe that is the process of manufacturing selves for ourselves and for other selves. The self we manufacture of our selves is

simply a version of the selves we manufacture for other selves. That is why there is a strong sense of otherness in our own self-mages. Otherness is a powerful force in determining the various dimensions of the self. And yet, all the versions of the self that we project on ourselves or on others can lead to a personal transcendence for us. How? We overcome or transcend the interpretation of the self we generate by being aware of the multi-dimensionality of all selves. When we realize that the self is a way of being in the world that also expresses itself in images that turn a living dynamic into the static, we can go beyond a superficial or utilitarian relationship to the image. In today's image-saturated and overly mediated digital world the self is commodified in images. These images conceal more of the self than they reveal because their static nature encourages the field of narrative flux that we generate as viewers. In front of images we become meaning machines. They are dependent on us for their relevance. The meaning we give them is the essential reciprocity between the self and its image. When we know how the self exists in an image we will see each self-image as a blending of -blank slate and mirror.

Notes

[1] This term is used by Karen Beckman in her article "Nothing to Say: The War on Terror and the Mad Photography of Roland Barthes" in Beckman and Weissberg, *On Writing with Photography*, 315.
[2] Alberta Manguel, *Reading Pictures: What We Think of When We Look at Art* (Toronto: Random House, 2000,13.
[3] Manguel, *Reading Pictures*, 12.
[4] Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004, 27.
[5] Ibid. 230.
[6] Ibid, 366.
[7] John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling*, New York: Pantheon, 1982, 7.
[8] Ibd, 91.
[9]David Remnick, "Groovin' High" *The New Yorker* 1 Nov. 2010 102-108.