

The “Digital Other”: Self-Objectification and Narration in Contemporary Fiction

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Abstract

The “digital Other” is a useful description for a phenomenon we often face in contemporary literature. Many characters act as if an invisible observer is judging them, even when they are alone or in an intimate situation. They continuously undergo acts of self-objectification, which require an optical medium, like a camera shot. The “Other” who holds the camera has no physical presence in the story but a psychological presence in the character’s mind. I call this internalized authority the “digital Other,” and it refers to today’s omnipresent digital visual media. The power of the digital Other could be compared to the power the air has from the perspective of an aircraft pilot. Even though the air cannot be seen or touched, it moves the plane and forces its pilot to react to it. The internalized idea of an invisible observer has the same effect on literary figures. It makes them not only decide what to wear or say but also whom they are allowed to regard as desirable and how they should perform their sexuality. Hans-Georg Moeller and Paul J. D’Ambrosio claim that nowadays having an identity feels like presenting yourself through a social media profile, and the digital Other can be described as an agent supporting this profile-based identity. The burden of permanent self-objectification also has an impact on modes of literary narration. The digital Other entails a remarkable connection of internal and external focalizations. Literary voices seem to simultaneously describe actions both from internal and external points of view. The narrative voice sounds odd because it is subjective and yet inauthentic. Through this bizarre voice, characters are staged as objects even when they are presented through first-person narration. The narrative voice presents an imaged, idealized ego, a mode of self-presentation that obeys the digital Other.

Keywords

(late) modern subjectivity, body politics, gender studies, narratology, the digital Other,
idealism

In this essay, I would like to draw attention to a phenomenon that is paradigmatic for contemporary literature. Conceptualizing it will prove helpful for the analysis of literary characters and narratological devices alike. It works on the level of identity as well as on the level of narratology. This phenomenon, which I call the “digital Other,” is a sign of our media-diversified present. The influence of an optical medium on self-presentation can be traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century in its earlier forms. The essay is divided into two main sections. In the first, I place this phenomenon historically and conceptualize it; in the second, I illuminate the narratological dimension of the digital Other, which opens up a new perspective for literary studies that deal with contemporary texts.

The Digital Other as a Contemporary Means of Self-Objectification

In the story “Je ne parle pas français,” Katherine Mansfield creates a male first-person narrator, Raoul, who lives his life as a gigolo in Paris. He states about himself:

But, wait! Isn't it strange I should have written all that about my body and so on? It's the result of my bad life, my submerged life. I am like a little woman in a café who has to introduce herself with a handful of photographs. “Me in my chemise, coming out of an eggshell. . . . Me upside down in a swing, with a frilly behind like a cauliflower. . . .” You know the things. (71; ellipses in original)

In this instance, we find ourselves in agreement with the narrator. We know the phenomenon, maybe not from rendezvous in cafés, but from Facebook, Instagram, and all the other social media platforms on which people in late modernity act like they must introduce themselves with a “handful of photographs.”

Mansfield's analogy between this young man's self-presentation and visual media is remarkable because the story was written almost one hundred years before Facebook was invented. The bohemian laments that when he imagines himself, he will always be focused on his silky hair, his soft hands, and his effect on others. This self-objectification, where Raoul objectively and meticulously describes his own external appearance in order to present himself, is connected to his “bad life.” He considers his own life “bad” because it is clearly an effeminate one in the historical context of the story. Importantly, he does not stop at simply recognizing his life as effeminate; instead, he expresses his fixation on his external appearance through the

support of the media of his time (“a handful of photographs”). Since Raoul does not work for a living, he does not fulfill the typical male, bourgeois role. He is aware of his difference from other men and articulates this by self-objectifying himself in a way that he understands as female in nature, describing himself as behaving “like a little woman.” This gender aspect is not surprising given the historical context of Mansfield’s story, when a woman’s concern for her appearance was socially expected as part of constructing female identity. Bourgeois women were above all meant to be desirable objects for the male gaze and to carry out reproductive work. Their attractiveness was decisive for their path in life because in most cases women were not able to become financially independent, and therefore they depended economically on the very men they had to please. That a man who acts like Raoul considers himself effeminate and associates his actions with a feminine gender performance is not noteworthy. What is noteworthy, however, is that in “Je ne parle pas français” the form of self-portrayal that corresponds to the feminine gender is linked to a common visual medium of the time.

Raoul views himself from an external standpoint. He looks at himself as he looks at a photograph. Elsewhere in the story, this ability to see his life as if it were a spectacle following a linear dramaturgy is shown through the medium of cinema:

Query: Why am I so bitter against Life? And why do I see her as a rag-picker on the American cinema, shuffling along wrapped in a filthy shawl with her old claws crooked over a stick?

Answer: The direct result of the American cinema acting upon a weak mind. (65)

Raoul’s assessment that his “weak mind” has adopted its mindset from cinema, which structures reality for him, is striking. As early as the 1910s, the new cinematic medium had emancipated itself from its earlier status as fairground spectacle, instead creating narratives with meaningful contexts that were very popular and impactful. Mansfield’s first-person narrator does not claim that all people are inundated with images coming from American cinema in the same way that he is. Only weak-minded people are affected by the images to the same extent. The “weak mind,” in the context of a time when women were seen as more irrational than men, suggests that this state of mind can only be “female.” It follows that only women (and men who act like “little women”) succumb to this adapted perception of reality. Viewing life (and oneself) from the perspective of a camera seems to correspond to feminine-gendered characters.

In this vein, a famous German “little woman” immediately comes to mind, namely Doris in Irmgard Keun’s 1932 novel, *The Artificial Silk Girl*. Keun describes pre-war Berlin and the age of cinematic glamour through the eyes of an unemployed, lower-class woman who has great dreams for her future. The novel became an acclaimed bestseller in the tradition of Christopher Isherwood’s *The Berlin Stories* and Bertolt Brecht’s *The Threepenny Opera*. The notable feature of Keun’s novel that sets it apart from Isherwood’s or Brecht’s is the empathy shown toward Doris, who truly believes she could become a star in the spotlights of the “golden twenties.” Indeed, Doris structures her reality by using film images. It is only from this external perspective that she is able to see herself in a positive light. While she writes in a café, she is thinking about how the men at the next table might perceive her: “me with my fancy new hat and fox stole—and that I’m now starting to write a diary is making a very interesting impression on them—there can be no doubt about it” (14; my translation).¹

She can only claim to appear interesting while she is writing her diary, which itself anticipates an external perspective on herself. It is openly stated where this external perspective comes from: Doris’s self-modeling is based on her cinema addiction, where cinematic images of women shape her self-perception. Movie heroines wear fancy new hats, so Doris compares herself directly with an American film star, a symbol of the “golden twenties,” because she embodies women’s popular cultural longing for modernity and freedom through her hairstyle, clothing, and charisma: “But I will write like film because that’s how my life is and how I want it to be. And I look like Colleen Moore, if she had a perm and my nose were more fashionably upturned” (8; my translation).²

The 1920s are considered the classic era of silent cinema. We know from cultural criticism like Siegfried Kracauer’s “The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies” that “little shopgirls” did indeed go to the cinema and borrowed their dreams there, which both shaped and limited their worldview. Even people on a low income, like shop assistants and other badly paid service staff, could enter these cinematic dreamworlds. Although not really a shopgirl, Doris belongs to the social class of unskilled employees who lived economically precarious lives and hoped for great fortune, whether that came from marrying a wealthy man or signing a lucrative film

¹ Translation by Kathie von Ankum: “I’m wearing my elegant hat and the coat with the fox collar, and the fact that I’m starting to write into my dove-covered notebook undoubtedly looks very intriguing . . .” (8).

² Translation by Kathie von Ankum: “But I want to write like a movie, because my life is like that and it’s going to become even more so. And I look like Colleen Moore, if she had a perm and her nose were a little bit more fashionable, like pointing up” (8).

deal. According to Kracauer, the shopgirls spend their modest incomes on the dubious amusement of going to the cinema at the cost of other activities—dubious because cinema undermines self-critical thinking and realistic visions of the future (294-97). This is only partially true in Doris’s case. Her naïve view of the world changes into a clear understanding of her social disadvantages because of the harsh social descent she experiences after stealing an expensive fur coat to better compete with film industry stars. A naïve young woman blinded by the spotlight of the cinematic world matures, by novel’s end, into a woman striving to take charge of her life. Doris’s similarity to Kracauer’s shopgirls is therefore merely superficial; she cannot be reduced to his caricature of femininity. She is naïve and dreamy, but she should not be seen as part of a mindless, ideologically deluded crowd. This is because a healthy self-esteem abolishes the unattainable concepts of self that had influenced her lifestyle before. Like Kracauer’s caricature of shopgirls, Doris is obviously fascinated by the cinematic world, but the author Keun has individualized her from the dull crowd because Doris’s cinematic experiences are also the very source of her ability to see herself critically.

If we imagine “little shopgirls” as people who see themselves and their environment as filtered through a camera lens, should we not critically ask ourselves if we have not all turned into them? Although our perception is mainly structured by television and social media instead of cinema, these new media images that we work on (and that work on us) do not necessarily become a source of self-critique. Who today, regardless of gender and profession, has a concept of self that remains completely unaffected by contemporary media? Even intellectuals and universities use images to present themselves on the internet. If Kracauer were alive today, he would probably have an Instagram account with at least one flattering portrait! It is therefore not necessary to advance much beyond Kracauer’s critical stance on mass media. From a purely empirical point of view, the influence that media has on our lives is unquestionable. The constant presence of Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter and the ability they give us to stream every experience, to upload or share every snapshot, has become a universal reality that has spread to all generations, at least since the COVID lockdowns. If the success of cinema has not been without consequences for self-expression, then what effect does the digital revolution we are currently facing have on our self-understanding? Contemporary literature shows that digital media have produced new methods of subjectification.

In Constanze Petery’s 2011 novel *Your Power and My Glory*, fifteen-year-old Anita awaits the anticipated Other’s perspective on her outward appearance more eagerly and depends on it more heavily than Raoul and Doris. This enthusiastic self-

objectification is closely related to digitization. Smartphones, which were introduced in 2007, easily allow one to stylize oneself as an object for the camera. Although the following monologue by Anita doesn't directly invoke smartphones, it is pervaded by their logic:

The wind has not come by coincidence. I have ordered it. For this moment, a perfect moment in a perfect life. I read it would be fashionable to keep hair short this season, bob or pixie cut. Poor fools who are following this advice, look at me, I do not obey fashion rules, I am the one dictating them. Who will look after the girl whose clumsy bowl cut is being tousled by the breeze, by my breeze, while I stand next to her, my long blond mane like a silk flag. I'm telling you guys, what I'm doing is in vogue. I am crossing the square, stepping out of the tree's shadow, running into the sun. Isn't that the image you all have of me? Wherever I go it will be bright, radiant, I am the glamour that is needed so desperately by everyone. . . . Who hasn't realized it, who hasn't looked up, who doesn't feel the power that comes from my glory? No one has missed it, they've all turned around to look at me, the man who uses too much gel and wears a leather jacket from a car company stared at me the same way the woman did. She is dressed in a tweed skirt and is holding a tissue in front of a snotty baby's nose. The waiter from the café across the street almost drops his tray, espresso is dripping onto the colorful, oriental-looking, silky, certainly expensive wrap dress of a woman in her mid-fifties who hides her crow's feet behind a pair of oversized sunglasses. The sunglasses make her look like an insect. She won't be able to keep the attention of the person next to her, her rendezvous is going to fail because he has suddenly seen me, he will be dreaming that I'm stubbing out my cigarette on his chest each lonely night like the rest of them. (7-8; my translation)

Even if we don't want to identify with Anita's outrageous narcissism,³ her stream of consciousness is pervaded by a (self-)image obsession that also affects many other

³ My use of "narcissism" should be differentiated from the common meaning of something like egoism or self-love. Instead, I intend something similar to that of Isolde Charim, who claims that narcissism can be seen as the rule of the ego ideal. The Freudian superego is replaced by an ego ideal that drives us to a perfect image of ourselves. This perfect image is not to be achieved, but we are subjected to it nonetheless.

contemporary figures, including us as readers. The first person experiences herself in selfie mode. Wolfgang Ullrichs explains that “[t]aking a selfie means making yourself into an image. This is different from merely taking a picture of yourself, a self-portrait. To take a selfie is to take a picture of yourself in which you have already styled yourself as though in an image” (6; my translation).

The German Idealists believed that the ability to constitute an image of oneself is based on “transcendental spontaneity” (*transzendentaler Spontanität*) (Žižek 53; my translation). This means that subjects refer to themselves without regarding themselves as an object (Henrich 188-232). As a diagnosis of the present, it can be stated that this notion of transcendental spontaneity has turned into unspontaneous receptivity: namely, the ability to create an image of oneself. This type of image is what I term a “self-image.” The aspect of receptivity arises because the self-image of many fictional figures relies on media-generated images (of themselves). The ego does not *constitute* or *see* itself spontaneously. Rather, identity is formed by a triangular relationship that demands receptivity rather than spontaneity. Self-awareness requires a medium through which fictional characters can achieve self-confidence based on self-perception. To build up an image of oneself requires an optical medium like a camera shot. Anita does not simply reflect herself in a spontaneous, self-referential way without any support. The mirror she uses for her self-reflection is held by an invisible hand, an anonymous observer who transcends the subject’s own ego in the process of self-discovery. The first-person subject does not see herself as if she is just looking in a mirror. She experiences herself as being the object of a camera shot, as being gazed upon by someone else.

This invisible spectator is a narcissistic, imagined one whom I describe with the term “digital Other.” The digital Other is a purely internal, psychological phenomenon, since it can be assumed neither that the wind will obey the long-haired young woman nor that she can really foresee the future dreams of those around her. Her first-person narration celebrates its own self-objectification, which refers to an internal representation of the self that characterizes that self as an object of an external gaze. In psychoanalysis this mental structure is simply called the “self-object” (*Selbstobjekt*) (Fischer 32; my translation). The impression we get from Anita’s first-person narration is that she seems extremely vain and noticeably isolated from the outside world. What she describes is all in her head, not in the world she is facing.

I derived and generated the concept of the digital Other from feminist writings that criticize female self-objectification. The three literary examples of the digital Other that I have examined so far show an effeminate man (1918), an uneducated “little woman” who could work as a shopgirl (1932), and an adolescent, girlish,

insincere dreamer (2011). In the patriarchal, binary gender system, it is assumed that all women (more or less) tend to obtain a self-objectifying view of themselves. So, it is no wonder that Simone de Beauvoir includes a passage that analyzes the narcissism of women in her influential feminist work *The Second Sex*, published in France as *Le Deuxième Sexe* in 1949, in German as *Das andere Geschlecht* in 1951, and in English in 1953. There we have a first criticism of self-objectification acted out by feminine narcissists. According to Beauvoir, the bourgeois woman is excluded from social life, never finding herself validated by deeds and actions. This social exclusion makes her perceive herself primarily as an object. She cannot build up an independent subjectivity of her own:

since childhood she has seen herself as an object. . . . But throughout her life, woman will be vigorously encouraged to leave and come back to herself by the magic of the mirror. . . . It is above all in woman that the reflection allows itself to be assimilated to the self. Male beauty is a sign of transcendence, that of woman has the passivity of immanence: the latter alone is made to arrest man's gaze and can thus be caught in the immobile trap of the mirror's silvering; man who feels and wants himself to be activity and subjectivity does not recognize himself in his immobile image; it does not appeal to him, since the man's body does not appear to him as an object of desire; while the woman, knowing she is making herself object, really believes she is seeing *herself* in the mirror: passive and given, the reflection is a thing like herself[.] (*The Second Sex* 667-68)

The woman's status as an object is based on the male gaze—in other words, a woman aims to be considered desirable by men. She accepts that her alignment to the male heterosexual perspective as its object is her true self. Beauvoir considers female narcissism to be dangerous because it keeps women in subservience and immanence, and the narcissist complex also makes them lose “all hold on the concrete world” (680). A woman can lose her narcissistically generated self at any time because it is extremely vulnerable and will decay as soon as her (perceived) beauty fades.

Beauvoir posits that women who claim civil rights can break free from being mere objects and shed the male gaze directed toward them. Emancipation means protecting women from becoming frozen in their own self-objectification. A woman who chooses to become a self-object puts her identity on shaky ground. She quite literally cannot survive the physical aging process. Her identity is gone when she is

no longer a pretty picture for everybody else. If the reflection in the mirror is no longer flattering, she loses the ground from under her feet. What will the artificial silk girl do when she's no longer as beautiful as Colleen Moore? What will become the source of her self-confidence? Doris needs a grounding for her self-confidence that is independent of wearing a nice fur coat and having a fashionable hairstyle. Keun lets her protagonist realize the necessity of becoming independent from the male gaze. The uneducated, socially disadvantaged Doris goes further than many better educated women of the twentieth century as she manages to give up her narcissistic image of herself.

One disillusioned conclusion from after the second wave of the women's movement goes as follows: even if the "shopgirls" have become shop managers and Beauvoir's ambitions for social freedom have come true for many women, aging continues to affect women significantly more than their male colleagues, even for women in management positions. That women are more affected is not just a consequence of their being tormented by the duty to be regarded as successful sexual objects—even if they can make a living without a man in their lives. Women continue to submit to patriarchal power, but the power is no longer applied through external instructions. It is rather an internalized structure. The psychological enslavement that women face does not take the direct route of social exclusion from all areas that are open to men. Sandra Lee Bartky, an American philosopher one generation younger than Beauvoir, analyzes post-feminist femininity in her 1988 essay "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power." As she explains, female self-objectification is no longer dictated by way of external restrictions; the patriarchal power that relentlessly imposed certain behaviors on women of an earlier generation is now concealed. What at the beginning of the twentieth century was still based on external constraints, because bourgeois women were stuck in their social role of being objects for men, had transformed over the course of the century into an internalized commandment. Many women tamely continued to make themselves obedient objects, even if they had gained much in the way of social liberty. They could now call all civil rights their own and were more or less able to become economically independent, but women still fell "so easily into ridiculousness" (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* 680) and accepted "the tyranny of public opinion" for "she is uneasy, susceptible, irritable" (882). For Bartky, women cannot set themselves free from the male gaze. They continue to show their inferior status through physical practices, unnecessarily lusting for male applause and making themselves dependent on a mysterious, unpredictable power. They undertake radical measures to physically transform into an acceptable feminine object. Their

subjectification takes the form of self-objectification. Beauvoir visualizes this type of self-objectification with her “twin brother” metaphor, where the female subject is split into an object (herself) and her imagined “twin brother” / *frère jumeau* (Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième sexe* 419) who resides in her mind and judges her. The twin brother is the self-reflecting female subject’s own projection, in Beauvoir’s terms “her own figure in dreams” (*The Second Sex* 670). He condemns her to lead a life without real subjectivity, and she is eternally condemned to immanence.

I like the metaphor of the “twin brother” residing in female minds because it aligns with Bartky’s idea of the “patriarchal Other” that women have internalized:

In the regime of institutionalized heterosexuality woman must make herself “object and prey” for men. . . . In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment. Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other. (34)

What Bartky calls the “patriarchal Other” also resides in the female psyche, as we learned in Petery’s novel. But I would suggest that gender is not vital to this narcissistic concept of self in contemporary fiction. Such internalized power is not restricted to female characters; indeed, it is no longer attached to gender. We wouldn’t say that only women are selfie-savvy. What has changed over the course of history is that self-objectification (based on cinematic or current digital media) is no longer reserved for women. Gender, class, and other qualities of the subject can still make a difference in how a person objectifies him- or herself, but these factors cause only slight differences, not structural ones like before.

I therefore call this internalized external perspective, which crops up with increasing frequency in contemporary texts, the “digital Other” rather than the “patriarchal Other.” The concept is new even if it’s not completely unfamiliar to readers since it appears in various forms, and with different gender emphases, across the twentieth century. While the women pitied by Beauvoir depended on the external environment to fulfill their need for a response to their beauty, the narcissistic gratification of men, women, and non-binary people in the present can be achieved simply by photoshopping self-images. Today’s subjects do not need real people to applaud them. Instead, they can post their enhanced images and feel instantly satisfied. Whether a community evaluates these self-images or not is no longer decisive for narcissistic satisfaction. The contemporary internalized compulsion consists of being

able to correlate every situation to an idealized image of oneself in that situation—in other words, to design every situation in such a way that a camera could shoot it. In order to know who I am, an eye-to-eye response is not necessary. Self-objectifying characters do not question whether their image is authentic or not. Instead, they form a profile of their identity, and they obey the image provided by the internalized other. To speak in Hans-Georg Moeller and Paul J. D’Ambrosio’s terms, the digital Other is the internalized agent of the “general peer,” which is “an audience to which profilig identity is presented” (50). Indeed, the general peer and the digital Other seem to be quite similar, but I would suggest differentiating between them through the psychological dimension. Whereas the first one is an impersonal instance, the second one is already familiar, more intimate. The digital Other is anonymous like the general peer is, but it seems to show more empathy. Whereas the digital Other is a twin brother, a dreamed-of lover, a close friend, the general peer is only an imagined audience.

In order to further examine the digital Other, the general peer, and the difference between the two, I would like to consider the contemporary novel *Allegro Pastel*, written by Leif Randt and published to great success in 2020. Its success is rooted in the author’s ability to show how self-reflexive and narcissistic characters interact, illustrating how they define themselves as seen by another. This digital Other is not really tangible; it is the simple idea of a general onlooker. What I call the “digital Other” is the internalized notion that you experience your life as though there were always a camera pointed at you: this phenomenon is both tiresome and enjoyable for the subject in equal measure. The mode of constant reflection shapes subjectivity and desire. Even if there is no camera and no one else is present, the characters experience the digital Other as their “twin brother” and act as if they are playing the lead role in the movie of “their life.” Authenticity is replaced by constantly having to worry about maintaining one’s own image.

In the following passage from *Allegro Pastel*, it only seems that we can locate the literary voice of Tanja. Its actual position is much harder to pinpoint than one might expect:

Caro approached Tanja at around half past eight in the morning with a glassy and at the same time highly motivated look. “How are you, are you still feeling alright?” She touched Tanja’s arm. “Not at all,” said Tanja, although she didn’t feel bad. The joint Fred was smoking had made her a little more alert. . . . Usually, it felt nice to be desired by a woman, and Caro had a good body, you could see that she went

bouldering regularly, she didn't smell bad either, but she looked grown-up in a depressing way. That was what Tanja thought in the windowless bathroom. In contrast to Tanja, Caro clearly looked like she was over thirty, and although Tanja was willing to accept that women did indeed get older and, above all, were allowed to be lustful, she thought that because of her age and short haircut, Caro did not deserve to ask her out or hook up with her. How terribly vain and hostile to life this thought was, Tanja immediately admitted this to herself when, after flushing the toilet, she stood in front of the sink and looked at her reflection in the mirror. Sure, she was over thirty now too, she had also already been a woman for a long time, but her face was the perfect mix of two or three stages of life, and even the fact that she had not slept the whole night didn't spoil this positive impression. She could understand that Alex and Caro wanted to go home with her, that Janis was sad because she had given him up, that Max and Ernesto were definitely still thinking about her a lot. She could understand all these people. (239-42; my translation)

Tanja does not desire Caro authentically, and her lack of desire is equally achieved without any authenticity. This lack of authenticity can be explained by recourse to Moeller and D'Ambrosio's conception of profelicity or profile-based identity: "The logic of profelicity follows the reversal of the hierarchy between presence and representation entailed in the concept of the picturesque. The picture in fact becomes the real thing: that which is actually of interest and most valuable. In profelicity, the profile is the real thing. Profiles precede essence" (34). Similarly, Tanja thinks and acts as if she is being seen by someone and her love affairs were an issue for a reality show. She does not care about feelings but about how her image may grow, how her feelings might be represented. Tanja pictures herself in the role of Caro's lover, but she thinks she would not be ideally suited to it because she is afraid that getting involved in Caro's attempt at flirting with her would be unjust to her own beauty. Indeed, Tanja suspects that having a lover like Caro could possibly downgrade her own image, a downgrading in her mind that is asserted by a general peer (Moeller and D'Ambrosio 47-50). It is a harsh and misogynist audience in this context. Tanja admits to herself the degree of internalized misogyny that comes into play when she rejects Caro because of her age and her haircut. She also recognizes that this thought is based on what Beauvoir already complained about in narcissists, namely being "vain and hostile to life."

Although she is aware of this, she cannot escape the narcissistic trap because the internalized analysis of human bodies is constant, and this is rooted in what I call “consumerability,” which is different from “commensurability,” as people only feel their body if they feel it is a conventional object of desire. The power of the digital Other is not subject to individual choice.⁴ It is inscribed in Tanja’s self-image. We could therefore imagine that Caro obeys the same inner connoisseur or “twin brother” as Tanja and would only like to flirt with Tanja because the girlish-looking, nice woman would flatter her self-image. It is therefore possible that she falls for Tanja not for Tanja’s individual qualities but for her own (self-)image. Her girl crush could be nothing more than an abstract desire that has little to do with Tanja’s personality.

In *Allegro Pastel*, we are confronted with characters who have pop-cultural experiences that are likely similar to those of the contemporary reader (parties, queer flirts, on and off relationships). But Randt complicates and heightens these experiences because his characters must preliminarily check how every experience would impact their self-image before they dare to make it. This involves checking the experience’s visual and pornographic quality and seeing whether it can be digitalized. This pre-reflection seems to be a significant part of cultivating the self-image that is not dependent on gender. Jerome, the main male character in the novel, operates in the same way his girlfriend Tanja does. While he kisses Tanja in the subway after having picked her up at the railway station, he imagines how his displays of tenderness might affect the other passengers. In fact, he is more pleased with the idea he has of what might be going on in the observers’ minds than he is with the physical experience itself. In seeking for psychological satisfaction, he calls this fixation on his effect on others his “external personality composed of attributions from his surroundings. He could guess his own external personality by looking at photos and in the mirror, because when looking at these images he automatically added (what he considered to be) the gazes, insinuations, and associations of others” (11; my translation). As the narrative goes on, it transpires that this external personality dominates the supposedly internal personality. Jerome cannot switch off

⁴ Same-sex desire between women is also strongly related to narcissistic gratification in Randt’s 2011 debut novel, *Shimmering Haze over Coby County*. From a feminist perspective, the author could be accused of failing to understand the bond between women: the novel could be seen as ridiculing or downplaying same-sex sexuality between women. In fact, it is obvious that the characters in this novel are far too much shaped by the digital Other, and this is the reason for their proximity to narcissism. It should be recognized as the tendency of every character in the novel. They all play out self-objectification. The fact that desire is also subject to blatant narcissism instead of an honest, gut feeling corresponds to the logic of the narrated world and does not result in heterosexism on the part of the narrator or the author.

the gazes, insinuations, and associations of others. When he thinks about himself, he automatically thinks about what other people might think about him. However, these automatic thoughts refer neither to any external reality nor to concrete others. They are internally focused. He makes himself into an image based on imaginary others in such a way that the quality of this self-image determines any action he takes in *Allegro Pastel*. The novel appeals to so many readers because there is hardly any discrepancy between individual experiences (on the level of the characters) and supra-individual communicability (for the readers). This is because Randt's narrative structure first frames every experience in terms of the character's a priori knowledge of it. The a priori knowledge informing a character's self-image is formed from various media also familiar to the reader: that is to say, it is formed by supra-individual experience. Thus, supra-individual media shapes the a priori understanding of any event that a character can experience. Returning to the text, an experience's impact on the others' view of the subject is considered before even a first step towards action is taken. Being suitable for media is the primary condition for having an experience. This condition has to be fulfilled by Tanja and Jerome before they can live out what they feel and want.

The "transcendental I" of Kant has become something that can be accessed through media. The tenderness between Jerome and Tanja in the subway, like Tanja's lack of any tender feelings for Caro, is acted out such that it can only be experienced after the imaginary gaze of the others has approved the sexual bond (or forbidden it). The digital Other tells them what to feel and do. In the absence of real onlookers, this practice is both narcissistic and tends to be life-threatening, but the digital Other is nonetheless fed by a shared supra-individual force, which is why it can be so easily understood by every reader. Like Randt's characters, his readers are pop-culturally socialized and therefore also aware of the unyielding power that digitization exerts on their own lives.

The Digital Other as the Narrative Voice of a Story

Let's have a look at the above excerpt about Tanja and Caro from Randt's novel again. When Tanja decides not to make out with Caro in the passage quoted above, it seems reasonable to interpret the narrator as a heterodiegetic one, since the person and her inner experience are not clearly portrayed from Tanja's perspective. Instead, her thoughts appear to be mediated through an external perspective that is not entirely identical to Tanja's own views. While the text is variably internally focalized, the statement that "in contrast to Tanja, Caro clearly looked like she was over thirty"

seems externally focalized, as if the text is speaking of objective facts that simply happen to correspond to Tanja's worldview and self-image. These observations can also be taken as factual reality by other characters in the story because they describe something that everyone would see if they looked at Caro and Tanja.

But is this really what is going on? Could mentioning Tanja in the third person possibly mislead the reader? The statement about Caro's appearance does not refer to anything that Tanja or any other observer could actually perceive and is therefore an imaginary attribution. It confronts us with Tanja's awareness of her ideal self-image: that, unlike Caro, her face seems to be the "perfect mix of two or three stages of life." In other words, it is an apperception. The narrative voice adds something to her perception of Tanja that is not factual and congruent with Tanja's own self-image. She perceives Caro in such a way that she is able to functionalize her as a mirror for her own image, in which she appears younger. In contrast to this perception of Caro, Tanja's beauty surges. Her phenomenological age determination takes place entirely in her head. We cannot rely on it. In the description of an apparently externally mediated reality, Tanja's (narrative and narrated) "I" emerges. The narrator compares the youth of both women as if it were part of a perceptible reality independent of Tanja's psyche. But this is some distance from the truth because the comparison is also subjective, based as it is on Tanja's self-image, which remains intelligible throughout. It is not a simple matter of something everybody could see.

Thus, the narrator's voice corresponds to Tanja as a self-objectifying voice. In this absurd comparison, a narrative instance emerges that reveals itself to be both internally and externally focused. It is conveying a narcissistic woman who is "over thirty now, too, [and] had already been a woman for a long time," but it also believes that everyone has a crush on her and "want[s] to go home with her." On a narratological level, this is remarkable because internal and external focalizations are bizarrely connected (rather than simply being variable); the view through the eyes of a single person turns out to be identical to the view through the eyes of the (digital) general. This makes it difficult to identify the internally focused narrative voice as homo- or even auto-diegetic, since the narrated "I" is somehow shown from an external perspective. Both from an internal point of view and from an external point of view, Tanja appears to be more a copy of someone than a real person. Her ego does not gain any plasticity through being constructed from a fragile set of external descriptions. However, since Tanja can only identify and express herself from an eccentric perspective—she is dependent on the camera view on (and of) herself—it becomes apparent that internal and external focalizations are synthesized in this text. The narrator's voice not only looks at the world through Tanja's eyes but also tells

us what Tanja would do. This Tanja can only be heard through a different, more general, non-individual voice.

The perspective from which Tanja is shown to the reader is neither that of a self-confident ego nor one entirely separate from the ego. It is the perspective of the digital Other. Tanja's ego asserts itself as a simulating ego, not one that can loudly say "I." The character's identity is developed by its ability to copy the images generated by media. This is a clear example of despicable receptivity. Petery's Anita is even more marked by her penchant for an eccentric, externalized self-portrayal. Anita's voice, which appears as a first-person narrator, seems to come from offstage because internal and external focalizations are equally connected. When her voice, which is marked as an auto-diegetic narrative voice, says "I," it technically produces the same kind of self-objectification as in Randt's novel. The first sentences of *Your Power and My Glory* that confront us with overt narcissism not only introduce a character whose identity is built completely by media images but also make it clear that the narrative voice is adapted from media in the same way as the narrative voice of *Allegro Pastel*.

Conclusion: Where Does the Digital Other Come From?

The form of narrative centered on the digital Other comes from a present, or *Zeitgeist*, in which the authentic, idealistic personality that has a transcendental status and is spontaneously chosen by the subject has been given up and has given way to a receptive, media-mediated self. The narrative "I" of the present withdraws onto an already-illuminated projector screen; it backs down, humbly accepting its role. For example, the young woman in Petery's novel views herself only as an object. She celebrates her own enslavement as a purely sexual being and as a fulfillment of male desire, as a "Slut Aphrodite" (11; my translation). In this way she too is not concretely perceptible, neither as a narrator nor as a character. We never learn anything about the character's inner life. If we try to imagine this first-person narrator, she is either unimaginable or, if we do want to get an idea, the person only appears to us as a transferable image, like the decal of a conventional, clean, non-sensual sexual object. We see her as we would come across her on screen or in a video clip. The narrator daydreams about herself using clichés that are common currency. This is what I mean by speaking of unspontaneous receptivity instead of a transcendental spontaneity that creates authenticity. Contemporary fictional characters appear as unconvincing supernatural sex gods and goddesses, like Elise, played by Angelina Jolie in *The Tourist* (2010), who, like a Wonder Woman, walks the aisles of a moving train,

drawing the eyes of her fellow passengers (indeed, Jolie's appearance is already only a walking film quote of herself from earlier genres like *film noir*).

Or does Anita appear to us as another diva that we know from commercials and other media? Which music video or commercial was viral about ten years ago when the text was written? German people might imagine her as the charming Alice of the Telecom commercial (with her blonde hair) or Lena Gercke, the first winner of Germany's Next Top Model. What we see is not a literary character who triggers associations beyond our cinematic imagination. Nor can we imagine that anyone in the narrated world actually perceives this woman in this way. What we perceive is an "I" that is self-narrating, that can state about itself that it is nothing more than a silly reference to images of a *femme fatale* from pop culture. We cannot ascribe individuality to this narrator/person. The person and her voice are both inside and outside the narration. The voice that is speaking seems not to come from within.

This self-objectifying narrative instance, even on an intradiegetic level, only promotes a perception of itself that comes from beyond what is being narrated. As readers, we think of the character as cropped to fit the picture and hear the narrator's voice as a media devotee who follows its power in a quasi-religious manner: "I am the glamour that is needed so desperately by everyone." We also fear for her mental health, and when we imagine her, we leave the realm of literary fantasy and move to well-known advertising iconography. This type of self-objectifying narration does not challenge us or our imagination. The text wants us to locate the characters presented, be it the attractive reveler Tanja or the nameless blonde *flâneur*, in the media-accessible arsenal of images. On one hand the narrator seems to be of questionable reliability, but on the other hand the agonized self-exposure/-examination is somehow trustworthy. The narrative voice speaks loudly of the power of the digital Other, yet the voice is not located where we think we are hearing it from. The self-objectifying narrators' voices are equally focused externally and internally. The characters' knowledge of themselves is limited and faked—they are literally unaware of themselves, yet they are not unreliable narrators. Their unreliability, or rather, the sense of vagueness or lack of reality density in this form of subjectification, is a phenomenon that is not based on a narrative technique but on the mechanization of human self-perception that produced this narrative technique in the first place.



Fig. 1. *Turbo Ripper* (2019), Constantin Hardenstein. Courtesy of Constantin Hardenstein.

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