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Nicole Erin Morse, *Selfie Aesthetics: Seeing Trans Feminist Futures in Self-Representational Art*. Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2022. Reviewed for *Journal of American Studies* by Alix Beeston, Cardiff University

Nicole Erin Morse's *Selfie Aesthetics: Seeing Trans Feminist Futures in Self-Representational Art* wears its heart(s) on every sleeve. A trio of heart emojis appears on the book's cover, as if the "like" icon that appears beneath images on Instagram has duplicated itself. Hearts also proliferate inside the book. On the running footer, the small pictographs are wedged between chapter titles and page numbers, so to count pages is to count hearts, 179 of each. Conveying positive sentiment and empathetic feeling—affection, liking, loving—the heart emoji is preferred by so-called "agreeable" personalities and is seen, in line with stereotypes around gendered communication, as more acceptable when used by women than by men.¹ Heart emojis are thus associated with femininity and effeminacy, as indeed are all emojis. Icons equivocating between text and image—more image than text, more text than image—emojis are expressive tools whose emotional disclosures seem at once too heartfelt, too sincere, and yet not heartfelt enough. In their ease and speed of use, as well as their affiliation with the youth and commercial cultures of their origins, emojis are suspect, superficial, and unserious.²

These negative valences, which are also gendered valences, attach to another media form ubiquitous in Web 2.0: the selfie. The selfie's ascendancy tracks with the rise of proprietary social media platforms and interface technologies post-2003—those "walled

¹ See Weijian Li, Yuxiao Chen, Tianran Hu, and Jiebo Luo, "Mining the Relationship between Emoji Usage Patterns and Personality," *Proceedings of the Twelfth International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* 12.1 (2018): 648–51, and Sarah E. Butterworth, Traci A. Giuliano, Justin White, Lizette Cantu, and Kyle C. Fraser, "Sender Gender Influences Emoji Interpretation in Text Messages," *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (April 2019): 1–5. The latter study is limited to an analysis of binary gender and does not account for non-normative sexualities or genders.

² See Lisa Lebduska, "Emoji, Emoji, What for Art Thou?," *Harlot: A Revealing Look at the Arts of Persuasion* 12, 6 (2015): <https://doi.org/10.15760/harlot.2014.12.6>.

gardens” in which users’ autonomy is routed through automation.³ The selfie is in many respects *the* genre of digital photography, and though all kinds of people take selfies, it is above all young women who pose before the bathroom mirrors and front-facing phone cameras of our cultural imagination. A string of selfies, like a string of hearts, is (women’s) feeling in excess and in deficit, for the making of selfies is understood as narcissistic and trivial. “The stories we tell about selfies,” as Morse notes at the outset of *Selfie Aesthetics*, “reinforce that there is something feminized, embarrassing, and even repulsive about the entire process of taking, sharing, and seeing selfies.”⁴

As is suggested by the book’s profusion of hearts, Morse writes against these stories, inflected as they are with anxieties about women’s expressive practices online (or even outright misogyny). Yet though Morse declares with a confessional air, “I love looking at selfies,” *Selfie Aesthetics* is also written against pro-selfie discourses that accept and reroute the charge of narcissism by attending to the selfie as a genre capable of disrupting gendered norms and as an empowering activity for women and feminized people (2). It is common in selfie scholarship to approach selfies as one or another type of blunt instrument: a tool either of social regulation and neoliberal self-commodification or of liberatory self-expression. Moving beyond these binaristic and rather ossified terms, Morse conceptualizes the selfie as a relational form whose political efficacy is constituted through its interactions with the viewers it addresses. Not only are selfies composed in and through networks of social relations, Morse insists, but their meanings and effects are also determined by their viewers, who, encountering them online, are called upon to “act as witnesses to another’s exploration of embodiment through image and form” (15).

³ See Cadence Kinsey, *Walled Gardens: Autonomy, Automation, and Art After the Internet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 4.

⁴ Nicole Erin Morse, *Selfie Aesthetics: Seeing Trans Feminist Futures in Self-Representational Art* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2022), ix.

Selfie Aesthetics identifies several key aesthetic strategies that are used by trans feminine creators of selfies and related digital forms to “invite us into collaborative spectatorial encounters . . . with political potentiality” (1–2). In a series of lucidly written and imaginatively conceived chapters, Morse discusses visual tropes of doubling and mirroring that elaborate the relationality and fluidity of mediated identity (Chapter 1); the seriality of the selfie as a structure that allows creators and viewers to coproduce and contest digital selves through iterative, improvisational, and collective processes (Chapters 2 and 3); and the antinormative logics of nonlinear temporalities, which unveil the labor of digital self-creation (Chapter 4) and open onto alternative visions of personal and collective histories (Chapter 5).

Emphasizing how the selfie expresses and creates various kinds of relations, *Selfie Aesthetics* is a theoretically sophisticated addition to a body of scholarship that has increasingly, over the last decade, emphasized the selfie as a set of social practices. It also participates in wider efforts in photography studies to develop new affective and intersubjective methods for reading photographs as objects primed to denaturalize the past and pitch (us) toward liberatory futures. These include, most notably, Tina M. Campt’s call for scholars to “listen” to images and Ariella Aïsha Azoulay’s program for enacting “potential history” in relation to photography, learning from the medium as “a practice and a form of human relations” wherein we may encounter other people as our “potential companions” and partners in resisting imperialist regimes.⁵ Similarly, Morse claims that selfies—paradigmatically but not solely selfies by trans feminine creators—bear signs of “trans feminist futures,” gender liberation, and radical collectivity; and, importantly, that these signs can be read (or perhaps generated) through formal analysis.

⁵ See Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2017), and Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London and New York: Verso, 2019), 16.

For me, the most striking aspect of *Selfie Aesthetics* is its detailed analysis of specific selfies. Refusing the scholarly tendency to examine vernacular images in the aggregate rather than the particular, Morse performs remarkable close readings of selfies that demonstrate the value of slow, careful attention to the culturally degraded and ephemeral visual objects we normally scroll by so swiftly. Morse's beautiful and surprising reading of a selfie by the filmmaker and activist Tourmaline in Chapter 1, for instance, has transformed the way I see the rippling reflections and outstretched arms of mirror selfies—my own and those that populate my Instagram feed. However, the sheer virtuosity of these readings raises questions about the conditions under which the liberatory power of selfies can be appreciated or achieved. Morse holds that the radical potentialities of selfie aesthetics are a result of their formal properties as well as their transformation via acts of reading or reformulation by viewers. The selfie, Morse says, “offers the opportunity to examine ourselves and our commitments and to align ourselves with others. Who am I when I look at selfies?” (3). Yet across the book, the commitments of viewers seem to precede the readings and determine the nature of the political and relational alignments (which must also be dealignments) that emerge via selfie aesthetics. This is evident as much in Morse's deeply sensitive and explicitly trans feminist acts of reading—reading selfies out of love, under the sign of the heart emoji—as it is in the far more ambivalent or even hostile involvement of online audiences in the mediated self-representations of trans feminine people.

A prominent example of the latter in *Selfie Aesthetics* relates to the activist and educator Zinnia Jones. In Chapters 2 and 4, Morse details an encounter between Jones and an anonymous follower on YouTube, in which the follower coopted Jones's images and videos to narrate for Jones a “transition timeline” that deviated from, and denied, Jones's testimony of her experience. Morse acknowledges that this troubling event shows how audiences' participation in the serialized construction of digital personas can be “harmful,” although they

maintain that “this kind of engagement . . . also opens up space for active modes of spectatorship” (99). Certainly the “activity” of online spectatorship is evident here, but the question remains as to the character or effects of that activity—and what determines them. More broadly, it is unclear if selfie aesthetics do invite us to interrogate or reform our commitments to and alignments with others, or whether they rather serve as a site for entrenching and dramatizing the commitments we already hold.

To some extent because of the complexity that defines Morse’s thinking, there is a tension between the book’s broadly reparative approach to the relationality of selfie aesthetics and the knotty, volatile relations the chapters actually describe. Morse is well aware of the fact that trans feminine people are often the subject of the most heinous abuse and mistreatment online and off. In fact, a strength of the book is its thoughtful and persuasive excursions on key ethical and political issues related to trans people’s representation and the theorization of transness in queer studies, such as the perils and pressures of visibility, the normative dictates of “inclusion,” and the dematerializing, spectacularizing effects of trans exceptionalism or allegory, through which trans people are made into figures of an ultimate queerness or pure fluidity. Among other examples, Jones’s treatment by her followers leads Morse to argue that “digital self-representation must be *made* resistant,” for it is not necessarily so (113). But what it takes for this to happen is, in my view, undertheorized, particularly since the radical meanings ascribed to selfie aesthetics seem contingent and precarious, relying to a large degree on the analytic force and situated, extant political desires of the person who attends to them.

Who can do the work of producing resistant interpretations of selfie aesthetics? What frames and methods of attention do these interpretations necessitate? How might these practices not only reflect but also potentially inspire trans feminist politics? That these questions are raised but not satisfactorily answered by this book, not least in its determination

to engage the materiality and specificity of trans feminine people's experiences and digital self-representations, is a mark of its boldness and ambition. It is also an invitation for scholars and audiences to attend to selfies—the definitive images of our digital age—with something of Morse's creativity, intellectual courage, and, yes, love.