

# Selfhood and Simulacra: On the Phenomenon of Snapchat Dysmorphia\*

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## Abstract:

Snapchat dysmorphia is a body dysmorphic disorder where a user of filtered selfies becomes dissatisfied with his or her “natural” appearance and seeks surgical procedures in order to look like in the filtered selfies. This study presents the current discussions of Snapchat dysmorphia and proposes to further analyse the phenomenon against the backdrop of the concepts of hyperreality and simulacra. The critique of Snapchat dysmorphia is fuelled by the implicit dualism of “natural” vs. “artificial”, “real” vs. “fake” and takes place in the context of an unacknowledged effort to defend the inviolability and sanctity of human nature. In order to overcome the binarity and normativeness of understanding Snapchat dysmorphia as an “unnatural” phenomenon, this study proposes to view it as an instance of “second nature”. It is a habitualised practice, an attempt to appropriate, to manifest the already accustomed image of the self on the corporeal level. In this analysis, the phenomenon of Snapchat dysmorphia becomes a case study of the limits of our views of the relationship between selfhood and corporeality.

**Keywords:** dysmorphia; aesthetic surgery; social media; simulacrum; hyperreality; second nature; selfhood; corporeality

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Snapchat dysmorphia is an uncanny phenomenon of our time. It started with the practice of social media users sharing selfies, altered by filters. This results in enhanced and augmented selfies that differ significantly from users’ “natural” appearance in many ways. In some cases, however, users become so comfortable with their filtered selfies, that they identify with them as a representation of their true appearance. The image in the mirror ceases to be the primary form of the self. In the final phase, then, there are docu-

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mented cases of people turning to plastic surgeons for changes that would allow them to resemble – “themselves”.

Why should such an unusual phenomenon be the subject of a philosophical study? I believe that, rather than thinking of it as an aberration and a pathological phenomenon, it is necessary to see that it is an essential phenomenon of the present, which amplifies a significant transformation of human self-conception. It is a radical case of the interpenetration of the virtual and the “real” world, where somatic nature and artificial appearance collide, where the boundaries between model and imitation, image and archetype, are broken down.

This study seeks to analyse the problem of Snapchat dysmorphia as a case of coming to terms with the consequences of hyperreality, with the new era of phantasm and simulacra, and above all, to show that the debate or controversy of Snapchat dysmorphia takes place in the context of an unacknowledged effort to defend the inviolability and sanctity of human nature. But is the human being a natural being?

In the first part, I will discuss the technological precursors of the Snapchat dysmorphia phenomenon: social networks, selfies, and filters. I will then comment on the research that has recently been devoted to Snapchat dysmorphia. In the second part, I approach the issue through the prism of the hyperreality controversy, and by referring to Baudrillard and Deleuze’s two different conceptions of simulacra. Finally, I aim to illustrate the degree to which Snapchat dysmorphia is characterised by a context of binary oppositional thinking, namely, a fundamental dualism and its implicit connection to the idea of an inviolable bodily nature. Nature (or rather, corporeality and its complementary notion of culture or thought) will be opposed by the traditional notion of the human *second nature*, based on the 19<sup>th</sup> century authors. Second nature will be understood as a habitualised practice whose consequence is bodily appropriation, incorporation – a bodily transformation, a bodily manifestation of those habituated and automatised behaviours, habits, with which one identifies.

## 1. Snapchat dysmorphia

If we want to analyse the phenomenon of Snapchat dysmorphia, we must first demonstrate in what context this phenomenon makes sense and present the key assumptions underlying it. First of all, there are fundamental technological precursors. The intention here is not to recapitulate the technical side of these precursors, but to note the connection between technologies and users that is gradually formed by these preconditions.

Among these technological precursors, of course, it is primarily the social networks themselves which have radically and qualitatively surpassed the chat rooms and messenger-boards of the 1990s and have therefore become one of the innovations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I emphasise the significant difference between the nature of social interaction on the Internet in the last century and in the current one, primarily because the new social networks, in contrast to the characteristic anonymity of the forums and chat rooms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, link a user's "civil" identity to their online profile.<sup>1</sup> Whereas older communication technology promotes an online persona that can very easily be separated from the real person (as in popular culture's clichéd hackers), and even the two may not resemble each other, social networks (here, especially Facebook, Instagram) are built on the principle of self-presentation in online space. It does not mean that anonymity or complete dissimilarity of the persona of the user and the online persona of the same is passé. Rather, the argument that helps us understand the phenomenon of Snapchat dysmorphia is that social networks have established a specific relationship between the online and offline worlds of the user. In what sense is it specific? In contrast to the way we might think of 20<sup>th</sup> century forums and chat rooms, *today's social networks users are accountable for their online presence*. The implications of this self-presentation are not limited to cyberspace but have relevance in the world of work or partnership, lead, as we see very often right now, to legal sanctions and, more interestingly in relation to our topic, are a crucial identity factor. Social belonging, respect, recognition, and of course a sense of self-esteem, all of these aspects of identity are today closely linked to our online footprint. And this footprint is mainly in the form of social media profiles.

The second technological invention, which exceeds its apparent banality in terms of its consequences, is photographic self-portrait, abbreviated as a selfie. The selfie does not make sense without social networks, because it is not, in terms of its implications and meaning, a documentary or private, family photograph, like the photographs that date back to the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nor is it entirely possible to regard as a selfie an accidental photograph in which the photographer turns the camera on himself/herself. The selfie is specifically a tool of self-presentation on social networks, and it is not documentary or private, but is taken in the context of, and for the

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1 Cf. Dreyfus, H. L., *On the Internet: Thinking in Action*. London, Routledge 2001. For a discussion of anonymity on the Internet and a critical response to Dreyfus' original contribution, cf. Vallor, S., *Social Networking and Ethics*. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 2023. Available online at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/ethics-social-networking/> [cit. June 1, 2023].

sake of, social networks. If the folder of photographs on a user's Smartphone contains an order of magnitude more selfies than have been posted on social networks, this does not mean that the “unpublished” selfies have not, to one degree or another of conscious activity, of conscious choice, been judged in relation to their usability for social networks. In other words: a photographic self-portrait is not a selfie unless posted on a social network.



Parmigianino's *Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror* (c. 1524) contains all the visual hallmarks of a selfie. It is not, however, a selfie proper. A selfie is not defined simply as a self-portrait, not even a self-portrait “at arm's length”. (Public domain, Wikimedia.org)

Cambre and Lavrence define the selfie primarily as a social practice at the boundary between the online and offline worlds, and at the same time, as a genre different from traditional photographic self-portraits. Their distinctive feature lies in the fact that they are shared on social media, use the camera of a mobile phone, evoke specific, ritualised, emotional responses, and finally are not only a subject, but also a gesture.<sup>2</sup>

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2 Cambre, M.-C. – Lavrence, C., *Towards a Sociology of Selfies: The Filtered Face*. London, Routledge 2023.

A selfie is not a picture of who we are. The relationship between the person taking a selfie and the selfie itself is not mimetic. The main feature of the selfie is precisely its presentability. The selfie is not a mirror (and if anything, a convex mirror),<sup>3</sup> but rather a projection field, a construction framework within which we shape a carefully considered, nurtured, and intended image of our media personas.

However, these two technologies are brought to a higher qualitative level by a third innovation, which is of fundamental interest to us. From the abovementioned, it follows that self-presentation through the selfie involves a conscious effort to choose the form of the media persona we publicly exhibit. This conscious effort does not only involve composition, angle, lighting, and other aspects of traditional photography. It is also not exhausted by a concern for facial expression, for an aesthetic appeal that can be influenced without further technological intervention. The second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century brings new technologies, namely “big data” and artificial intelligence tools (neural networks), the immediate consequence of which for the selfie is the emergence of a third innovation: filters.<sup>4</sup>

Filters are a complementary extension of popular social networks. With the help of filters, the users can noticeably modify their selfies. The editing options are countless: from turning into animals, modifying clothes, background, etc., to, above all, significantly changing the appearance of the face. Filters can rejuvenate or, on the contrary, simulate aging, they can showcase the user in many comical or parodic modifications. However, filters that conspicuously reveal their intended purpose at first sight, and thereby declare their illusiveness, their “unreality”, are irrelevant. What is essential to Snapchat dysmorphia is that type of editing by filters which “augment”, enhance and improve the selfie. Typical edits are those that smooth the skin, widen the eyes, narrow the jaw line, firm (and enlarge) the lips, smooth nasolabial folds, and more.

Augmentation is a simple tool that allows users to remove unwanted aesthetic features from their (selfie) faces. It is noticeable that several important considerations come together here: filtered photographs are the elaboration and consequence of the meaning of the selfie, which is self-presentation. In

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3 Cf. Ward, B. – Ward, M. – Fried, O. – Paskhover, B., Nasal Distortion in Short-Distance Photographs: The Selfie Effect. *JAMA Facial Plastic Surgery*, 20, 2018, No. 4, pp. 333–335.

4 An overview study is offered by e.g. Mihaila, R. – Braniste, L., Digital Semantics of Beauty Apps and Filters: Big Data-Driven Facial Retouching, Aesthetic Self-Monitoring Devices, and Augmented Reality-Based Body-Enhancing Technologies. *Journal of Research in Gender Studies*, 11, 2021, No. 2, pp. 100–112.

fact, they allow this self-presentation to be even more intentional, so that users are better detached from the initial image that is the initial selfie (and then, of course, from the substrate of the photograph, which is ultimately one's own face). Users' cyber-identities are presented on social media, and the intentionality of self-presentation does not happen regardless of aesthetic standards and considerations of beauty. Filter technology seems to allow users to approach these demands on their own terms. Finally, it radically contrasts the "unmodified" and the "modified" (augmented) form of the user. I will comment briefly on this last point:

Borgmann, in his book *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* characterises the phenomena of hyperreality by three aspects: brilliance, richness, and pliability.<sup>5</sup> Brilliance corresponds to the specific brightness or distinctness of the selfie. The selfie avoids presenting "its" user in a bad light, so to speak (optically and semantically). Second, it brings richness in the sense that it is revealing, stable, and therefore subject to a far greater degree of intensity of the viewer's gaze than in ordinary social interactions. The selfie gives a fuller picture, a richer picture, because it is a presentation that cannot obscure anything. From a more fundamental point of view, the selfie is an appropriation of the dialectic of covering up, it is the exposure of a covered face. Obscured insofar as it need not show anything that the user does not want to be seen. The third characteristic is pliability, which has the most significant implications for us. Pliability here, again following Borgmann's analysis, corresponds to the loss of the resistance of objectivity. The substrate of the photograph, the face itself, is not ultimately the binding factor of the resulting selfie. The mimetic principle is fully trumped by the constructive principle. Self-presentation is the exposure of the "self" as a work, as a product.<sup>6</sup>

After this initial introduction of the context and technological precursors, I now proceed to the phenomenon of Snapchat dysmorphia itself.

The prevalence, even ubiquity, of filters and filtered photographs is such that it can be argued that they are becoming an aesthetic norm, or socio-

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5 Borgmann, A., *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*. Chicago–London, University of Chicago Press 1992, p. 83.

6 The selfie can be thought of as a self-portrait in the sense of constructing a narrative, Shipley speaks of synecdochic selfies. Shipley, J. W. Selfie Love: Public Lives in an Era of Celebrity Pleasure, Violence, and Social Media. *American Anthropologist*, 117, 2015, No. 2, pp. 403–413. "Even pictures of food and other shared photos participate in our selfie image on social media. In terms of the relationship between the user and self-presentation, it is a relationship between the producer and the work: one imagines oneself as a sort of curator-in-chief, reigning supreme over one's social media profile." Crano, R., The Real Terror of Instagram: Death and Disindividuation in the Social Media Scopic Field. *Convergence*, 25, 2019, No. 5–6, p. 1133.

cultural standard.<sup>7</sup> The tradition of photo editing goes once again back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but we see some fundamental differences. Edited photographs used to be usually, firstly, the work of a professional (portrait, or art photography), and therefore involve an unrealistic investment (of time, materials, and skills), and do not have the mass appeal of the filtered selfie; secondly, they do not make the same aesthetic claim on photographs as is the norm today. Edited and retouched photographs used to be the standard for celebrities on the pages of magazines. And then, whether their enhancement is apparent or not, they seem to emphasise the divide between photographs of “ordinary people” and “stars”.<sup>8</sup> This aspect also plays a role in our analysis, for what occurs is, paradoxically, a problematic democratisation of the enhanced appearance. Self-representation, which has the possibility to use the tools of filters, seems to be deprived of the right to imperfection.

Today, therefore, we cannot fail to observe the fundamental consequences of this technology and the aesthetic paradigm it inevitably brings with it: anxiety and feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, social exclusion and, in extreme cases, suicide.

The habitualisation and ubiquity of the selfie as a tool of self-presentation on social media has resulted in the selfie being the primary self-image for many, and playing an increasingly important role in how we see (or have an idea of) ourselves. This is even to the extent that, as the recent research discussed below illustrates, there is a confusion and loss of perception of what the person in question looks like without filters, or other than in a selfie. This is not to say that the image in the mirror would cease to remind us of a different face than the one produced by the filtered selfie. It only means that the face in the mirror ceases to have the character of reality and authenticity. Ontologically, the face in the mirror is an inappropriate representation, a phantasm.<sup>9</sup>

Snapchat dysmorphia is therefore a phenomenon of critical and acute incongruence between two images of the self. On the one hand, the image we see in the mirror, on the other, the filtered selfie.

In medical terms, Snapchat dysmorphia is a form of body dysmorphic (or dysmorphophobic) disorder. According to the American Psychiatric As-

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7 Cf. Tremblay, S. C. – Tremblay, S. E. – Poirier, P., From Filters to Fillers: An Active Inference Approach to Body Image Distortion in the Selfie Era. *AI and Society*, 36, 2021, No. 1, pp. 33–48.

8 Keats, J., Jargon Watch: Snapchat Dysmorphia. *Wired*, 26, 2018, No. 11, p. 22.

9 I am referring to the mirror only from the point of view of a “folk psychology”: in this sense, the mirror presents us with the “real” image of ourselves. I am not, however, arguing that the mirror image constitutes a true mimesis.

sociation (APA) and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) is classified on the obsessive-compulsive spectrum. Persons suffering from BDD focus on one or more nonexistent or mild defects in their physical appearance. They think about their defect very often, usually for at least an hour a day, and this compulsive disorder impacts their social, occupational, and other levels of life.<sup>10</sup>

In the case of Snapchat dysmorphia, the obsessive-compulsive need or dissatisfaction relates to the image with which such persons are confronted in the mirror. Their “natural” appearance is, in other words, what they consider to be inappropriate, a defect.

What are the consequences of this situation? The fundamental reason why Snapchat dysmorphia has become the topic of heated discussion is because of reports from plastic surgeons about unexpected requests from their clients. They were asking for procedures based on their own photographs or filtered selfies.

In one of the first reports, K. Ramphul and S. G. Mejias in 2018 described cases where patients requested such modifications to resemble their filtered selfies.<sup>11</sup> The report highlights the ethical issues of such procedures, and recommends that surgeons take note of red flags, and offer clients professional psychological and psychiatric help.

Note, however, that the authors are also discussing the possibility of lawsuits being brought against Snapchat or Instagram by patients who would argue that the filtered selfies gave them the wrong idea of what they look like. The second point that explicitly appears here is the concern that “the common man is losing perspectives on what he/she actually looks like due to these two social media applications [Snapchat and Instagram, JM].”<sup>12</sup>

Other authors have addressed the topic in a more in-depth 2019 study when they attempted to understand Snapchat dysmorphia as a type of “dysfunctional self-modelling, which entails maladaptive internalisation of sociocultural preferences during adolescent identity formation.”<sup>13</sup> Using the analytical tool of body schema, they consider the self not as an entity, but as a process of representation. The phenomenological research of S. Gallagher and D. Zahavi understands this schema as an unconscious or pre-reflective process, but one that can reach the level of conscious activity.<sup>14</sup> The body

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10 Tremblay, S. C. – Tremblay, S. E. – Poirier, P., From Filters to Fillers.

11 Ramphul, K. – Mejias, S. G., Is “Snapchat Dysmorphia” a Real Issue? *Cureus*, 10, 2018, No. 3, e2263.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

13 Tremblay, S. C. – Tremblay, S. E. – Poirier, P., From Filters to Fillers, p. 33.

14 Gallagher, S. – Zahavi, D., *The Phenomenological Mind: An Introduction to Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Science*. London, Routledge 2008.



schema is then to be distinguished from body image, which is a representation used to monitor the body, or a “form of a pre-reflective bodily self-awareness.”<sup>15</sup>

These two structures interact with each other, they are co-constructed. Tremblay et al. propose to think of their relationship as an “active inference framework, [in which] body schema and body image form a hierarchical continuum of body representations that interact hierarchically in a bidirectional manner.”<sup>16</sup>

Body dysmorphic disorders are then “maladaptive internalisation of sociocultural norms.”<sup>17</sup> That is, these individuals with body dysmorphic disorder make conscious attempts to cope with their own deficiencies over time, habitualising behaviours that eventually become obsessive. The process, the authors argue, involves a degree of automation. And this is where, they suggest, the main problem lies. Habitualisation, internalisation, and automatisa-tion are important elements of this disorder. I will return to these aspects of Snapchat dysmorphia below, in relation to the topic of second nature.

Let us more precisely distinguish where the novelty of the Snapchat dysmorphia phenomenon lies in relation to plastic surgery. Indeed, plastic surgery has undergone a great evolution since its beginnings, when it was mainly used in its reconstructive role (burns, war veterans, etc.)<sup>18</sup> and its domain has become the various modifications that are undoubtedly related to the hierarchical relationship between body schema and body image that I discussed earlier. Rejuvenation procedures, such as face lifting, body fat removal (liposuction), can be seen as ways in which a person seeks, on the level of conscious activity, to stabilise or bring into balance the self-image and the body schema. For a long time, plastic surgery has been meeting the demands of clients who require modifications based on photographs of famous people.<sup>19</sup> Finally, the most notable example of efforts to reverse the mismatch between body schema and body image is transformative gender reassignment.

The field of medical ethics must come to terms with the distinction between the legitimacy and illegitimacy of requests for plastic surgery. Some of these entail psychological and psychiatric assessments, others do not. In the case of Snapchat dysmorphia, it is too early to judge what standards or procedures will be established, but we see in any case that its classification

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15 Tremblay, S. C. – Tremblay, S. E. – Poirier, P., *From Filters to Fillers*, p. 35.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

18 Cf. Scuderi, N. – Toth, B. A. (eds.), *International Textbook of Aesthetic Surgery*. Berlin–Heidelberg, Springer 2016.

19 Cf. Anon., *Snapchat Dysmorphia Becoming Too Common*. *USA Today*, 147, 2018, No. 2883, pp. 12–13.

as a disorder and the way cases are judged so far tend for the time being to reject the legitimacy of these interventions. The standard practice now is for surgeons to offer therapy and psychological help to their clients, instead of aesthetic interventions.<sup>20</sup>

But let's look at this phenomenon from another side. In research by Robert Christel, Steven Dayan, Moriyike Akinosa, and Peter Russell in 2021 the aim was to investigate the first impression of photographs on random evaluators.<sup>21</sup> A group of ten people were asked to take different photographs, which were then evaluated by 240 research participants. What kind of photographs were they? Firstly, a normal selfie, then a selfie with standardised filters applied to this type of photo of all ten people. The third photo was taken with the back camera of a mobile phone (here it was an iPhone 7 Plus), and the fourth photo was taken with a Nikon digital SLR camera.

The differences between the individual photographs are undeniably noticeable, and it is almost difficult to consider all four photographs to be of the same person.

Surprisingly, there was a fundamental discrepancy between which photograph was considered the best by the photographers themselves, and which made the best impression on the evaluators. Five out of ten identified a normal selfie as their best, another four a filtered selfie, and only in one case a DSLR photo. However, according to the evaluators, the DSLR photo received the highest scores.

The implication of the research was that surgeons who encounter clients who request adjustments based on a selfie are advised to first show these clients a DSLR photo. This is because there is a possibility that clients will suddenly realise that they look better than they thought.

Let us consider the paradoxical situation even more closely. One of the most common issues these clients want to address is the width of the nose. A filtered selfie solves this problem, but a normal selfie shows the nose differently. However, it is not necessarily a matter of the face that the nose belongs to. In fact, in selfies, and sometimes filtered selfies, the nose appears up to 30 % wider due to the optical properties, distance from the subject, and the characteristics of the camera. Selfies are taken from a much closer distance than portrait photos are taken.<sup>22</sup> This is also why in the research

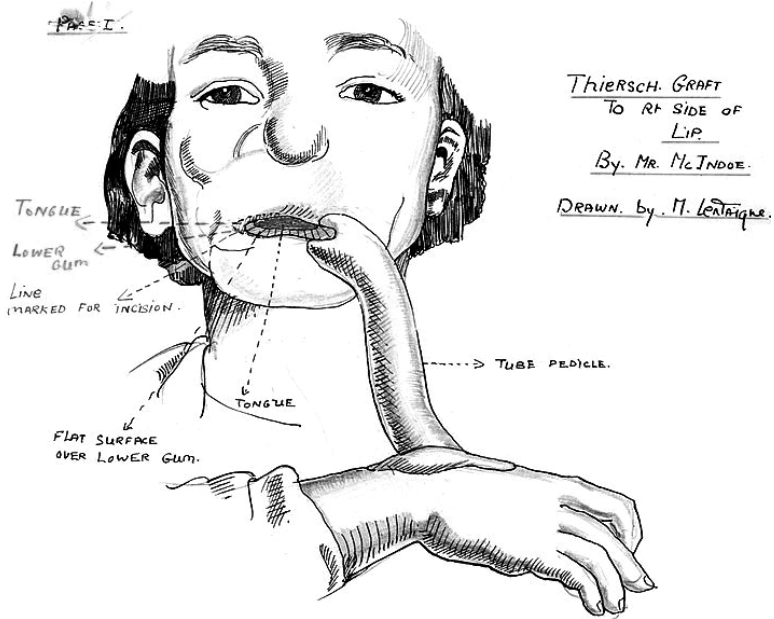
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20 Cf. Abbas, L. – Hamzeh, D., Body Dysmorphic Features among Snapchat Users of “Beauty-Retouching of Selfies” and Its Relationship with Quality of Life. *Media Asia*, 49, 2022, No. 3, pp. 196–212; Ramphul, K. – Mejias, S. G., Is “Snapchat Dysmorphia” a Real Issue?

21 Cristel, R. T. – Dayan, S. H. – Akinosun, M. – Russell, P. T., Evaluation of Selfies and Filtered Selfies and Effects on First Impressions. *Aesthetic Surgery Journal*, 41, 2021, No. 1, pp. 122–130.

22 Cf. Ward, B. – et al., Nasal Distortion in Short-Distance Photographs: The Selfie Effect.

the evaluators rated selfies as inferior, as they give the person a slightly unnatural appearance.



Mollie Lentaigne's drawing of a Thiersch graft to the right side of a lip. Mollie Lentaigne was one of the pioneers of medical art in the field of plastic surgery. The relationship between art and plastic surgery is inconspicuously rich: "It can be argued that the ability of a medical artist to enhance, emphasise or omit certain aspects of the operative scene is what made (and continues to make) medical illustrations more valuable than photography in the documentation of surgical procedures." (Baldwin, A. J., *Illustrating plastic surgery: the past, present and future. The Bulletin of the Royal College of Surgeons of England*, 105, 2003, No. 2, p. 56) The inherent aesthetic quality of this branch of surgery also results in the observed fact that "many patients see and value their plastic surgeons as artists." (Goldwyn, R. M., *The plastic surgeon as an artist. Plastic & Reconstructive Surgery*, 112, 2003, No. 1, p. 327) Or, for example, J. P. Webster has advocated the idea of plastic surgery as art using Aristotle's dictum: "Art indeed consists in the conception of the result to be produced before its realisation in the material." (Webster, J. P., Foreword. In: Gillies, H. – Millard, R. – Magill, I., *Principles and Art of Plastic Surgery* 3, Boston, Little–Brown 1957. Cf. Fernandes, J. W., *The Legacy of Art in Plastic Surgery. Plast Reconstr Surg Glob Open*, 9, 2021, No. 4). (Public domain, Wikimedia.org)

At the same time, compared with preoperative imaging software, such as Vectra (Canfield Scientific, NJ), which can be used to display changes during the preoperative consultation, filtered selfies do not display realistic results. The filtered selfie makes significant changes in several areas of the face that may not be achievable, or would require multiple interventions to achieve,

most typically eye size. At the same time, filtered selfies often create a more feminine appearance, and therefore can create a more negative first impression for men.<sup>23</sup>

Snapchat dysmorphia is therefore a complex phenomenon in which the relationship between model and imitation, archetype, and image, is constantly mirrored at the level of everyday life, at the level of social networks, and finally at the level of photography as a template for aesthetic surgery.

In a logical sequence, the first stage is the unrepresented face itself. The second step is the selfie, which constructs, rather than mirrors, creates, rather than faithfully depicts, that face. In the third step, this selfie is adjusted by filters that correct some deficiencies (deficiencies in the sense of what the filter algorithm focuses on as requiring adjustment). Among these imperfections, ironically, is the optical imperfection of the selfie itself, such as the aforementioned width of the nose. In the fourth step, clients attempt to undergo aesthetic surgical procedures to give them an appearance that matches not their own appearance (in the sense of looking in the mirror), but that matches the filtered selfie.

Summarising these steps, we can see in which direction our analysis must proceed. Between the model and the image, between the face and the selfie, there is no relation of faithful representation, but an image emerges, a filtered selfie that does not, in the sense of adequate representation, have a model, but is – a simulacrum. The face that is supposed to resemble this model is itself a simulacrum. Of course, I have yet to substantiate this thesis.

## 2. Hyperreality, Simulacrum, and the Second Nature of Snapchat Dysmorphia

Selfies, social networks, and finally Snapchat dysmorphia itself are instances of hyperreality. The selfie specifically reduplicates reality, doubling or multiplying the original. This initial determination, however, is fundamentally flawed. For it gives the impression of a hierarchical or dependent relationship between the selfie and the substrate that is the face. Let us therefore look more closely at the problem of hyperreality.

The two original source authors are Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard. Eco uses the term hyperreality in his essays from the 1970s<sup>24</sup> where the author focuses on the problem of reduplication:

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23 Cristel, R. T. – et al., Evaluation of Selfies and Filtered Selfies and Effects on First Impressions, p. 128.

24 Eco, U., *Travels in Hyperreality*. San Diego, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1986.

Hyperreality is, to the maximum extent, a reality-like imitation. The examples Eco analyses are Disneyland or the Eiffel Tower in Las Vegas. The dialectic of the hyperreal gives the imitation the status of the hyperreal, that is, more real than the real, a near perfection. That which in its original sense stood behind the bulwark of a Benjaminian aura is suddenly within reach, relegated from exclusivity to accessibility.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, this hyperreality is endowed with the clarity and distinctness of hyper-detail, of hyper-presence. Paradoxically, the apparent copy or the apparent substitute, the imitation, serves the ultimate needs of a sense of reality. “This is the reason for this journey into hyperreality, in search of instances where the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake [...]”<sup>26</sup> Of course, in the same dialectic, the accessibility and perceptibility of the hyperreal is given hand in hand with its consumability, and the reduplication in the sense of repetition of the model takes the form of technical reproducibility, the endless production of imitation.<sup>27</sup> Is the model then anything more than an inaccessible chimera, which even when we see the “real” Eiffel Tower ceases to be distinguishable from the imitation? Eco’s analysis of hyperreality paves the way to the collapse of the category of the real, and to the infinite regress of imitation.

Baudrillard precisely explicates the way in which reality collapses into hyperrealism, how, in the end – exactly in the logic of the inaccessibility and chimerical nature of the model – it gives way to the “fetishism of the lost object: no longer the object of representation, but the ecstasy of denial and of its own ritual extermination: the hyperreal.”<sup>28</sup>

Baudrillard understands the real as that which can have a corresponding representation.<sup>29</sup> This fundamental relation is demolished in hyperreality, everything that is, is always already reproduced, it is reduced to the level of the aesthetic hallucination of reality, and then the original status of the original and the representation loses its meaning. In his programmatic thesis, Baudrillard says unequivocally that “today, *reality itself is hyperrealistic*.”<sup>30</sup>

For Baudrillard, the context and fundamental justification of the meaning of the hyperreal is also the attempt to restore the real. It is once again a dialectic of imitation that, insofar as it seeks to be as faithful a copy as possible,

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25 Cf. Benjamin, W., *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp 2003.

26 Eco, U., *Travels in Hyperreality*, p. 8.

27 Cf. Benjamin, W., *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*.

28 Baudrillard, J., *Selected Writings*. Ed. Mark Poster. Cambridge, Polity 2004, p. 145.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 145n.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 144.

denies the model the status of the exclusive, but at the same time simulates reality through this hyperrealism. The choice of material or media representation serves the goal of being as adequate as possible.

The cycle of analysis and ultimately critique of hyperreality ends with the moralising comments of Albert Borgmann. His “postmodern realism” is an attempt “to outgrow technology as a way of life and to put it in the service of reality, of the things that command our respect and grace our life.”<sup>31</sup> Hyperreality, according to Borgmann, is undoubtedly an artificial reality, whose relation to reality is not indifferent, or not an extension, an enrichment, but literally an assault on reality. Borgmann contemplates a limited or instrumental hyperreality, which is still limited by the reality principle,<sup>32</sup> while the *final hyperreality* is the unlimited rule of this reality displacing or denying technologically conditioned artificial reality.

I have already mentioned three aspects of hyperreality, which for Borgmann are brilliance, richness, and pliability. Hyperreality is, to use a deliberately normative term that fully corresponds to Borgmann’s intention, an unfair competition, for in it the “artificial” world stands out without resistance, much more easily, more quickly, but also in a hyperreal degree of detail, of splendour, which suddenly replaces, as it were, the less accessible, less pliable, “slow” world of reality.

In Ecoian hyperreality, the selfie emerges as a hyperreal correlate, the one that abolishes the distinction between the real and the fake. It is more real than the real, it is the true appearance. Baudrillard similarly shows that the specific characteristic of the hyperreal photograph is its surreal objectivity, namely its detail, its complexity.<sup>33</sup> Although the photograph depicts, its depiction is above all an amplification. We are back to Borgmann’s triptych of the properties of hyperreality: brilliance, richness, and pliability.

However, behind the logic of the interpretation of hyperreality in these cases looms the nostalgic desire for reality. In Baudrillard, hyperreality as reality itself is not a legitimate new reality, but a derivative, almost a perversion or Borgmann’s assault on reality. Or, as we have seen especially in Eco, it is always, as it were, an attempt to reconquer the paradise of reality, an attempt to find something true in this Baudrillardian “desert of the real”.<sup>34</sup> However, it is precisely the desperate attempt to conquer the real that causes the desert to spread. The real is a hyperreality in the sense of a semantic desolation; it is the invalidation of reality, the loss of the substratum of the real.

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31 Borgmann, A., *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*, p. 82.

32 Borgmann does not, however, provide a clear definition of his “reality principle”, cf. *ibid.*, p. 87.

33 Cf. Baudrillard, J., *Because Illusion and Reality Are Not Opposed*. In: Baudrillard, J. – Guillaume, M., *Radical Alterity*. Los Angeles, Semiotext(e) 2008, pp. 145–158.

34 Baudrillard, J., *Selected Writings*, p. 166.

But here I think we see the root of the Snapchat dysmorphia problem, including the ethical dilemmas of cosmetic surgeons. They seem to be standing guard over this fading reality under the attack of hyperreality. The face that is supposed to change according to the model that is the filtered selfie seems to have ceased to be a true, real, even natural face. However, a practice that seems to be universally accepted, and which, at least in the 2008 research, plays a large role in the model based on which clients undergo plastic surgery, is wanting to look – especially in specifics – like celebrities. Angelina Jolie’s lips are the most common example.<sup>35</sup>

What is the fundamental difference between the requirement to resemble your filtered selfie and the requirement to resemble a famous actor, actress, or singer? One possible reading of this difference, in my judgment, is that in the first case we encounter the logic of simulation, or the model for plastic surgery is a reality in reference to which imitation makes sense. The face does change, but according to a legitimate model. In the second sense, we encounter a simulacrum, the “unreality” of the model. And the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the model is negotiated on the basis of belonging to the regime of simulation (mimesis) or simulacrum. The binary oppositions of reality and unreality, the real and the artificial, the natural and the unnatural, decide the basic position of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of surgical interventions.

The simulacrum with a negative normative meaning is the legacy of Baudrillard’s analyses.<sup>36</sup> But we can hardly characterise the phenomenon of Snapchat dysmorphia better than as an exemplary case of the logic of simulacra. The face here becomes a simulacrum, it becomes such a likeness, such an image whose similarity to the model lies in its dissimilarity. It is an effort to resemble oneself as a differentiation from oneself. The new form, the new appearance, is established in a space independent of the “true” face of such a person, but without being an imitation of any other model. It is a “non-similarity” that nevertheless relates, in this non-similarity, to the original face as its source. It is a simulacrum.

Against the notion of simulacra as an assault on reality stands the conception of Deleuze.<sup>37</sup> Deleuze turns to Plato’s original view of the simulacrum as a perverse, deviant imitation. The simulacrum, unlike the (faithful) copy, ac-

35 Cf. Ohlden, A., Surgery; Celebrity Influences on Plastic Surgery. *Science* 2.0, 2008. Available online at [www: https://www.science20.com/newswire/celebrity\\_influences\\_on\\_plastic\\_surgery](https://www.science20.com/newswire/celebrity_influences_on_plastic_surgery) [cit. 1. 6. 2023]; Tijerina, J. D. – Morrison, S. D. – Nolan, I. T. – et al., Celebrity Influence Affecting Public Interest in Plastic Surgery Procedures: Google Trends Analysis. *Aesthetic Plastic Surgery*, 43, 2019, No. 6, pp. 1669–1680.

36 Most importantly, of course, in *Simulacra and simulation*. See Baudrillard, J., *Simulacres et Simulation*. Paris, Galilée 1981.

37 Deleuze, G., The Simulacrum and Ancient Philosophy. In: *The Logic of Sense*. London, Athlone Press 1990, pp. 253–279.

quires its resemblance to the model, the archetype, illegitimately, without, in fact, fulfilling mimesis in a spiritual sense. It is then true that “the simulacrum is not simply a false copy, but that it places in question the very notations of copy and model.”<sup>38</sup>

Deleuze’s analysis concludes that “the simulacrum is built upon a disparity or upon a difference. It internalises a dissimilarity.”<sup>39</sup> However, here, in the order of the simulacrum, we discover a reactionary force, a resistance to the almost Levinasian totalising power of the same, or to the claim of Platonism to be “the domain of representation filled by copies-icons, and defined not by an extrinsic relation to an object, but by an intrinsic relation to the model or foundation. The Platonic model is the same [...]”<sup>40</sup> Against each other stand these two distinct and mutually contradictory orders: the identity order of mimesis and the differential order of inequality of simulacra. For Deleuze, these two orders are equally legitimate, even though the European tradition is dominated by the pursuit of the Platonic ideal of identity. Above all, however, “these are two distinct readings of the world: one invites us to think difference from the standpoint of a previous similitude or identity; whereas the other invites us to think similitude and even identity as the product of a deep disparity.”<sup>41</sup>

The simulacrum here acquires an unquestionable legitimacy and, in Deleuze’s reading, is neither derivative (with respect to the real, with respect to the model) nor unreal (since the yardstick of the reality-sameness is dissolved in the view of the world in general as a phantasm). The dualism of reality-virtuality, of model-image, of true-fake, is the reign of identity against which Deleuze defends the essential right of difference and disparity. Even more so: “The simulacrum is not a degraded copy. It harbours a positive power which denies the *original and the copy, the model and the reproduction*.”<sup>42</sup>

What do we take away from the two conceptions of simulacra? First of all, a specific dialectic of thinking about the plasticity, that is naturalness and unnaturalness of the face. The face, thought of as natural, is the last vestige of the true, the identical. It is an accidental givenness that therefore, as an uncorrupted paradise of the original human condition, resists the power of virtualisation and hyperreality. But is it really the case? Plastic surgery that alters the appearance of the face is an intrusion on this natural order, but it

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38 Ibid., p. 256.

39 Ibid., p. 258.

40 Ibid., p. 259.

41 Ibid., p. 261.

42 Ibid., p. 262. However, there is a final consideration of Deleuze’s notion of simulacrum: simulacrum is not identical with artificiality. “The artificial is always a copy of a copy, which should be pushed to the point where it changes its nature and is reversed into the simulacrum.” Ibid., p. 265.



is equally a subversive rejection of nature as a binding norm, a conscious attempt at self-creation. We can even say that it is a spontaneous attempt to break out of this oppressive domain of the natural, and to give oneself a form that is not governed by natural givenness.

As paradoxical as it sounds, Snapchat dysmorphia carries with it the claim of breaking free from the power of the model, which is identity with one's own haphazard appearance. It is subversive and nihilistic because it is a choice of *one's own* face as *different*. It is a choice of the self as Other.

This reading of the Snapchat dysmorphia phenomenon notes the subtle, unacknowledged, but crucial role played by dualistic thinking, thinking in oppositions of right/wrong, real/virtual. Thinking in binary oppositions is frequent in the context of social networks and IT more generally. The distinction between the real and the virtual, online, and offline, work and play, production and consumption, as clearly separate spheres, has already been critiqued.<sup>43</sup> The order of hyperreality abolishes this distinction, but the question remains as to what consequences such abolition leads to. We have seen that, on the one hand, it can be understood as a nostalgic desire for the restoration or return of reality, which hyperreality had turned into a phantasm. Or, in the case of Deleuze's logic of simulacra, it means, on the contrary, the recognition of the positive value of difference and differentiation. The binary oppositions discussed here are always normative and postulate within each pair a hierarchy of the elements. The pairs consist of the positive vs. negative, legitimate vs. illegitimate, original vs. derived.

The key item in this implicit logic of binary opposites, which determines normative thinking about Snapchat dysmorphia, is the relation of natural/unnatural, or natural/artificial. Then again, how can we legitimately speak of human nature at all?

A characteristic example of the defence of human nature is Habermas' reasoning, which primarily targets the problem of genetic engineering.<sup>44</sup> For Habermas, the post-metaphysical age in which we live is the loss of the defining models or images of humanity resulting in the threat of moral indifference or anarchy. His solution, from an ethical point of view, is the perspective of a non-metaphysical criterion of a good or successful life, a life in the sense of "undisturbed self-existence", "being-able-to-be-oneself".<sup>45</sup>

Habermas asks whether it is possible to "be oneself" if the somatic substrate of who I am is not a random given, but the result of purposeful in-

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43 Cf. Johnson, N. F. – Keane, H., Internet Addiction? Temporality and Life Online in the Networked Society. *Time and Society*, 26, 2017, No. 3, pp. 267–285.

44 Habermas, J., *The Future of Human Nature*. Cambridge, Polity Press 2003.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

tervention. “For as soon as adults treat the desirable genetic traits of their descendants as a product they can shape according to a design of their own liking, they are exercising a kind of control over their genetically manipulated offspring that intervenes in the somatic bases of another person’s spontaneous relation-to-self and ethical freedom.”<sup>46</sup> For Habermas, it is the contingency or unintentionality of the somatic basis that is the prerequisite for the possibility or ability to be oneself; in other words: nature. And because of genetic engineering, “the boundary between the nature that we ‘are’ and the organic endowments we ‘give’ ourselves disappears.”<sup>47</sup> The hypostasising of nature as an accidental somatic foundation leads Habermas to the consequence that the only relation one can legitimately take to such a bodily substrate is a “*revisionary* self-understanding”<sup>48</sup> or reflexive moral self-understanding of a Kierkegaardian kind. The power to be oneself here explicitly refers to Kierkegaard’s conception of the self in *The Sickness unto Death*.<sup>49</sup> This relation presupposes that I must also take charge of my own body, to take a balanced relation to my corporeality.

But do we have to relate to the body as natural, a given, an accidental bodily substrate that is inviolable? Is the possibility of free, authentic, self-relationship, the ability to be oneself, limited to a reflexive acceptance, an embracing of this given body?<sup>50</sup>

We have already seen that the Snapchat dysmorphia phenomenon includes habitualisation, internalisation, and automation. It is the result of such a habitualised practice in which a different idea of one’s own face is gradually formed, an idea with which the user identifies and literally becomes accustomed to. In the last part of this analysis, therefore, I will try to see Snapchat dysmorphia through the lens of the idea of second nature. Crucially, *second* nature is not understood here as merely a cultural superstructure against which *first* nature is a somatic substrate, but we will see that the consequence of thinking about second nature in authors such as Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche is to abolish the constitutive distinction between bodily nature and culture as a kind of superorganic sphere *sui generis*.<sup>51</sup>

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46 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

49 Kierkegaard, S., *Sygdommen til døden*. In: *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter 11*. Copenhagen, Gads forlag 2006, pp. 115–242.

50 In the context of Kierkegaard and gender identity, see Norman, O., *Despair and Gender Identity*. Reading Kierkegaard in a Queer Light. In: *Kierkegaard and Issues in Contemporary Ethics*. Ed. M. Fox-Muratton. Berlin–New York, De Gruyter 2020, pp. 253–272.

51 By this distinction I refer to Kroeber’s famous superorganic conception of culture. See Kroeber, A., *The Superorganic*. *American Anthropologist*, 19, 1917, No. 2, pp. 163–213.

The motif of second nature is currently relegated to the position of an intellectual curiosity or an ornamental description of the fact that we consider ourselves as fundamentally non-instinctual beings who, like animals, need certain automated, immediate reactions to everyday situations. These reactions, automated responses, are then understood as second nature or as learned, habitualised behaviour. The key difference is the cultural or enculturated character of second nature. It is not part of a person's "natural" (in the sense of "first" nature) genetic or evolutionary makeup, but must be acquired, is culturally disseminated, and is part of socialisation.<sup>52</sup>

The connection between Snapchat dysmorphia and the classical notion of second nature is primarily established due to the twofold aspect that is characteristic of the phenomenon we are studying: habitualisation and bodily appropriation. Habitualisation in the context of Snapchat dysmorphia equals to the repeated and therefore habituated cognitive acts by which one appropriates the body image that is shaped by the filtered selfie. It is worth emphasising that Snapchat dysmorphia is not a type of sudden and immediate reversal in self-evaluation, but rather a process of habitualisation or gradual identification with this body image. It arises out of repeated everyday practice. Furthermore, in referring to the authors of the classical theory of second nature, I understand bodily appropriation as the somatic realisation of such habitualised behaviour.<sup>53</sup> In this interpretation, however, the aim will be to argue that surgical alteration of appearance, which can be understood as an inorganic and radical intervention in (natural) appearance, can be reinterpreted as a way of appropriating, a somatic appropriation, of a cognitively habitualised second nature.

Second nature has a paradigmatic form expressed by Cicero: "habit produces a sort of second nature."<sup>54</sup> Second nature is understood not only as individual habits, but, for example, in the interpretation of I. Testa, second nature includes subjective (habits, values, abilities, personality traits) and objective (social set-up, relationships, institutions) aspects of human culture in the broad sense.<sup>55</sup> At the same time, second nature is understood as those habitual behaviours that – in cultural relabelling – allow for similarly im-

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52 Cf. Carlisle, C., *On Habit*. London, Routledge 2014.

53 In the following interpretation I rely on my earlier study devoted to the topic of second nature in 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy, with an emphasis on S. Kierkegaard's notion of original sin: Marek, J., *Creatures of Habit: On Second Nature, Habitual Behaviour, and Ethical Life in Kierkegaard*. In: *Kierkegaard and Issues in Contemporary Ethics*. Ed. M. Fox-Muraton. Berlin–New York, De Gruyter 2020, pp. 235–252.

54 Cicero, M. T., *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*. London, William Heinemann 1914, p. 477.

55 Testa, I., *Selbstbewußtsein und zweite Natur*. In: *Hegels Phänomenologie des Geistes – Ein kooperativer Kommentar zu einem Schlüsselwerk der Moderne*. Ed. K. Vieweg, W. Welsh. Frankfurt/Main, Suhrkamp 2008, pp. 286–307.

mediate and automated reactions as animal instincts. It amounts to saying, for example, that playing the piano becomes second nature insofar as it allows conscious activity to be detached from the difficulties of fingering, automates motor skills, and allows for the person to attend to a higher activity (such as in this case composition or interpretation).<sup>56</sup> The second nature therefore forms a kind of infrastructure that enables higher cultural structures or superstructures.

The classical notion of second nature becomes a theme in Hegel's philosophy, especially in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, the book where the author deals with the problem of rationalised intersubjectivity: ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*). Hegel's conception of the second nature is broad or all-encompassing, like the above-mentioned interpretation in I. Testa: "the system of right is the realm of actualised freedom, the world of spirit produced from within itself as a *second nature*."<sup>57</sup> Crucially for Hegel, he uses this term to convey the persistence and automaticity of intersubjectivity in the sense that our behaviour is not a sequence of moral choices, but rather a habituated recognition of a rationality realised in the fabric of social institutions and interpersonal relationships.

But Hegel goes further in his conception of second nature: he speaks of second nature as nature in the sense that it is immediate (automatic) and "second" because "it is an immediacy posited by the soul, incorporating and moulding the bodiliness that pertains to the determinations of feeling as such, and to the determinations of representation and of the will in so far as they are embodied."<sup>58</sup> Hegel, of course, does not start from the standpoint of a substance dualism, and the distinction between body and soul is for him precisely this ideal activity, the constitution of a certain immediacy that manifests itself as corporeality. Habit literally weaves its body, or rather, habituated behaviour is appropriated, corresponds to bodily experience, bodily sensations, etc. Man is then a being who is endowed with that organic substrate, which is a corporeality like that of an animal, but he cultivates, transforms, purifies this corporeality through habit.

Friedrich Nietzsche is the second author who presents the link between habit, morals, corporeality, and second nature in an almost paradigmatic way.<sup>59</sup> It could be argued that the culminating phase of Nietzsche's philoso-

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56 In an almost Gehlenian sense of "unburdening" [Entlastung], cf. Gehlen, A., *Der Mensch. Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt*. Frankfurt/Main, Vittorio Klostermann 2016.

57 Hegel, G. W. F., *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1991, p. 35.

58 Hegel, G. W. F., *Philosophy of Mind*. Oxford, Clarendon Press 2007, p. 131.

59 Nietzsche does not use the term "second nature" in most key places. This does not mean, however, that he does not explicitly consider it, cf. Nietzsche, F., *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*.

phy sets as its programme the very problem of the process of the appropriation of moral values. In his case, the dualistic framework is also abolished, only in favour of the primacy of corporeality, in relation to which “soul is just a word for something on the body.”<sup>60</sup> Nietzsche, beginning with his short essay *On Truth and Lies in Nonmoral Sense*,<sup>61</sup> throughout his major works, including *Zarathustra* and finally, very significantly, in the *Genealogy of Morals*,<sup>62</sup> explores the aspects in which originally bodily gestures, movements, and expressions are internalised, metaphorised, and become intrinsic moral values; but in a second step, it is the values themselves that are internalised and manifested or expressed by the body.<sup>63</sup>

Finally, the logic of the appropriation of moral attitudes, and explicitly the transformation of corporeality given by habitual, customary behaviour, is evident in Kierkegaard’s late posthumous works. For him, as later for F. Nietzsche, the key problem is the degeneration of the human race, a degeneration that is the consequence, in this Kierkegaardian reasoning, of hereditary sin.<sup>64</sup>

At first glance, the historical curiosity of the concept of second nature allows us to grasp the problem of Snapchat dysmorphia in a remarkably holistic way. If we were to proceed from the dualistic view discussed above, Snapchat dysmorphia would remain an aberrant condition, and this in relation to an uncritically understood natural corporeality. In contrast, viewing humans as second nature beings reveals a perspective in which the duality of the somatic and the cultural is not a given, but is a fluid continuum in which cultural habits, habitualised behaviours, lead to objectification, bodily manifestation. And vice versa, thinking is dependent on corporeality, on everyday habits.<sup>65</sup>

Snapchat dysmorphia is the result of habitualising, internalising, and automating a specific practice: editing and sharing one’s selfies. The filtered

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In: *Kritische Studienausgabe* 1, München, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag–De Gruyter 1999, p. 270; Nietzsche, F., *Morgenröthe*. In: *Kritische Studienausgabe* 3. München, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag–De Gruyter 1999, p. 46.

60 Nietzsche, F., *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2006, p. 23.

61 Nietzsche, F., *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne*. In: *Kritische Studienausgabe* 1, pp. 873–890.

62 Nietzsche, F., *Zur Genealogie der Moral*. In: *Kritische Studienausgabe* 5. München, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag–De Gruyter 1999, pp. 245–412.

63 For a concise discussion of the topic see Chavalka, J., *Přivtělení a morálka: pojetí tělesnosti ve filosofii Friedricha Nietzscheho*. Prague, Togga 2014.

64 Cf. Kierkegaard, S., *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* 26. *Journalerne NB31–NB36*. Copenhagen, Gads forlag 2009, pp. 379–381, esp. pp. 426n.

65 One of the most remarkable attempts to break down the idea of thinking, or rationality, as a distinct sphere clearly differentiated from the somatic basis (specifically the emotions, the limbic system) is A. Damasio’s *Descartes’ Error*. See Damasio, A. R., *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*. London, Vintage 2006.

selfie becomes the image of the self that the user identifies with, which at the same time prevents the user from realising a satisfying relationship with oneself, from being oneself. The step that is plastic surgery – the bodily manifestation of this image – is entirely within the logic of second nature. It is an attempt to appropriate, to manifest on the corporeal level the already habitualised image of the self.

### 3. Conclusion

This study is aware of the controversy surrounding the phenomenon of Snapchat dysmorphia. There clearly are numerous cases of individuals who suffer from compulsive disorders that prevent them from living a happy life. However, it is also possible to believe that the blanket negative assessment of Snapchat dysmorphia corresponds to an unacknowledged bias of treating humans as natural beings, natural in terms of that random substrate with which we must be able to cope. Is such a view still tenable?

The sanctity of the body is a normative view of corporeality. It is then also a normative demand to come to terms with the accidental corporeality that has been given to us. However, today this view is problematic on many levels. Particularly in the case of transgender persons, somatic contingency has become an obstacle to the identity of the individual who seeks the possibility of a successful life through operative gender reassignment.<sup>66</sup>

Is the pathologising and medicalisation of the Snapchat dysmorphia phenomenon then more likely due to the needs of these people, who should be helped with psychiatric and psychological care, or is it a manifestation of the dual, binary thinking that defends the sanctity and inviolability of human bodily nature? The key question then is whether we can find any criterion of legitimacy for surgical interventions whose sole reason is dysmorphia, a profound discrepancy between how we see ourselves, and what image of ourselves we have internalised and habitually adopted.<sup>67</sup>

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66 I am not equating the experience of transgender persons and of those affected by Snapchat Dysmorphia. Rather, I am exemplifying the radical change in relating to the possibilities of changing one's body in gender reassignment surgery.

67 The ethical dimensions and implications are only very briefly hinted at here. My argument is not to warrant a blanket approval of any demanded aesthetic surgical procedures, but rather against a similarly blanket rejection. A major consideration to keep in mind are beauty standards propagated by various private companies and, similarly, the influence of social networks on such standards (not to mention the complete opacity of the algorithms behind social media feeds). I am, in so many words, aware of the delicate balancing act between the ethical value of individual freedom on the one hand, and the ethical value of protecting vulnerable persons from coercion and manipulation.