



MODERN RENAISSANCE

Portraits have always been about more than just the subject of the portrait. Subtle clues through props and symbols told us about who the subject was - or at least, who they wanted history to remember them as being. A hand on a globe represented conquering of lands and political power, an apple likely represented evil due to the Latin translation "malum", colours told the viewer of the wealth of the subject because pigment - both for dyeing fabrics and for making paint - were expensive. And, centuries later, when Da Vinci's flying machines have been created and the separation of Church and State is considered entirely normal - we still pose for our own audiences with certain imagery, certain symbols to dictate social status, wealth and personal achievement and beliefs. Yes, it is true, that no longer do we depict ourselves in oil paints as a sole method of letting others see our images. And no longer do we pose holding an ermine, or with orbs or globes. We have replaced the

medium with the "selfie" and the imagery with contemporary objects that signify status. Instead of the most fashionable ruff, we pose with the latest smartphone. We show off our high-end brand trainers, handbags and perfume. We flaunt on our social feeds the gifts we were given from lovers, parents, friends. We brag about our gym routines and the food we are eating and the drinks we are sipping - as it happens. We portray to the world through our social media profiles a version of ourselves which is of the social class, status, political opinion we want to be perceived as being. The key difference is that now, you do not need to be a part of the elite and able to afford a skilled painter to depict you as you wish to be depicted - anyone with a smartphone and WiFi can do that themselves. We have democratised the ability to present a version of oneself surrounded by the imagery and symbolism we see fit - which means now everyone is a celebrity, everyone is a brand, and everyone is performing a curated version of themselves.







"You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting "Vanity", thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure."

- John Berger, Ways of Seeing.

While in many ways we can say there is very little change between the modern day desire to be perceived in a certain way, and the Renaissance and Neo-Classical desire to be seen in a certain way, there are of course important societal and cultural differences.

Women take more "selfies" than men, and generally post them more for validation from their female friends than from potential romantic interests. Yet, women are also on the receiving end of much more vitriol online than men. It's almost a joke now, a meme from a feminist blog - but it still holds some truth; if a woman posts many images of herself, especially if she is wearing make-up or posing in a way that could be seen as provocatively then she is a slut, a whore, she has no self respect and is probably sexually promiscuous. Her intelligence will be called into question. If she doesn't care much for the trappings of being conventionally attractive, doesn't wear make-up or provocative clothing, doesn't participate in stereotypically female behaviour on social media then she has her sexual orientation questioned, is called ugly, unattractive, lazy and disgusting.

Despite the devastating effects this can have on people's mental health, there is very little police can do under our current legal system to stop "trolls". How we police the Internet will be one of the greatest legal challenges of the 21st century. Women, especially women working in politics, female celebrities or "influencers", are on the receiving end of death and rape threats, phone hacks, personal data leaks and endless abusive comments. A good example of the lack of legal protection women get from harassers online is the problem of "upskirting". In Scotland "upskirting", or the practice of taking a photograph up the skirt of a victim without their knowledge or consent and often sharing the resulting images online, has been illegal since 2010. In England and Wales, this practice only became illegal in January 2019.

Many of these attitudes towards women, do however, grow from conceptions of women dating as far back in time as Da Vinci - if not longer.

In Renaissance painting, for example, women played the role of the Madonna, or The Whore. Despite the fact that Renaissance artists changed the course of Western art history by making the nude central to the artistic practice, this development was not without its controversy. Some worried that such depiction of a nude body would incite lust and encourage sin. This controversy was set against an interesting moral background - it was readily accepted that men would find the nude body of a young, athletic man erotic, and despite it being illegal, homosexuality appears to have been very much the norm, indeed some records show that in the 15th century, more than half of Florentine men were indicted for having sex with other men. In other words, men making erotic depictions of men to be viewed by other men was deemed entirely normal. Once the female gaze got involved though, it was a very different conversation - an example of Saint Sebastian by Fra Bartolommeo in the Church of Saint Marco "had to be moved because they thought the female congregation were looking at it too eagerly and having evil thoughts about it". This, combined with then-contemporary beliefs about the inferior nature of women's bodies, and their minds, as the weaker sex. After the Reformation of 1517, religious imagery was banned from places of worship which left artists free to explore more secular themes. It was then that women began being depicted nude as gods and goddesses of antiquity but also as witches, nymphs, highlighting their supposed sexual power over men. Either the nude female was the Blessed Virgin, a Saint, or a witch, a demonic figure, a temptress. The Madonna, or The Whore. Of course over time, female nudes became much more common in fine art than male nudes - more than 80% of nudes at the Metropolitan Museum of Art are female - the negative connotations of the female who posed haven't changed much. In 2019, the performance we put on for social media is subject to gender stereotypes - whether that is archaic beliefs about how a woman or girl should present herself, people being outspoken about identity and gender politics from behind their screens, or often aphid misogyny, xenophobia and sexism. Revenge porn, leaking of people's nude images without their consent, mockery for expressing sexuality, we may have moved a few centuries on from the Renaissance but the gender roles, the shame surrounding female sexuality and so-called vanity is still alive and well.

Women's bodies are still subject to shame - I can post the topless images of men I have taken without censoring them, but I must censor women's nipples. I've been told by men that my portraiture is pornographic, something women with self respect would not do. For a woman to be comfortable with, proud of and unashamed of her body is a rebellious act. It is accepted for us to fetishize women's bodies clad in bikinis on TV, to put them in magazines and newspapers, to advertise cosmetic surgery, weight loss pills and meal replacement lollipops on Instagram, but these bodies we use to sell products and to feed our own eroticism are simultaneously shamed, considered something acceptable for society to gaze upon and enjoy their eroticism, but certainly not something that's acceptable for your own friend, sister, or daughter, and certainly not wife or girlfriend, to do.

The thing is, this constant performance on social media is damaging young women. There have been reports of



young women taking selfies with Snapchat filters on to Harley Street clinics to request plastic surgery to make them look like the filtered version of themselves. Young people are more likely to buy something an influencer recommends to them than they are to buy a product based on advertising campaigns alone - this makes sense, influencers gain their following through giving the illusion of friendship and everyone is more likely to want something a friend recommends to them. And as discussed, people have wanted to be able to change their appearance and the way they are perceived by other people since ancient times. However, there's a moral conundrum - this modern social media performance values certain things, such as conventional attractiveness, thinness, tanned skin, long hair. What about when these influencers are being paid to recommend meal replacement lollipops, plastic surgery and Skinny Tea to an audience of primarily teenage girls? Is this ethical? Recently regulations changed and these influencers must make it clear if products were gifted to them, or they are being paid to promote them - but even then, they can often easily hide this in a hashtag.

With mental health problems amongst teenagers and young people rapidly on the rise, and social media taking a hard rap in the news over its links to the increase in these problems and even suicides, it seems increasingly possible that having access to both our own, and everyone else's, perfected, curated self 24/7 isn't good for us at all.

And it isn't even as easy as just stopping - we have become social media addicts. Whilst people are shamed online often for "fishing for likes" or "clickbaiting", social media is addictive, and like any other addict, we'll seek out our next fix whenever we can. When we receive a like on our post, our brain gives us a hit of dopamine, just like if we achieve something or are given a compliment in real life. This "reward" buzz makes us want another hit...and another hit. It therefore makes sense that vulnerable people, people in need of a self esteem boost, are actually the people most likely to spend more time posting on and looking at social media despite the fact it is likely having a negative effect on them.

Unlike any other type of performance, such as television or theatre, we cannot be entirely sure what we are looking at on social media is real. Not everything is what it seems, but unlike older depictions of people in their idealised state it is accessible to everyone, at any time of the day or night. It is a performance which does not take intervals and has no final act, ending. It simply goes on, ruled by algorithms and fuelled by the people who continuously chase more likes and followers.

It may not be anything particularly modern to want to show the world an idealised and perfected version of yourself, but it is certainly a modern problem to deal with the pressure of presenting that self every day to an ever increasing audience.









Social media is still a relatively new invention - and no one is entirely sure of its effects on us, or how it will shape society. Simply, we have never been this connected with everyone else on the planet at any time in history. It's entirely new. And it is creating entirely new problems. It's generally accepted that no one is the same person at 27 that they were at 17 - because people change, evolve and grow as experiences shape them. Everyone makes mistakes, says ill-advised things, and in the general course of life, grows and realises why those things were ill-advised mistakes. Social media means there is a record, forever, of all of your misadventures. MPs have lost their position over comments made online a decade before they got their job as an MP. The simple reality is - 10 years ago, no one understood what social media was going to become. No one understood that an ill-advised comment would cost you your job and your business a few years later when a teenager with access to Google cache dug it up and reshared it. This pressure brings up two key problems - one, everyone needs to be their interview worthy self all the time online, and a lot of

social media users are teenagers. And two, how does one grow and evolve if there is no way to escape every mistake you made, every lover you lost, every ill-advised remark?

Generally, everyone from teenagers to Baby Boomers seem now to realise that nothing can ever truly be deleted from the Internet, and that a future employer may well be able to find that Instagram account dedicated to your favourite actor in 10 years time. This creates a pressure to portray oneself as a perfect balance of trendy for social circles and somewhat respectable and clean cut for the potential future university tutor or employer who might one day find it. If you dream of working one day in a public role, that pressure is even higher - I've seen countless news reports of teachers losing their jobs after parents find pole fitness photographs or drunken selfies on their social media accounts. We are taught to filter ourselves into an idealised version online from a very early age. Because there is an omnipresent threat that one photograph, one comment, leaked later on could destroy our careers and reputations.

As for growth - we all die several times. And it is good for us. We need to grow, and therefore outgrow old friends, old habits. None of us are still exactly the same person as we were even a year ago, regardless of your age or background. I often wonder how my generation, and those younger than me, will be able to grow and change into new people when their past self is kept around forever. When people we went to high school with but barely spoke to even then can still see every one of our life events on the Internet. When our ex-lovers, ex-friends, former employers and colleagues are still an almost tangible addition to our lives. When you never really have to say goodbye forever to anyone, no matter how beneficial that goodbye may be for both parties involved, because you can look up their profiles, see their face and their life now and torture yourself with it. Does this restrict our growth? Surely being stuck in an echo-chamber of who we used to be, preventing people and things leaving us that should have left our lives as we grow isn't healthy. We could argue that not being able to truly escape who you once were, not being able to die many times over, restricts growth and means we cannot move on from failures.







The artificial showcase of social media puts pressure on everyone, but perhaps the most harmful effects from this pressure are seen in children and young adults. As already discussed this pressure comes both from social peers and from the knowledge that anything posted on social media is forever. We've even created a job title for people who have gotten good at promoting their own personal brand - they're influencers, and they're the It-Girls and celebrities, the Famous For Being Famous kids of 2019.

The problem, as I see it, is that high school sucks. Even the kids who had a pretty easy ride in high school will admit that high school sucked. You're already under pressure to achieve certain grades to get to your chosen university, there's the changes happening to your mind and body, you're trying to figure yourself out, and you're probably already comparing yourself to the popular, attractive kids at school. Increasingly in the UK university students are also reporting record breaking levels of stress and anxiety, tied in part to changes in student finance, the move from home, and depending on the university, poor mental health support for students, or simply not enough counsellors for the volume of students. Now, not only are teenagers and young adults suffering a mental health pandemic of never before seen proportions, they feel a

pressure to keep up with the Kardashians too. It's little wonder that experts are starting to draw a link between an increase in teen and young adult suicide and the rise of social media from 2010 to 2015.

Yet there's another compounding factor - we've always been vain, we've always valued our looks and strived to look better. That's why weight loss, beauty and cosmetic surgery industries rake in billions of pounds every year. Advertisement campaigns from all of these industries tell us that clear skin, white teeth, bigger boobs, flatter stomachs and glimmering cheekbones are the secret to a happier, more fulfilling life. And photo filters are nothing new either. Adobe Photoshop is the great-great-grandfather of all digital photo manipulation programs, so much so we use "Photoshop" as a verb, for example "God that photograph on the cover of Cosmopolitan is so Photoshopped!" However traditional programs such as Photoshop involve a degree of skill for the user to convincingly edit their image. Apps available for free, or for a couple of pounds on the AppStore, do all the hard work for you. Tools such as FaceTune or YouCam Perfect can remove blemishes, whiten and straighten teeth, even thin your face down. In a world where even your real life friends curate their social media feeds more carefully than an exhibition at Tate Modern, these digital versions of "yourself" carefully edited to be blemish-free with straighter teeth and more prominent cheekbones provide an ideal for everyone else to chase. What's perverse about these apps is that they do away with everything that makes someone unique, all the little "flaws" that make you, you. They validate our yearning for unattainable perfection. When marketed as an app that will make you hotter, most people will pay the £3.99. But what if they were marketed as apps that take away your defining features, and allow you to market a fake version of yourself for others to feed the algorithm that just wants more likes and more conventionally attractive people? Would you still be willing to be the £3.99 for something to take away what makes you yourself in return for a few more likes and comments?

What's most alarming about this ability to essentially present augmented reality as real life is where it leads us. We've accepted edited everything from our skin texture to our bone structure, but what comes next?



It simply isn't that difficult to imagine a world where this curated version of reality has crept even more into our cultural norm. How about an app that makes your date look like a supermodel until you remove your FaceTune branded contact lenses? You could keep them in forever, and never see your partner's faults. Or how about one for the long term couples - an app that makes your partner look like someone different every day? Maybe you could pick their defining physical characteristics each day. Pale, blond, curvy with green eyes one day, tanned lithe and tall with dark hair and dark eyes the next?

And then, the next obvious step in that world, the world where we have accepted changing how our appearance is perceived by our audience to fit in with our curated self, is to start making designer babies. Like a dystopian fiction nightmare, technology companies would begin with the basic things - picking your babies eye colour, hair colour, genetic predisposition to require glasses. Then maybe we could eliminate the need for

makeup and airbrushing at all. These beautiful, more than human children would be unveiled at technology shows and press releases. Each new model would be thinner, learn to process information faster, require less sleep and less milk, be able to solve equations and maintain an Instagram account by age one. Maybe they could even have a chip implanted - one that has GPS maybe, so it's easier to find a missing child. Maybe that chip could be Wi-Fi enabled so they can post directly to Instagram using their genetically engineered retinas like Google Glass. They could reply to emails by thinking. They'd be more than human, post-human. A sick, Matrix inspired take on the Biblical stories of the Nephilim. What would love, and family and loyalty look in this perfected, curated world?

It seems far fetched right now, but we have laid the foundations for it already. Our self-obsessed culture is consuming us, rewarding the conventionally attractive, the people who do things "right" and pressuring the rest of us to conform too, to do things for the likes and not to wonder why we are failing if we refuse. These shallow obsessions that reward vanity and encourage basing worth off of follower counts, likes and online popularity are propelling us towards a world in which everyone appears happy online as offline depression and anxiety rates skyrocket. And for as long as any of us are willing to spend £3.99 on a digital facelift, that long term outcome is not something we can complain about.











"...and I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly;
I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit. For in much wisdom is much
grief, and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow."