

# TEXTUAL RELATIONS

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Friday, March 1, 2013

## The Young-Girl and the Selfie



In reality, the Young-Girl is only the model citizen such as commodity society has defined it since WWI, as an explicit response to the revolutionary threats against it -- Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of The Young-Girl*

A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself -- John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*

About a week and a half ago, CBC Radio's show *The Current* aired what could politely be called a "discussion" — and impolitely, a travesty — on the role of the selfie in contemporary digital culture. Featuring Andrew Keen, author of *Cult of the Amateur* and reliable old-man grump on the subject of Web 2.0, Toronto novelist Hal Niedviecki, and ex-pat Canadian writer and actual

young woman Sarah Nicole Prickett, the conversation started started badly and ended at cringe-worthy. About halfway through, two adult men laughed out loud at the idea that young women's bodily experiences under sexism might play a role in the evaluation of the selfie's moral status, and at that point Prickett (and I, as the listener) check out of the conversation. Keen, who dominates the latter half of the discussion, bloviates that selfies are about "extreme narcissism" and that, as a cultural phenomenon, they are simultaneously absurd, embarrassing, narcissistic, and — apparently — a pressing moral issue.

The accusation of narcissism leveled at self-photographers and, if opaquely, at teenage girls in particular is evidence of an extraordinary lack of insight into the workings of femininity under late capitalism. Keen's moral condemnation of the selfie as an act of narcissism is plainly unencumbered by any consideration that narcissism, as a personality trait, may not only be what capital expects but also *demand*s from young girls, in order that they be legible as girls at all.

Which is not to re-categorize the selfie as a radical act of political empowerment (although this view has been taken up, more or less successfully, on hundreds of Tumblrs across the Internet). When it comes to the selfie, my preference is to strike the word empowerment from our vocabularies entirely. I'd also like to leave out narcissism as an individual moral failing, and the phrase male gaze because, really? Male gaze? Really. Selfies, like orgasms, *Girls*, make-up, and high heels are most often — and most tediously — discussed in the frame of will-she won't-she individualist choice feminism, which inevitably ends up in one of two places. First, that everything women do is feminist because they're women and they're doing it. Second, that nothing women do that relates to making bodies interesting or beautiful is feminist because, like, dudes run the advertising agencies or something. Both of these positions are boring at best, and politically useless at worst.

As an alternative, I suggest we get down to the brass, materialist tacks of the matter: under capitalism, what does the selfie actually *do*?

1.

When we talk about selfies, what we are really talking about is teenage girls. "Teenage girls" here is more of a concept than a biological necessity; the age is primarily arbitrary and the girl-ness is semiotic at best. But the disgust at the moral failures of kids today, with their iPhones and their Instagrams is a gendered disgust — it is disgust for bodies whose worth is determined not by those who inhabit them, but by those who look at them. It is disgust for bodies that run in emulation, whose primary labour is dedicated to looking a particular way rather than making a particular thing.

Tiqqun, in *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, takes the body of the Young-Girl (who, they make clear in the introduction, is not necessarily an actual young girl) as the central unit of late capitalism. As a caveat, many readers of Tiqqun put *Theory of the Young-Girl* down because it comes off as gross and sexist. If you read the new translation for Semiotext(e) by the excellent Ariana Reines, she says as much in her introduction ([excerpts here at Triple Canopy](#)). What *Theory of the Young-Girl* requires, in order to be useful, is an understanding that the body or idea of the teenage girl is sometimes separate from the actuality of teenage girl-dom. This conceptual separation is not just tangential to the work — it is in fact what allows it to hold

together at all.

The Young-Girl, according to Tiquun, is “the model citizen of commodity society”, an identity colonized by capital. The Young-Girl is the citizen as consumer, not just of material products, but of ideology itself. This identity is not ahistorical — not all young girls throughout time have been Young-Girls — nor is it a biological necessity. Rather, it is an historical invention, one that works to make the bodies of young girls useful to capital. If Young-Girlism is about capital’s attempt to colonize the sphere outside of industrial production, who has been *less* outside that sphere than the teenage girl? The flapper, the flaneuse, the hysteric — prior to the advent of consumer capitalism, the bodies of young women can be read as the bodies *most* useless to capitalism.

The identity of the Young-Girl is about taking these previously useless bodies and making them useful. If they are not useful for making things, then they will be made useful for buying things, and this consumer identity is performed on and through her body. What characterizes the Young-Girl is that her body is a commodity, one which belongs to her and is her responsibility to maintain the value of. The concept of the teenage girl — a concept that actual teenage girls can inhabit more or less successfully — is a collaboration between industry and girls themselves. It exists in the liminal space where consumption and emancipation begin to overlap: if I represent my individuality through the consumption of particular items (lipstick, science-fiction novels, cupcakes, leather jackets with studs) is this emancipation because I made a choice? Capital says yes, that emancipation comes from participation in consumption, rather than its rejection. Tiquun says no -- that we must think not of liberating the Young-Girl, but liberation relative to the Young-Girl. I tend to fall in with the latter; that consumption is offered as an alternative to liberation, rather than its realization.

2.

If we treat the Young-Girl as a historical concept, it’s hard to get away from the fact that in some ways teen girls are often what Tiquun says they are. The way Tiquun describes the Young-Girl is insulting, at best. It is also, on my reading, fairly accurate. But the disgust that comes with it, I think, hinges on the question of whether we (as former/continued young girls and Young-Girls) carry the burden of responsibility for engaging in this particular mode of citizenship. The practice of the selfie provides a roadmap for an answer.

Back to the original question: what does the selfie actually *do*? It is clearly the product of work, both on the body and on the representation of the body. I will be the first to admit that I have spent inordinate amounts of time figuring out how best to hold my face and body in order to take the most flattering mirror-photograph. It is the culmination of research — most girls tilt their heads down, look up and shoot from above, so maybe I should too — and skills. It is also an engagement with an external discourse, one in which what Dorothy Smith calls “the doctrines of femininity” are widely available on the newsstand, on television, on the internet, and on the street. Smith writes that women create themselves as instances of the textual image — that women’s bodies, and those of young girls in particular, run in emulation.

Emulation in computing is a strategy of preservation, a tactic in an ongoing battle with obsolescence. Unlike make-up and fashion, which are often determined (usually by men) to be techniques of falsification — how many times have we heard girls with “too much” makeup

describe as “fake” — emulation in computing is about authenticity. If the the body of the Young-Girl is her primary commodity, her ticket of entry into the world of consumer capitalism (outside of which she is not only useless but also illegible), then her ability to authentically maintain the femininity of her body maintains its value. Participating in femininity, and documenting and representing that participation, is not only a relation of the young girl to herself, as the narcissism explanation would have it. It is also the relation of the young girl to herself as the Young-Girl, as an object to work on, and whose realization can be more or less effective. The selfie is both a representation of and, in the case of social media sites like Instagram and Facebook, an opportunity for the public recognition of that labour. The image may assert sexual subordination, but it still asserts.

3.

So if selfies are labour of a sort, why is the discourse around them so fraught? There is palpable disgust evident in Tiquun’s description of the Young-Girl, and in Andrew Keen’s analysis of digitally-driven narcissism. Keen frames his disgust as a reaction against the moral failures of a generation. I think there is more to it than that. Disgust is not just about reproach or disapproval. Disgust is about contempt. It polices the boundaries between observer and observed. For Kant, disgust is about imagination:

The object itself is represented as it were obtruding itself for our enjoyment while we strive against it with all our might. And the artistic representation of the object is no longer distinguished from the nature of the object itself, and thus it is impossible that it can be regarded as beautiful.

The object that intrudes is the body of the teenage girl — simultaneously the site of desire and pity. The representation of the the object is the selfie. That young women express feelings of shame and disgrace upon realizing the pressing requirement of femininity is built into the Young-Girls’ place in the hegemonic structure of capitalism. The Young-Girl is the model citizen of contemporary society not because we worship her, but because by expending her energy on the cultivation of her body, her potential as a revolutionary subject is neutralized. If young girls are the hated bodies of capital (along with immigrant bodies, racialized bodies, LGBT bodies, etc) then they must also be predictable bodies; that is why we spend inordinate amount of money on emphasizing the important of beauty, the importance of fashion, the importance of youthfulness and desirability and individuality. If the best way of making your womanhood legible is to adorn your body in a particular way — whether femme or punk rock or teeny bopper or whatever — then there is an injunction to perform that work. Women who do not do that work, particularly teenage girls who ‘opt out’ as it were, face social repercussions far more meaningful than some 40-year-old dude calling them narcissists. We elevate the work women do on their bodies to the utmost importance, and then punish the outcome of that labour. That is how hegemony works.

In this light, the selfie isn’t about empowerment. But it also isn’t *not* about empowerment. Empowerment, or lack thereof, is not part of the picture. Neither is narcissism, as either a personal or a cultural moral failure. And the selfie isn’t about the male gaze. The selfie, in the end is about the gendered labour of young girls under capitalism. Do we honestly think that by ceasing to take and post selfies, the bodies of young women would cease to be spectacles? Teenage girls are Young-Girls, *are* spectacles, *are* narcissists, *are* consumers because those are the very criterion which must be met to be a young woman and also a part of society. That

their bodies are commodities enters them into economies of attention, and that is where the disgust with selfies comes from. In an economy of attention, it is a disaster for men that girls take up physical space and document it, and that this documentation takes up page hits and retweets that could go to 'more important' things. And so the Young-Girl must be punished, with a disgust reserved for the purely trivial. To paraphrase that beloved of Young-Girl films, *Ever After* — itself paraphrasing Thomas More's *Utopia* — what are we to make of the selfie but that we first create teenage girls and then punish them?

Sarah Gram at 4:30 PM



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## 13 comments:



**Lawson** March 4, 2013 at 10:11 PM

brilliant piece, particularly love how you sideline the gaze and moral intent.

an aside, perhaps, but do you think the hipster occupies a similar or overlapping position with the Young Girl? i say this because a lot (but not all) of your points could be applied to the hipster and the popular representation of this 'identity' (in the sense that the 'hipster' is not a hipster just like the Young Girl is not a young girl).

particularly, hipsters' "primary labour is dedicated to looking a particular way rather than making a particular thing" - this in fact is the main (generational) critique of the hipster, 'get a job' etc.

to make the link somewhat tangentially, a notoriously unreconstructed academic recently quipped about North Korea being overrun with hipsters with the arrival of Instagram there.

perhaps it is going too far, though, to say that the plight of the hipster and the Young Girl is one and the same.

but what about hip young girls? the scorn they face is redoubled.

[Reply](#)



**Frances Killea** March 12, 2013 at 12:59 PM

This is the absolute most interesting piece on women- particularly young women- in society that I've read in years. Way to go. A friend of mine is using your essay in his high school philosophy class today; he works at an all-girls school, so its message will be doubly important, and the feedback he gets doubly interesting. I'm impressed. Thanks so much for the good read.

[Reply](#)



**Sarah Gram** March 13, 2013 at 10:11 AM

Thank you Frances! I would love to know how your friend's class went -- when I was in grad school, I

always had a really hard time working with these ideas pedagogically for my undergrads. I'd love to know what his students think!

[Reply](#)



**Sarah Gram** March 13, 2013 at 10:14 AM

Lawson, I actually think it isn't going too far to say that the hipster and the Young-Girl are one and the same. Hipsterism & Young-Girlism have a vast degree of overlap, tempered only (maybe, in some cases) by the fact that hipsters might know that they're doing Young-Girlism and bring a level of irony to the performance? I'll have to think more about that.

[Reply](#)



**Rob Horning** March 13, 2013 at 7:30 PM

This essay is great. Fwiw I make similar point about hipsters/Young-Girls in this New Inquiry essay <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/hi-haters/>

[Reply](#)



**Eve Honeywill** March 18, 2013 at 7:04 PM

Thank you. Excellent read :)

[Reply](#)



**Cindy** April 5, 2013 at 2:36 PM

Ifuckinglovethis.

As a woman, and as a mother of many girls, and as just a human being on this planet, I love this.

[Reply](#)



**Dylan Barsby** July 5, 2013 at 4:52 AM

I enjoyed this.

It reminds me of another thought I've had about women who dress sexy "for themselves".

I've always thought of this as programming that has taken place over many generations. If left to their own devices, women in a Western-influenced society surely would never decide to dress themselves in uncomfortable high-heels, sexy lingerie, jeans that are too tight, low-cut cleavage-advertising tops, etc. "for themselves"?

If a woman decides she wants to go out and about and "feel sexy" but not to attract males (assuming she's hetero), what criteria does she use to judge what is or isn't considered sexy? Surely it's the criteria programmed into her by male-dominated society? It's what men see as sexy and I believe that these women might THINK they're doing this for themselves, but are still unconsciously dressing for men. They measure "sexy" or "attractive" with the same tools as the men who they fool themselves

into believing they're NOT trying to attract. They only "feel sexy" because the men they're "not" dressing for judge them as sexy. And then some of them may even become upset when those men approach and/or proposition them.

I can't imagine any other reason for women to dress themselves in that way. I feel that if they were truly dressing "for themselves" they would be in more comfortable clothing. Not necessarily ugly clothing, but not the kinds of things that the historically male-dominated fashion world has trained them to wear in order to look and feel attractive.

While I certainly enjoy the eye-candy, I find myself unable to take those women as seriously as the women who might be wearing less- to no make-up, more comfortable not-so-tight jeans, flat shoes/sneakers/anything that isn't painful.

I haven't expressed this as well here as I planned, but do you know what I mean? Does this make any sense to you?

Thanks.

[Reply](#)



**A.H.B.** July 5, 2013 at 5:00 AM

oh great, another "feminist" text implying that women can't whatever they want.

[Reply](#)



**Helm** July 5, 2013 at 6:00 AM

This is a wonderful read. Thank you.

[Reply](#)



**Lara Glemum** July 6, 2013 at 9:59 PM

I love much of this but am curious why you're so quick to jettison the male gaze in relation to the culture of the selfie? There are plenty of valid reasons to avoid the rhetoric around the male gaze, it's just not clear to me why you do. Can you say more? Also, curious about the relationship of the selfie to porn & the recent spate of teen girl suicides related to pornographic selfies gone viral.

[Reply](#)



**bengriffin.me** July 7, 2013 at 5:14 AM

Absolutely sparkling prose, particularly toward the end with zing like this-

"The Young-Girl is the model citizen of contemporary society not because we worship her, but because by expending her energy on the cultivation of her body, her potential as a revolutionary subject is neutralized."

And the clubbing fragment on hegemony.

But, I think our blogger performs a kind of sleight of hand toward the end, with her zen like koan about empowerment/not-empowerment. Which troubles me the way Žižek does. In that it's with good will. Doesn't the above quote obviously point to disempowerment? The Marxist in me gets quite lost with the evasive new language that subaltern critiques seem to need to employ.

[Reply](#)



**GS** July 9, 2013 at 5:07 PM

I actually see a lot of problems with this analysis.

First of all, it is wrong to say that "women," as a class, have always been "outside the sphere" of "industrial production." For some women you might argue this is true--wealthy white women, who did not have to work. Black and brown women, however, have always been a part of this sphere, whether through agricultural labor or factory jobs, and even the reproductive labor they perform in wealthy white homes... a condition which allows the "Young-Girl" to exist at all, we might add. And the power to reproduce has always made women of all classes vital to capital, as it is they who are responsible for the new workforce. Women have in fact always been vital to capital, although it must /appear/ as though they are not. But the distinction between form and appearance should be familiar to any Marxist, and is a far more interesting analysis than what is presented here.

The "entrance" of the Young-Girl into the commodity-form is also hardly a new phenomena... since the beginning of capital, there have always been women who had to work to stay alive, and there have always been women who could afford to stay at home (and therefore focus on adorning their bodies, as you have mentioned... certainly an oppressive preoccupation, but a preoccupation which must be seen ironically--dialectically--as a position of privilege as well).

In not analyzing race and class in this piece, we erase any distinctions between young teenage girls. Implicitly here we are talking about young, white, middle class women, whose experience cannot be taken as representative of ALL young women. While women of all races do take "selfies," these meanings cannot be homogenized and read as "the same" for all these women.

I feel this to be a gross error in theory on the part of this piece.

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**About Me**



**Sarah Gram**

Sarah is an ex-sociology PhD student, currently underemployed at a technology retailer. She's interested in knowledge, technology and gender -- and video games and music and the internet. Right now she's trying to live an actual real adult life, and this blog is a good excuse to procrastinate on all of that.

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