On Seeking the Other: An Outlook on Digital *Doppelgänger* Trends[1]

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Abstract: Recently, digital *doppelgänger* trends have become a phenomenon in which social media users seek their lookalikes. In this paper I investigate the meaning and impact of such trends and what the digital revolution signifies to the *doppelgänger* apparition.

Keywords: Double Self, Image, Postmodernism, Social Media

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The *doppelgänger* is a term which crystallized in the 18th and 19th century and was widely associated with the onset of doom. This belief was reflected and reinforced in literary creations such as *Peter Schlemihl* by von Chamisso (1814), *William Wilson* by Poe (1939), and the film *The Student of Prague* (1913) in which the self, and often the copy, is destroyed after it meets its counter self. While we can still see remnants of this negative conception, the association between meeting our doubles and harm, madness, or death is arguably changing in the digital age.

With the introduction of the digital era, our image consumption has risen significantly. The ease of taking pictures using digital cameras and smart phones, and the equal ease of posting them on the Net and social media websites has changed the nature of the image, in terms of constitution, accessibility, and distribution. On the Internet, the phenomenon centering on finding lookalikes or digital *doppelgänger* is increasingly on the rise, marking a heightened sense of self-awareness, and a shift in its nature. The *doppelgänger* has undergone a change in both its nature (an elusive symbolic concept visualized in a more tangible and photographic form) as well as in the willing acceptance of seeing the self and its lookalike in the same moment, to the extent of even being photographed together[2]. In fact, digital imagery has inverted the anatomy of

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1 This article is forthcoming in "The International Journal of the Image", see www.ontheimage.com.
2 An increase in visual presentations of the double self is exemplified in three films released in 2013, *The Double*, *Enemy*, and *The Face of Love*.

the *doppelgänger* figure: an image on the Internet gives the impression of being there forever, and thus serves as a preservation against death and oblivion rather than being their trigger, a reversal of classical conception.

I will analyze two digital *doppelgänger* campaigns through contemporary theories of cultural psychology that shed light on changes to the self and the *doppelgänger* figure. An application of Kenneth Gergen's Saturated Self concept and Hubert Hermans's Dialogical Self Theory will show how the marriage between the *doppelgänger* figure and the digitized image celebrates multidimensionality and self-authorship, further, that the new world of modernity, globalization, and digital opportunities impact our consciousness which has evolved to become more social, discursive, and reliant on the other. My first example features a young woman's ardent search for her *doppelgänger* through social media websites. In 2011, Sophie Robehmed, a British-Lebanese journalist began looking for her own *doppelgänger*[3]. The second example involves a photographer's project to allocate pairs of lookalikes and snap them in photos together. In 2006 François Brunelle launched a project called "I Am Not a Lookalike". Brunelle's campaign produced 140 pairs of successful matches from around the globe[4].

In digital *doppelgänger* trends, the culture of the copied self arises from the pursuit of self-innovation and new positions for the self. My paper will attempt to explain the way the self adjusts to new types of experiences and to the multiplicity of positions afforded to it by the expansion of our world. Relevant postmodern theories suggest that the self is a socially constructed entity that changes its constitution in order to adapt to its dynamic surrounding. The increasing fascination with the culture of lookalikes[5] further suggests the need for alterity as well as the constant reevaluation of self-positions. New positions as well as new modes of thought emerge to allow previously banned or feared imagery to surface and be part of a shifting self-image. I will show through my research that new *doppelgänger* trends treat the self as a hybrid entity that contains, not one, but several selves.

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3 Robehmed's video entitled "Please world, help me find my doppelgänger" is available on Youtube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u87LYolDrmY)
4 You can see these images on (http://www.francoisbrunelle.com/index.php?id=3&lang=En)
5 The examples given here are but a few in the contemporary fascination with the culture of lookalikes. Websites such as http://www.ilooklikeyou.com/, http://www.findmydoppelganger.com/, and http://www.reddit.com/r/Doppleganger/ helps individuals to find their *doppelgänger*. More structured and professional projects include Martin Schoeller's photography campaign which investigates why identical twins differ in features and tastes later in life. Spanish photographer María Zarazúa has a project titled 'Parte de ti,' which in Spanish translates as 'Part of you'. Zarazúa's images investigate the similarities and differences between identical twins through digital photography. The variation on this trend is endless and gaining momentum.

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