

Travel, Writing and the Media

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Chapter 9

Harmful or Empowering Convergence?

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9 Harmful or Empowering Convergence?

The Female Traveller and Insta-Aesthetics – Selfies and Documentaries

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The Travelling Female Body

This chapter concerns the converging visual practices involved in the taking, sharing and posting of travel selfies on Instagram, as well as in the production of what I define as ‘personalised travel documentary’ for the cinema screen. At the centre of my analysis is the question of whether those convergences are harmful or empowering for the representation of the female traveller. This focus is based on the findings of many recent media and social-psychological studies that proved young women are often affected by social media-related “selfie harm”. By comparing the same “media *genre*” (Bucher et al. 2010, 19) – the travelogue – within two distinct “media *formats*” (ibid.), I will question the converging visual practices and image aesthetics to verify if the images of the travelling female body are affected by selfie harm. I am using the term “travelogue” for the media *genre* in question to indicate that both the selfies and the documentaries are recounting autobiographical travel experience and, more importantly, are perceived as authentic accounts of travel experience.¹ To compare selfies and travel documentaries, I will classify the two media formats, explain the phenomenon of selfie harm and introduce the set of visual practices in question.

The specific examination of the travelling female body is founded on the essential relationship between the body and travel writing. Charles Forsdick dubbed travel writing “the most physical of all literary genres” (2016, 97), and there have been many efforts within travel writing studies to elaborate on the embodiment of travel experience.² Travel and physicality have a fundamentally tense relationship characterised by the technical possibilities of travel within a specific time and place, as well as by the possibilities of the body itself: “the body is not only the vehicle thanks to which travel traditionally occurs”, but “the limits of the body can also, at moments of exhaustion and dysfunction, serve as an impediment to the progress of the journey” (Forsdick 2019, 22). Furthermore, we know that the human body serves always to “represent and to trigger

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emotions at the same time” (Kautt 2017, 112) and therefore I am considering questions about the “emotional work” and the “visual emotion management” (Döveling 2019, 74) related to the images of travelling women, even if this is only possible within the narrow framework set here. While there have been some articles on specific aspects of images of travelling women on Instagram, the “Insta-Aesthetics”, as I will call it, has not yet been compared with the image aesthetics of travelling women within other contemporary media formats. Molly Geoghegan, for example, asks whether Instagram can be used as a powerful instrument to overcome the neocolonial restrictions that inhibit young women of colour in particular, and enable them to travel free of fear. Her conclusion is ambivalent:

As a tool to find safe communities and create space for themselves, regardless of power dynamics at work, women and women of colour utilize Instagram to their advantage. Perceived fear manifests differently depending on sexuality, race, class and so on, creating an ‘intersectionality of fear’. However, the burden of representation – both of destinations travelled to and of travellers themselves – falls heavily on their shoulders, particularly for high-profile Instagrammers.

(2020, 46)

The answer to the question of *how* young women are using Instagram to represent images of their travelling body remains ambiguous. But, as Gray et al. did in their study *Curating a Public Self: Exploring Social Media Images of Women in the Outdoors*, one can take another step back and ask from a feminist point of view: “Shouldn’t we all just be thrilled *that* women are being represented in the world of outdoor social media? Shouldn’t women be encouraged to get outside in whatever way they choose to do it?” (2018, 162, my emphasis). Gray et al. answer this question with a “resounding ‘yes’” (ibid.); however, due to my focus on converging practices and aesthetics, I would like to introduce another aspect to this debate. It may seem appropriate, in general, to welcome women as travellers and outdoor activists and to celebrate the fact that they are representing themselves, regardless of the chosen aesthetics. However, I think we must consider the possibility that a certain body norm is emerging from social media, and that this norm is converging and consequently influencing the visual practices and aesthetics of how female travellers are represented. As a consequence, this body norm may also be limiting the possible variety and diversity of female body representations. If my comparison between Instagram and travel documentary can show that a certain kind of Insta-Aesthetics also prevails in film due to media convergence, then this would be an important finding.

Instagram, the Personalised Travel Documentary and Selfie Harm

Instagram is not only one of the most popular social media platforms for adolescents but also profits a lot from “its utility as travel accoutrement” (Smith 2018, 172) and is deeply changing travel practices. Above all, Instagrammability, the aesthetic impact Instagram is having on our visual practices related to travel, cannot be stressed enough. Instagram is a highly interesting format for researchers of travel writing because “the platform functions as a form of multimodal travel writing, where, in the radically participatory framework of social media, authors-cum-users enact the mediated travel performances they no longer read about in books but scroll through with their thumbs” (Smith 2018, 173). While it is generally known that you can find millions of travel images and travel selfies under hashtags such as #traveladdict, #travelgram and #travelselkie, very little attention has been paid to another media format that has been booming, especially in Germany, over the last five years: the personalised travel documentary.³ This kind of documentary can be defined as a new sub-genre within the complex discourse of “Travel in the Digital Age” (Arthur and van Nuenen 2019). It has not yet been described, despite its strikingly close relation to social media formats like the vlog or – as I will show – Instagram. In line with selfie postings on social media, the personalised travel documentary for the cinema screen is a form of media use that is clearly based on the “logic of image” (Kress 2004, 115) and that cannot be analysed and interpreted without looking at the typical “producer” context (Schweiger 2019, 198) from which these films emerge.

When considering the body representations and aesthetics of female travellers on Instagram and personalised travel documentaries, we must also examine social media-related selfie harm, first labelled as such in an Instagram post by the British photographer Rankin in January 2019. In his post, he explains that he photographed teenagers and handed them their images to be “edited and filtered” until they felt their image was “social media ready” (Rankin 2019). His findings were striking: all of the participants changed their images in the same way: they made their “eyes bigger, their nose smaller and People of Colour chose to make their skin brighter”, thereby “mimicking their idols”. In the comments Rankin added that “it’s time to acknowledge the damaging effects that social media has on people’s self-image” (ibid). Interestingly though, he ended his comment with this note: “PLEASE NOTE: The majority of subjects preferred their original image” (ibid.). In a nutshell, Rankin’s findings represent what recent studies on social media use and female body image have revealed: on the one hand, it is clear that the immense success of online photo sharing systems cannot leave the millions of female users unaffected, and that visual practices on Instagram ensure, at least among

some adolescent women, an internalisation of certain body ideals and norms. On the other hand, it is also clear that the users of social media are aware of how many of the images are staged, and that they are able to distinguish between ‘social media ready’ and other images. This complex knowledge about how to best communicate, and with whom, through which types of images has been framed as “images in use” (Stocchetti and Kukkonen 2011), a concept that understands images not as something “powerful in and of themselves”, but as “mere tools” that are “almost always connected to other forms of communication (such as texts, verbal language, non-verbal communication, graphs, layout, typography, gestures, etc.)” (1–2). Similar results to Rankin’s have been found in many other studies. In a recent German study on *Female Self-Staging in New Media*, young women spoke about the strict expectations of viewers and the negative comments that emerged whenever image norms were not upheld. Researchers found a set of poses constantly used by female influencers on Instagram: “the leg extended to the side”, “the supposedly accidental look over the shoulder”, and “an angled arm and the hand as if casually in the hair” (Malisa Stiftung 2019). While Fardouly and Vartanian cautiously concluded that “social media use is associated with body image concerns” (2016, 3), we are now fully aware, only five years later, of the strong effect influencers can have on young women, and research seems to clearly indicate a problematic reinforcement of stereotyped female body representations. A recent Canadian study proved an even more alarming correlation between visual practices and selfie harm: the women who were given the possibility to rework their selfies before posting them had negative feelings about themselves afterwards, just as the comparison group who could not change or ‘improve’ their selfies before sharing and posting them. The results therefore correlated selfie harm directly with the posting and sharing of selfies in general.⁴ One could therefore argue that even the many possibilities of managing one’s own visual self within digital communication platforms like Instagram cannot prevent young women from suffering from self-objectification or from producing a negative body image. Arguably, selfie harm must be related to the massive perception of images showing women with the ‘ideal’ body, an effect that was already proven in the context of TV consumption in the late 1990s (see Wykes and Gunter 2005, 168). However, even if the research results seem to prove the tendency of an aggravating body ideal within social media, “the roles of selfies in relation to adult women’s body image are [still] unclear”: some authors argue that selfies “encourage body objectification, distorting women’s body image and encouraging unhealthy eating [...] and others that selfies can boost self-esteem and empower women through enabling control over the body aesthetic and through showcasing variations in beauty and celebrating uniqueness” (Grogan et al. 2018, 16).

Of course, the findings of the aforementioned media and socio-psychological studies ought to be tested further with larger numbers of participants. However, one can state already that there is a high consciousness amongst young women about the aesthetic rules and visual codes for presenting the female body on social media. So far, this consciousness has not provoked a critical engagement with those rules; quite the contrary, the specific image knowledge seems to intensify stereotypical reproductions of the perfect female body. The reason behind this mechanism may be called selfie harm, as it describes a cognitive dissonant behaviour. Even if the social media-driven image culture for presenting the female body is widely perceived as unrealistic, sexist and repressive, the female users still perform accordingly to those problematic body norms and adapt their visual practices.

Converging Visual Practices

While it is important to note that there is no such thing as a “genuine digital image aesthetic”, there are definitely “aesthetic constellations” which are typical for “digital image practices” (Reißmann 2019, 54). This chapter aims to verify whether the visual practices correlated with the posting of selfies in social media affect the visual practices within documentary films, and whether one can therefore state a converging image aesthetic. The term convergence is used according to the definition of Henry Jenkins who provocatively stated already in 2001 that “media convergence” is “transforming our culture as profoundly as the Renaissance” and must be seen as an “ongoing process” that “affects all aspects of our lives” (93). It is a “word that manages to describe technological, industrial, cultural, and social changes depending on who’s speaking and what they think they are talking about” (Jenkins 2008, 3) and it is important to note that “convergence does not occur through media”, but “occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others” (ibid.).⁵ My focus is therefore on convergence in the sense of Jenkins’s definition, as a fusion of media-related practices and body-related aesthetics across the boundaries of different media formats.

In order to analyse selfies on Instagram and images of female bodies within travel documentaries, the digital photographs and the film sequences in question must also be analysed as “images in use” and interpreted within their discursive patterns and specific multimodal design. However, there are many terms to describe the various styles within our “visual age” (Paul 2016) and the many forms of “visual communication” (Kautt 2019; Lobinger 2019). In order to focus on the question of converging image aesthetics of the representation of travelling female bodies, I will base my discussion on the terminology proposed

by Katharina Lobinger. She distinguishes between four different types of visual practices:

- 1 pre-communicative and property-related image practice, which involves above all *photowork*
- 2 photo sharing as precondition for image communication
- 3 verbal communication about images
- 4 communication with images which involves above all *self-presentation* (2015, 43, 51)⁶

What Rankin tested and observed mainly concerns levels one and four: he examined the *photowork* as part of the “pre-communicative and property-related” image practice and the *self-presentation* as part of the “communication with images”. His project seems to indicate that young women have internalised certain body ideals which are reproduced millions of times a day on Instagram, but the internalisation seems to affect only the visual practice of *photowork*. Within the visual practice, in terms of “verbal communicating about images” and “communicating with images”, the young women seemed to be conscious about the problematic effects of body norms and their proliferation. Considering the female users’ awareness, I will use this set of visual practices to analyse and compare the representations of female travellers in two recent German travel documentaries and a selection of travel selfies from Instagram.

Expedition Happiness (2017) and *Leaving the Frame* (2019)

The two travel documentaries selected are both recent German productions, but their English titles reveal the filmmakers’ ambitions to reach international publicity and sell their film to a wider market range.⁷ Both documentaries feature young couples who are travelling to get away from feeling unhappy or professionally exhausted. They fulfil what Gernot Böhme calls an “unease in prosperity” (2016, 19), a phenomenon typical of the wealthy and privileged citizens of industrialised states of the Global North, where people ‘suffer’ from a late-capitalist peculiarity: inner emptiness in the face of material abundance. *Expedition Happiness* shows Felix Starck and Selima Taibi undertaking a trip of several months from Alaska to Mexico in an old yellow school bus, which they bought second hand and then elaborately restored into a perfect white shabby chic home on wheels. The travel documented in *Leaving the Frame* is very similar. It depicts Maria Ehrich and Manuel Vering’s travels to Kenya, Mexico and the United States, mostly in a nostalgic bright-yellow VW Beetle that, although it was not repainted, was upgraded with a roof tent to grant more “liberty”. Although the young travellers in *Expedition Happiness* are aware of their wealth – “We had

it all, a nice loft in Berlin, a puppy, friends, but still, we weren't really happy" (Starck and Taibi 2017, 01:07–01:43) – they are still searching for happiness elsewhere. The prologues about the motive of travel in both films enable above all the “perception contract” (Hattendorf 1999, 75) of documentary by “verbally telling about the authenticity of the represented events” (73), but at the same time both couples deliver all of the four authenticity markers that Lobinger and Krämer discuss for the “visual representation of persons” within social media contexts: consistency, spontaneity, amateurism and a well-dosed release of intimate details (2019, 115–117). They introduce themselves as spontaneous young people who are not hiding anything and who are being honest and consistent, on- and offline, about their motives and weaknesses. They openly share intimate details (such as issues in their relationships or negative feelings that they have about themselves), while still being amateurs in regard to their project. Starck and Taibi, for example, admit in their introduction sequence that they gave up their flat in Berlin and bought the old bus without having a clue where to go or what to do, which helps to create the image of spontaneous and curious amateurs who are easy to identify with. The visual practice of *self-presentation* within this filmic kick-off is therefore identical to the visual practices of representing yourself on social media channels, and the first takes of the film reveal immediately how similar the chosen aesthetic is to image posts on Instagram. The travellers present themselves right from the outset in selfe-typical angles (eye-level) and shots (close-ups and medium close-ups), and above all there is the same design in terms of clothing, hairstyle and interior. The split screen used in *Expedition Happiness* to introduce the couple, sitting on a couch and talking about their travel motive connects images of social wealth and private happiness. On the left screen we see the couple laughing, underwater in a pool, or a puppy in its basket; on the right, we see Taibi (dressed in a woollen pullover and chignon) and Starck (wearing a cap and jeans) next to each other, distancing themselves verbally from their perfect but still not fulfilling Berlin lifestyle (Figures 9.1 and 9.2).

The chosen aesthetic and filmic design reveals many important aspects but, above all, it makes evident who the young travelling couples are addressing with their documentary: users of platforms like Instagram and Facebook. Such users are familiar with the presented design and topics and are a similar age to the filmmakers, as most Instagram users are between 25 and 34 years old.⁸ Another aspect is the gender difference: although both couples introduce themselves and the men briefly say who they are and why they want to travel, the women are portrayed in more detail, even with short video recordings of them as children. Within the first takes of *Leaving the Frame*, the actress Maria Ehrich is shown as a little girl, working backstage already, and in *Expedition Happiness* there is a flashback to the past of singer Selima Taibi, showing her as a



Figure 9.1 Screenshot from Expedition Happiness, 1:50. Figure 9.2 Screenshot from Expedition Happiness, 1:58.

schoolgirl who is performing opera on stage. It is also striking that there are, in the first minutes of the films, slow-motion takes of the two women only: Ehrich laughing in the rain; Taibi jumping and dancing, wearing flowers in her hair. When it comes to conveying emotions, the women in both films are immediately the focal points, rather than the men. The *self-presentation* as the most important form of communicating with images is correlated here with a special emotion that is visually encoded in the bodies of laughing young women. Their bodies are taking over the function of a “carrier” (Döveling 2019, 75) that is correlated with a specific set of emotions. The slow motion underlines the importance of those emotions for the whole setting of the film, and the images of the two young and attractive women, which are accompanied by the soft singing of Selima Taibi herself in *Expedition Happiness* and with soft piano music in *Leaving the Frame*, can be easily decoded by the viewers: they transmit emotions of joy, happiness, self-satisfaction and openness.

The convergences of the visual practices are most obvious, however, when looking at the Instagram and Facebook profiles of the two films on which both couples documented their journey intensively.⁹ This enabled the travellers to get in contact with the audience of their potential documentary long before the actual film was produced. Their social media channels therefore gave them precious first reviews and ratings of their travel images. They were able to know *in advance* what specific images were liked by their followers which means that they could profit from what had to be done in expensive market survey studies before producing had become the new norm within digital communication culture. There is a huge difference between only knowing *something* about the preferences of the target audience and knowing *exactly* which images and emotions they appreciate from the influx of free comments and likes on social media. The fact that personalised travel documentaries like *Expedition Happiness* or *Leaving the Frame* end up on the cinema screen is therefore far from coincidental, even if the filmmakers emphasise that everything happened more or less spontaneously and that they never had

any “script” – a claim that is almost overemphasised in the subtitle of *Leaving the Frame* that reads “a world trip without a script”. Of course, the travel of Maria Ehrich and Manuel Vering is – like any other travel – highly scripted. Firstly, because we can never travel without “a script we follow more or less consciously” (Greenblatt 1996, 10) and secondly because Ehrich and Vering openly communicate that their itinerary is shaped by the locations of “interesting stories” that they researched before starting their trip, stories they “absolutely want to tell” (2019, 4:55). By admitting their pre-travel research, they are revealing how much the script of *Leaving the Frame* is in fact marked by storytelling aspects. However, even if Ehrich and Vering confess that they had looked for special people or projects who could give them a story with a great potential to emotionalise, and even if they tell their viewers about this story-hunting, they are still performing within the authenticity-framework of social media. Because their story is ‘read’ as an open-minded sharing of the typical struggles in the making-of for the film, they are perceived as consistent people who are the same on and off screen, spontaneous amateurs who want to make interesting “reports” on their travel, but who are also sharing many “intimate” insights (Lobinger and Krämer 2019, 115–116). By claiming in their title and subtitle that they are leaving the common “frame” (which, by the way, is never addressed or explained) and by promising to travel “without a script”, the young couple encourages their viewers and followers to perceive them as authentic and interesting travellers.

Beside those authenticity markers, the travellers are also very aware of their performance on social media, of the “followership and attention” their travel vlogs created, as Manuel Vering explains in an interview (Blip 2020). It is state of the art within this new subgenre to first post several travel vlogs in order to evaluate the possibilities of making a successful film for cinema screen *while* you are still travelling. This first vlogging phase reveals that the ‘travelling away from it all’ is, in fact, not at all a travelling away from the hamster wheel of work and consumption and that the search for a ‘better self’ collides with a lot of work in terms of visual practices. It even demands a detailed survey of the impact your travel accounts are having on your social media channels. Self-finding and self-branding are therefore inseparably intertwined in travel writing within social media contexts. Finally, the travellers are profiting a lot from social networking: Felix Starck not only produced and distributed his own two travel documentaries, *Paddle the World* and *Expedition Happiness*, but also founded his own film company in 2017, which then successfully distributed *Leaving the Frame*. This special relationship between the filmmakers and their followers and of the digitally connected filmmaking community itself is typical for the era of social media and indicates precisely how media convergence is happening: the viewers of the cinema documentary are simultaneously followers on social media

platforms like Instagram and Facebook. The followers take over the roles of pre-evaluators and, even, producers, because the films are quite often funded by public donations once the travellers have successfully launched a crowdfunding campaign or raffled something – like Felix Starck and Selima Taibi did with their vintage-styled old school bus. The new standard within the personalised travel documentary is to use your followers in terms of content marketing by asking them if they like your style of travel, your posted images or by letting them vote for the film poster once the travel documentary is ready for cinema.¹⁰ The viewers of personalised travel documentaries are therefore very typical “producers”. They have the “double role” of being “recipients and consumers of existing offers” and of having an important impact on “the production and (co)-development of content and products” (Schweiger 2019, 198). What has been described for the documentary-production process illustrates also how “expertise and laity” are increasingly converging within a “peer-to-peer” organised and social media-based network (Pscheida 2017, 279). To give an interim summary, one can state that the personalised travel documentary emerges from a complex prosumer culture with a new and powerful role for the viewers, who not only interact with the filmmakers long before the actual film is produced but also decide, via their ratings, comments and likes on the pre-communicated images, which sequences will make the final cut. The filmmakers do know a lot about the aesthetic and subject-related preferences of their potential viewers, because they are able to ask their followers for detailed feedback on decisions related to images and travel routes and therefore set out with a travel script strongly guided by the social media rules of visual practices. Radically formulated, the personalised travel documentary can thus be classified as a compilation of images with the typical Insta-Aesthetics that is based on one’s own personalised market surveys.

Travel Selfies on Instagram

To ensure that I chose relevant images of *travelling* young women for my comparative analysis of different media formats, I searched Instagram for hashtags that clearly contain the self-categorisation of “female” and “travel”: #travelgirl, #travelfemme, #girltraveller, #girlswhoexplore. From the pool of posts with such hashtags, I selected random images.¹¹ To be able to reflect on the factor of social range within the analysis, I then categorised the images into four sections by numbers of followers: 0–1,000 followers, 1,000–5,000 followers, 5,000–100,000 followers and more than 100,000 followers. The most positive responses in terms of permission to use the images for research purpose came from the second group (1,000–5,000 followers) with eight permissions, followed by

the third group (5,000–100,000 followers) with six permissions. Four permissions were given by the persons with 0–1,000 followers, and only one by the Instagrammers with more than 100,000 followers,¹² indicating that Instagrammers with a small to middle-sized number of followers had a greater interest in responding to a first contact request than those who had a very small or a very large number of followers. The images for which I was granted permission are reprinted as screenshots, therefore showing the usual Instagram menu icons. The image analysis proposed here will consider both the image and the travel-related hashtag.

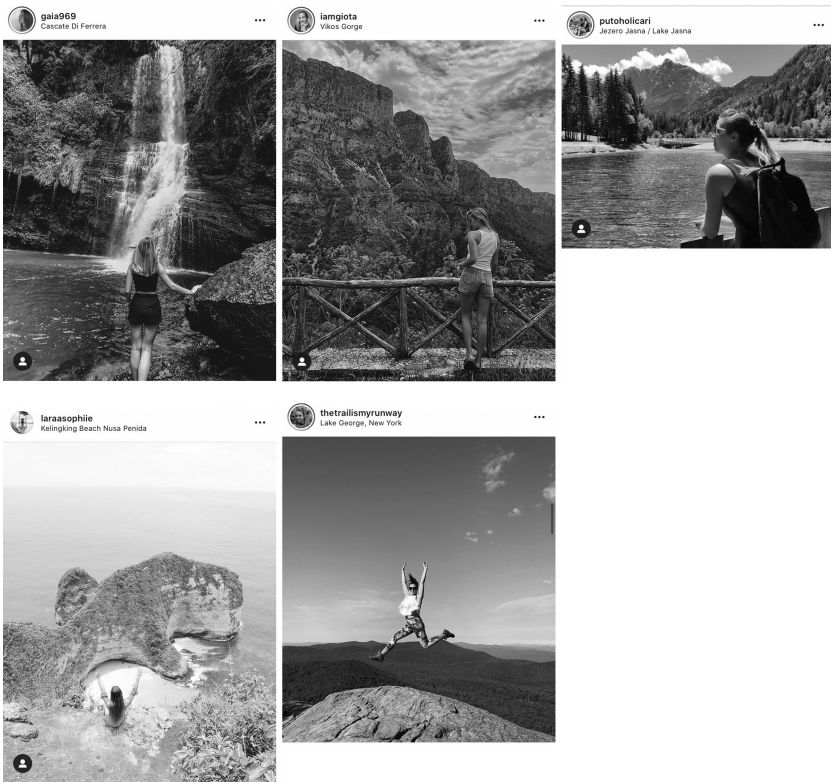


Figure 9.3 Selfie from @gaia969, courtesy of the Instagram account holder.

Figure 9.4 Selfie from @iamgiota, courtesy of the Instagram account holder.

Figure 9.5 Selfie from @putoholicari, courtesy of the Instagram account holder.

Figure 9.6 Selfie from @laraasophiie, courtesy of the Instagram account holder.

Figure 9.7 Selfie from @thetrailismyrunway, courtesy of the Instagram account holder.



Figure 9.8 Screenshot from *Expedition Happiness*, 16:10.



Figure 9.9 Screenshot from *Expedition Happiness*, 29:45.

Looking at the randomly assembled selfies from Instagram allows a surprisingly easy classification in terms of three picture motifs that will be discussed and compared to the screenshots from the travel documentaries: (1) picturesque landscapes, with the travelling women shot from behind; (2) the ‘classical’ selfie, showing mainly the traveller’s face, often with some specific clothing accessory (hat, sunglasses or headlamp) or



Figure 9.10 Screenshot from *Expedition Happiness*, 41:53.



Figure 9.11 Screenshot from *Leaving the Frame*, 49:58.

showing the face in front of a famous sight and (3) the traveller taking a distinctive body pose (shoulder glance, crossed naked legs and cross-legged seat).

The travelling woman shot from behind and standing in front of a panoramic view or idyllic nature (Figures 9.3–9.7) is a motif repeated five times within the set of 19 images, one slightly varying it by portraying the traveller from the front and jumping up.

This motif is also used frequently for Selima Taibi in *Expedition Happiness* (Figure 9.8–9.10), while it is used only once for Maria Ehrich in *Leaving the Frame* (Figure 9.11). However, the motif often appears, slightly changed, to portray Ehrich's profile (Figures 9.12–9.13):



Figure 9.12 Screenshot from *Leaving the Frame*, 1:02:00.



Figure 9.13 Screenshot from *Leaving the Frame*, 1:28:09.

The Picturesque View

The first motif can be interpreted as a ‘classical’ use of the body within the travelogue, because the body serves as an “eye-witnessing” element and guarantees the authenticity of a “first-hand-experience” (Helmers and Tilar 2005, 267). The back view allows the viewers to put themselves in the position of the traveller because they are looking in the same direction as the “witness” of the panoramic scene. However, this iconic view, forever associated with Caspar David Friedrich’s “Wanderer above the Sea of Fog”,¹³ has a problematic history, which Sean P. Smith analysed in detail in his article on “Instagram abroad”. The gesture of overlooking the land re-evokes the “promontory witness”, which has “a long historical precedent, beginning with late-eighteenth-century emphases on the picturesque and coalescing through an interaction with the Romantics and nineteenth-century scientific pursuit” (Smith 2018,

180). As Smith puts it: “The ‘promontory’ gained by the elevation of the subject’s gaze is indicative, at once, of the metaphysical solace delivered by the view as well as alluding to mastery of the scene beheld” (ibid.). This image practice is one of three regularly repeated motifs on Instagram – Smith discusses the promontory witness, the tropical exotic and the fantasised assimilation – that are directly reproducing colonial image practices, most famously described in Mary Louise Pratt’s study, *Imperial Eyes* (1992). The sublime view over wide landscapes is thus a motif with a long and problematic history, very popular on Instagram and, in the age of media convergence, also popular in travel documentaries. However, beside the unpleasant fact that the colonial gesture of those motifs is not reflected upon by the posters or users and is, instead, perpetuated, it is remarkable that it is predominantly women who are shown in the pose of the former male conqueror. On the one hand, this indicates something encouraging: in the spirit of the above cited optimism of Gray et al. (2018), women are increasingly conquering all sorts of poses and forms of representation that were previously reserved for men. On the other hand, the fact that within the documentaries it is *only* the women who are portrayed as promontory witnesses from behind, filmed by their male partners, seems to reinforce once more the objectification of the female body. Just like the slow motion clip of the laughing women in the introductory scenes of the films, the female body in the pose of the promontory witness becomes a carrier for emotions. The fact that Felix Starck and Manuel Vering are not portrayed from behind, gazing at a beautiful sunrise, not only indicates that they are the ones who are filming, but it also proves the female body as an easy trigger for emotionalising your viewers.

It is also striking that the selfies on Instagram cannot be selfies in the true sense of the word, because they all show women from behind, while a selfie is defined as a photograph “taken by the person in the photo, rather than being [...] taken by somebody else” (Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin 2020, 67). The motif thus contradicts the used selfie hashtags but, as Leaver et al. emphasise, this selfie definition is already “contested and jumbled”, so that now even a picture that the person has not taken themselves can be called a selfie (ibid.). Of course, the promontory witness pose is accompanied by numerous pictorial elements, which are discussed here in terms of multimodal image analysis. Multimodal analysis, in short, is about an inferential image analysis that bypasses the iconographic-iconological three-step process in favour of a discourse analysis. It aims at the specific capture of the image design that always depends on the “presentation mode” of a specific media format (Bucher 2019, 653). As for Instagram, the presentation mode consists primarily of the affordances of the app and of the correlation between image and hashtag, because the function of the hashtag is quite essential (see Kuhlhüser 2017, 84). When looking at the five selfies shown above, it is

not only the promontory witness setting that catches the eye but, once again, the female body as carrier of a specific positive emotion. As was discussed for the emotionalising function of the female body in the documentaries, the emotions of joy and liberty are clearly communicated through the postures in Figures 9.6 and 9.7, in which both women are stretching their arms to the sky, one jumping, the other making a victory finger sign. Beside the body as a sign for experiences of joy and liberty, Figures 9.3 and 9.4 call up the discussed attributes that determine the 'ideal female body': slender, with a lot of bare skin on display, long hair and, in Figure 9.4, also the supposedly accidental look over the shoulder, which creates a flattering profile, as well as the *contrapposto*. The screenshots from *Expedition Happiness* reveal very similar picture motifs. In particular, Figures 9.8 and 9.9 place Selima Taibi at the centre of the image, in front of a lake and the ocean, and these motifs are regularly reproduced on Instagram with the exact same setting and colouring. Figure 9.9 shows another supposedly accidental look over the shoulder, right into the camera. However, considering the questions of selfie harm, the female bodies in the documentaries are, in the two studied here, less typical than the average of the Instagram selfies I selected.

The Classical Travel Selfie

Most of the images from the Instagram corpus can be classified as a classical selfie, an image motif that is also frequently reproduced in the two travel documentaries, portraying the traveller's face or upper body, very often provided with a specific clothing detail. But the classical selfie can also simply portray the traveller in front of a sight, like a famous building (Figures 9.14–9.22):

Except for Figure 9.19, all of the classical selfies are not consistent with the stereotypical body characteristics discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Although this finding can only be based on a very small selection of images, it still supports the idea that travel photography on social media channels like Instagram can be more of an empowering tool than a problematic one for women. The women represented here seem to use the app without being affected by selfie harm; they use it to portray themselves as happy and independent individuals, profiting from the ability to travel. It cannot be observed that the skin has been lightened, noses narrowed, or eyes enlarged. Of course, the image design (filters, backgrounds, clothing, accessories) are all very similar, and this indicates the strong normative effect of the Insta-Aesthetics (see Manovich 2017), resulting from the affordances of the app and the associated consolidating user practices. However, when asking about selfie harm in correlation to travel images on Instagram, one can state, for the examples given here, that the media format is used for a non-stereotypical representation of the

travelling female body. It is also striking that the two most contrasting images, Figures 9.19 and 9.21, use the same hashtag: #womenwhoexplore. But while Figure 9.19 shows a slender woman with long hair and bare skin on display in perfect light, positioned analogous to the sight in the background, Christine Thürmer in Figure 9.21 shows herself quite unflatteringly: pale, with glasses, in front of a



9.14



9.15



9.16

Figure 9.14 Selfie from @aura.silver, courtesy of the Instagram account holder.

Figure 9.15 Selfie from @nomathembabellz, courtesy of the Instagram account holder.

Figure 9.16 Selfie from @christinetraveler, courtesy of the Instagram account holder.



9.17



9.18



9.19

Figure 9.17 Selfie from @es_lebe_das_leben, courtesy of the Instagram account holder.

Figure 9.18 Selfie from @rhena_heisenberg, courtesy of the Instagram account holder.

Figure 9.19 Selfie from @somethingaboutmary_travels, courtesy of the Instagram account holder.



Figure 9.20 Selfie from @thewildesttales, courtesy of the Instagram account holder.

Figure 9.21 Selfie from @christine_thuermer, courtesy of the Instagram account holder.

Figure 9.22 Selfie from @taravaitiere, courtesy of the Instagram account holder.

grey background and wearing a thick hooded jacket. This shows that the image that most closely represents the ideal female body characteristics is using the same hashtag as the image that most clearly rejects this very same body ideal. Someone looking for travel images or for travel inspiration with #womenwhoexplore is therefore confronted with a wide range of picture motifs. This can be interpreted as a positive signal, as it indicates that even on a highly normative app like Instagram, the representation of the travelling female body is not necessarily damaged by selfie harm on social media, but has diverse forms of representation.

The selection of travel-related selfies also confirms what Ulrike Gretzel stated in her netnographic study on #travelsselfie. She claimed that “while the traditional ‘I was here’ photograph of the self in front of an iconic tourist attraction exists” (2019, 120), it is no longer particularly prevalent. “And when it appears, it often includes the stylized performance of the self [...]. In most travel selfies, the destination does indeed only serve as the background, or prompt, or completely disappears into the location tag or hashtags” (120–121). This is also true for the classical selfies in the documentaries, where the iconic object is even less present than on Instagram, and the main focus always lies on the travelling subject or, to be more precise, lies on the female part. The screenshots below (Figures 9.23–9.27) show once more that the Insta-Aesthetics is reproduced in the films, portraying the travelling women with the usual clothing accessories (hats and sunglasses), and in the selfie-typical shots and settings:



Figure 9.23 Screenshot from *Leaving the Frame*, 1:28:28.



Figure 9.24 Screenshot from *Leaving the Frame*, 1:04:15.

Most importantly though, the classical selfie motif appears when the travellers are vlogging within their documentary. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the vlog as a “blog composed of posts in video form”. I would add that it can be defined as a short clip in a selfie-typical pose. It is therefore usually a self-recorded, frontal close-up in which a person comments on the present situation or on events from the very recent past, thereby adapting the narrative mode of a diary entry. Admittedly, a vlog differs from a traditional diary because it is designed from the outset to be shared with a large possible public, but it nevertheless proves how media convergence takes place. Figure 9.25, for example, shows Selima Taibi vlogging about the inconveniences she, Felix Starck and their co-travelling dog experienced at the border between Canada and

the United States. In Figure 9.26, she is vlogging about the health issues of their dog. In my opinion, this shows another significant media convergence effect: not only do the filmmakers use the same visual practices that are used to present themselves on social media channels, and not only do they use the same aesthetics that Instagram uses, but they also integrate the format of the vlog, which is more typical of the online platform YouTube.



Figure 9.25 Screenshot from *Expedition Happiness*, 34:19.



Figure 9.26 Screenshot from *Expedition Happiness*, 45:11.



Figure 9.27 Screenshot from *Expedition Happiness*, 1:28:53.

The Distinctive Body Pose

Specific body poses are found more often on Instagram than in travel documentaries. However, comparing the three poses in the set of selfies examined in this section (Figures 9.28 to 9.30), despite the arrangement of the picture elements typical of Insta-Aesthetics, some differences are very obvious.

The central perspective typical for the app is striking: all three women's bodies are placed in the centre of the picture, despite very different body poses and backgrounds. This reaffirms once again Gretzel's findings (2019) regarding travel photography on Instagram: the experiencing I is always the most important element of an image, the destination comes in second, at best. And without the hashtags, all three images cannot be identified as travel photography, as one would not be able to recognise where the travellers are in the picture. However, there is a striking difference concerning the presentation of the travelling female body. While Figure 9.30 could also be an everyday photograph of a young woman, sitting cross-legged in the grass, looking confident and smiling into the camera, Figures 9.28 and 9.29 represent the bodies of female travellers according to the supposed 'ideal' female body that social media users are always aware of: both women are slim, wearing short dresses, showing naked skin and wearing their long hair down. Moreover, the poses – the 'accidental' look over the shoulder, which creates a perfect s-shaped body curve, accompanied by a smile, and the elegantly crossed legs of a woman sitting on a boat – are prototypical body poses and body ideals that perpetuate, rather than overcome, selfie harm. The selfie (Figure 9.28)



Figure 9.28 Selfie from @travelwithherstyle, courtesy of the Instagram account holder.

which comes from an account with more than 100,000 followers is also the one that reproduces the discussed body clichés most clearly, and this is in line with Malisa's aforementioned study (2019).

Distinctive body poses are rarely found in the two discussed travel documentaries. The most striking pose is the already mentioned vlogging pose, in which the travellers hold the camera themselves or put it right in front of them to comment, often very emotionally, on recent events and problems, or simply on the present location of the journey. Especially in *Expedition Happiness*, the vlogging sequences of both travellers are very frequent. *Leaving the Frame* uses fewer vlogging sequences and distinctive body poses are only detected in adventurous or fun scenes; for example, when Maria Ehrich feeds a falcon in Kenya or dives into water with sharks. The poses Maria Ehrich and Selima Taibi take in the documentaries come out of their ongoing travel action (see Figure 9.27), rather than from the typical poses on Instagram. On the one hand, this is of course due to the difference of the media formats, because the films tell a whole travel story and therefore have to show the travelling bodies



Figure 9.29 Selfie from @nikkthequick, courtesy of the Instagram account holder.

in much more different poses and situations than within a single post or an Instagram story. On the other hand, body poses such as those in Figures 9.28 and 9.29 are due in large part to the previously mentioned knowledge about the effect of body images in social media contexts, a knowledge the filmmakers share due to the converging visual practices discussed earlier. One could therefore argue that the lack of stereotyped feminine body poses within documentaries shows that the media format is used to gain more distance from the female body norms shaping social media. However, as was discussed for the picturesque view and the classical selfie, there is also an observable aesthetic convergence between Instagram and personalised travel documentaries. Finally, the adoption of certain poses for image communication via Instagram shows that, despite the debates about filters and digitally post-processed images, it is perhaps not so much the photowork that should be at the centre of interest, but rather the photo sharing, self-presentation and the verbal communication about images. It seems that those are the visual practices with the greatest influence on the circulating image motifs and aesthetics.



Figure 9.30 Selfie from @humminghalcyon, courtesy of the Instagram account holder.

Conclusion

This analysis has shown that while Instagram motifs and aesthetics borrow from the pictorial traditions of travel literature, such as the picturesque view or the depiction of the travelling subject in front of a tourist attraction, new pictorial motifs and aesthetics are emerging out of user habits on social media. In this chapter, Insta-Aesthetics has referred to a pictorial aesthetic that has been significantly influenced by the selfie and corresponding selfie poses, as well as by the settings, clothing and accessories typical for Instagram. My comparison between travel selfies on Instagram and travel documentaries has also revealed a strong convergence in terms of visual practices. Talking about images, sharing images and self-expression through images are thus practices that influence different media formats. Hence, it has been shown that contemporary travel documentation is based on the same visual practices as posting a travel selfie on Instagram. One could therefore question whether the media format of the travel documentary is slowly losing its distinct media function because of its convergence with visual practices typical of social

media. But to answer complex questions like this, further analysis on convergence effects are needed. As for further studies on representations of female travellers in different media formats, categories of race and age would be of a particular importance, and the convergence effects discussed here could be further investigated in comparative studies on travel vlogs and blogs. For now, the aesthetic comparison could prove that while the picturesque view and the classical selfie are aesthetically highly convergent, the striking of distinctive body poses does not feature much in documentaries. While the back view of a woman, placed centrally in the picture against an idyllic background, is a very dominant motif in both media formats, stereotypically coded female poses such as crossed bare legs and the accidental look over the shoulder seem to occur more frequently on Instagram.

In terms of selfie harm, the findings state that for the depiction of female travellers, hardly any effects of selfie harm could be observed both on Instagram and in travel documentaries, suggesting that the representation of travelling women can be used as a vehicle to distance oneself from the ideal of a thin-nosed, white, wide-eyed woman. For as the view on the classical selfies has shown, even under the same hashtag there are still divergent representations of the travelling female body. It may therefore be easier to resist aesthetic body norms through the representation of the *travelling* female body than in other contexts of representation, such as everyday photography, because the strong activity context of travel alone makes it easier for the others who see, evaluate, comment, finance and advertise, to accept the deviation from the female body norm. The tradition of the travelogue as a genre associated with adventure and self-empowerment could thus perhaps help, in the long run, to overcome problematic body norms in different media formats. The use of young female bodies as an easy emotionalisation, however, seems to remain a common practice and has proved to be a conspicuous constant, especially in travel documentaries.

Notes

- 1 That even a single travel selfie on Instagram can be categorised as a “travel narrative” was recently discussed by Sandra Kuhlhüser (2017). For the ambiguous concept of authenticity within cotemporary travel writing see for example Drywa (2018) and van Nuenen (2016).
- 2 The latest companion to travel writing research even dedicates a whole part to “sensuous geographies” with chapters on “seeing, hearing, touching, tasting and smelling” (Pettinger and Youngs 2020). A detailed summary on the intensive research about travel writing and the body is given by Helmers and Tilar (2005).
- 3 Apart from the examples discussed in this chapter, this boom includes *Pedal the World* (Starck 2015), *Weit: Geschichte von einem Weg um die Welt* (Allgaier and Weisser 2017), *Projekt Antarktis. Die Reise unseres Lebens* (Michael Ginzburg, Tim Müller-Zitzke and Dennis Vogt 2018), *Anderswo*

- (Pahnke 2018), *Reiss aus: Zwei Menschen, zwei Jahre, ein Traum* (Stirnat and Wendt 2019) and *Blown Away* (Schulze 2019). For a further analysis of the travel stories told in those personalised documentaries, see Sennfelder (2021).
- 4 In their study, Mills, Musto, Williams and Tiggemann tested young women under three different conditions: “taking and uploading either an untouched selfie, taking and posting a preferred and retouched selfie to social media, or a control group” (2018, 86). They could show that feelings of anxiety, lacking self-confidence and feelings of being less attractive were related to both groups, with or without any photo work involved.
 - 5 For a precise summary of the research done by Jenkins and the possible adaptations for literary studies, see Georgi (2015).
 - 6 If not indicated differently, all translations from German sources are mine.
 - 7 Similar travel documentaries from the most recent years have German titles, like *Weit* (“Far”), *Reiss aus* (“Break free”) or *Anderswo* (“Elsewhere”). Both travel documentaries examined here are available on Netflix, and *Expedition Happiness* was also released on DVD in 2017.
 - 8 See <https://www.statista.com/statistics/248769/age-distribution-of-worldwide-instagram-users/>.
 - 9 See <https://www.instagram.com/leavingtheframe/?hl=en>; <https://de-de.facebook.com/leavingtheframe/>; <https://www.facebook.com/expeditionhappiness/>; <https://www.instagram.com/expeditionhappiness/?hl=en>.
 - 10 See the Instagram story of Maria Ehrich about the cinema release and cinema tour of their film: <https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/17843749993406465/?hl=en>.
 - 11 I did not choose the images myself to avoid any kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. The #-guided image research was done by a student assistant and I was first confronted with the images only after the permission of the persons involved had been granted.
 - 12 The numbers of followers all date from June 2020 and may of course have changed significantly by now.
 - 13 The popularity of this motif on Instagram can be seen when looking at a special collection of the account “Insta-Repeat” See: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B995ZTYnGSx/>.

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