IJoC Selfies

#NaMo: The Political Work of the Selfie
in the 2014 Indian General Elections

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A May 2014 issue of *Open Magazine*, an Indian weekly news digest, celebrated the victory of Narendra Modi, the new Indian prime minister, with an iconic portrait with the caption "Triumph of the Will" (see Figure 1). Given the pronounced right-wing leanings of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the political party with which Modi is affiliated, the reference in the caption to the Leni Reifenstahl film of the same name might have been more than just a mere play on words. Added to the oft-iterated implication of the BJP ministry in the Gujarat riots of 2002 during Narendra Modi's chief ministership, *Open Magazine*'s low-angle portrait of the incumbent prime minister, together with the caption, seemed to convey a deliberate construction of Modi as a man of iron will, whose government promised not to stray from the "right" path (pun intended).

Figure 1. **Open Magazine***'s celebratory*
cover image of Narendra Modi.

However, it is not oversized, spectacular images such as these that won Modi the elections. Rather, Narendra Modi's electoral campaign was marked by a strong digital presence, with regular updates being posted through a Twitter account. Selfies played an important part in this campaign, with the politician posting pictures of himself with his party's electoral symbol, with celebrities, and with family members. Contrary to *Open Magazine*'s Bonapartean portrait of Narendra Modi, his own uploads seemed to exude a very different aura. The more amateur look of Narendra Modi's selfies, I suggest, conveyed the sense of a more believable person rather than an inaccessible icon. This lent the electoral campaign a viral affective charge that, if it did not win the election, at least proved to be integral to the construction of a public imaginary around the personality of Narendra Modi. Like the Battle of Waterloo that the Duke of Wellington purportedly claimed to have been won in the everyday spaces of the playing fields of Eton, the 2014 general elections in India might well have been claimed in the viral playing field of the Internet.

Do-It-Yourself Virality: The Selfie as a Delivery System

Although photographs have always played an important role in Indian electoral campaigns, Modi's use of selfies to connect with his support base was unprecedented. However, this was not the first instance in which Modi effectively used technological means of dissemination for political leverage. In 2012, for instance, Modi's campaign mobilized three-dimensional holography to project a 10-foot-tall image of him delivering a speech across several BJP rallies and public meetings in the country. The use of 3-D holographic technology revealed a keen understanding of the impact of techno-spectacular media[2] and the benefits of the ostensible "omnipresence" that they accorded.[3] However, unlike the capital-intensive holographic projections that were reported to have cost Rs. 5 crore (approximately $8 million) per projection,[4] Modi's selfies were much less cost- and labor-intensive. Affordable and easy to produce, selfies accorded Modi's public self with something that the spectacular hologram could never achieve—a touch of virality. The holographic projection required people to actually attend a rally to see it, whereas Modi's viral self proved to be a much more effective delivery system that could reach his audience in more convenient and intimate interfaces—desktops, tablets, and mobile phones. The holographic projections demanded a singular presence, but the selfies compressed time and space and allowed the recipients to simultaneously inhabit two places. In corollary, Narendra Modi, the man in the selfies, could now infiltrate the spaces of the everyday.

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[2] I am indebted to Guy Debord's (2002) notion of the spectacle, where he claims: "The spectacle cannot be understood as a mere deception produced by mass-media technologies. It is a worldview that has actually been materialized" (p. 6). In essence, the spectacle of Narendra Modi produced by the campaign was technologically enabled, but it externalized the iconicity associated with the cult of the personality that BJP's electoral campaign banked upon so heavily.

[3] In fact, a section in Narendra Modi's official website is dedicated to explaining the technology behind 3-D holography. There is an almost didactic function attached to this inclusion, because it helped project Modi's image as a man who is in sync with the technological developments that can lead to progress and development. See http://www.narendramodi.in/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/3D-Technology.pdf.

[4]See   http://ibnlive.in.com/news/narendra-modis-3d-campaign-irks-opposition-congress-to-move-ec/306374-37-170.html.

In fact, selfies offered a unique two-way connection between the prime ministerial candidate and his supporters. On his website, for instance, Modi claims that social media was integral to his campaign, acting as a "direct means of information" that he and his party "gained tremendously from."[5] Not only was Modi posting his *own* selfies, he was encouraging his supporters to do the same, citing the selfies of his supporters shared over social media as proof of a positive political culture. Although such claims of optimism deserve critical dissection, one thing is certain: Social media and the possibilities of viral circulation had been actively recognized and tapped as potent political tools. The medium of the selfie allowed a do-it-yourself form of virality, ensuring that the "NaMo" (short for **Na**rendra **Mo**di) syndrome never went out of circulation. But *what* exactly was the message that was circulating through the use of selfies? To answer that question, we need to turn to the form of the selfie itself.

The Affect of the Everyday: The Form and Function of the Modi Selfies

Whereas images such as the *Open Magazine* cover and the holographic behemoth revel in the aesthetics of the spectacular, the selfie grounds itself in the familiar, the routinized, and the everyday. In fact, the elimination of the spectacular in the selfie lends it a peculiar sense of authenticity. Shot by the user with a handheld cellphone camera, this first-person point of view of the self is ostensibly amateur, for the corporeal self is never detached from the recording medium. The selfie is also amateur in the common-sense meaning of the word *amateur* that stands in opposition to the word *professional*. The very idea that digital technology—and, in particular, the cell-phone camera—allows for a certain level of democratization of imaging technology that was previously the domain of professional photographers points to the kind of access to technology that connects the selfie to the notion of the everyday.

An argument can be made—and has been made—about selfies being as old as self-portraiture (see Eler, 2013). The crucial point to note, however, is that the digital selfie is *not* a matter of mere technological advancement over older forms of recording the self through oil paintings or even celluloid photography—the selfie is not *merely* modern technology, it is a different *technic* altogether.[6] The drive to visually record the self might have similar precedents, but the self produced by a selfie and a traditional self-portrait are not the same. The connection of the hand to the cell phone at the moment of recording makes the selfie a sort of externalized inward look, and the point of view of the selfie is not necessarily the external gaze of the painter's eye as he steps out of his body to see and render his own form, but that of the hand that has been extended the power of sight. Thus, in a strange way, the so-called amateur look of the selfie also becomes an index of the real—the point of view of the selfie seems authentic, because it is as if the human body is looking at *itself*. Amateur, therefore, becomes synonymous with the everyday and the evidentiary in the case of the selfie, and an embedded presence in time and space accompanies

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[5] See http://www.narendramodi.in/a-victory-for-the-people-a-victory-for-india-and-the-triumph-of-the-ballot/.

[6] I use the term *technic* in the sense that Bernard Steigler (1998) uses it in *Technics and Time* (1998). He describes technics as the "pursuit of life by other means than life" (p. 17). Steigler is pointing out that technologies are not merely material forms that shape the world outside us, but are affectively ingrained in us as normalized habits. I borrow Steigler's definition to point out that selfies and selfie-taking, like many other forms of digital culture, are not merely *outside* us but also *within* us.

selfie imagery. This, then, is the affective charge of the selfie—a sense of liveness, an ostensible reality conveyed visually, frozen in bytes and ever ready to be shared.

It is this affective form of the selfie that was mobilized in Narendra Modi's electoral campaign. The Modi selfies literally produced *another* body that was Narendra Modi. Mirroring Ernst Kantorowicz's (1957) exegesis of the inherent duality of the office and the person of the king in medieval Europe, the Modi selfies seemed to emphasize that the office of the prime minister was marked by a similar dualism. However, because the selfies operated within the realm of the routinized and the everyday, they paradoxically seemed to visually fuse the body natural and the body politic. Thus, the prime ministerial candidate that was Narendra Modi seemed inseparable from Narendra Modi, the everyman. The amateur and everyday form of the selfie, then, complemented the ideology of the BJP and its emphatic projection of Narendra Modi as a man of austerity, routine, and practice. Consider, for instance, the emphasis on Modi's official website on slogans such as "We need action, not acts" and on Modi's career as a political activist of the street, "immersed in nation building from a very young age", which essentially pits this image against the dynastic operation seen in political parties such as Congress (see Admin, 2014a, 2014b). This idea of a self-made man has been integral to Modi's public persona and has been part of a larger public relations machinery that includes a comic book titled *Bal Narendra: Childhood Stories of Narendra Modi*, which narrates episodes from Modi's childhood, emphasizing his drive for moral action and extolling notions of self-dependence, selflessness, and bravery.[7]

The selfies extended and reemphasized this rhetoric of Narendra Modi as a man of action by taking advantage of the seemingly inherent, evidentiary, and immediate nature of their form. The idea of the self-made man seems to have become fused with the idea of the "selfie-made" man; the question of Modi's own agency as he clicks his own pictures rather than waiting for a photographer to reach out to the masses becomes fused with the rationale of "actions, not acts." This rationale, in fact, has been one of the ways in which Narendra Modi's popularity among his support base has been ensured, with the rhetoric of development being one of the major trump cards that the BJP has played in these elections.[8] In a sense, the immediate and everyday nature of the selfie was integral to BJP and Narendra Modi's ideological advertising—even a sort of viral marketing campaign, with more than 4 million followers on Twitter and more than 17 million likes on the official Facebook page.

The Viral Candidate: Debates and Discussions Around the Modi Selfies

For all its intended benefits, Narendra Modi's selfie-snapping landed him in controversy on April 30, 2014, when he clicked a selfie while holding a cutout of a lotus (his party symbol) at a polling booth

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[7] See Basu (2014), where the author describes the comic book as a "How to be like Young Modi Leaflet," pointing out its didactic function.

[8] Gujarat has been touted as a state with a high level of industrial and commercial development. The Bharatiya Janata Party has often claimed this to be a sign of the success of Narendra Modi's chief ministership, while detractors have often rightly pointed out that the façade of economic success is not an indicator of social equality that is often overlooked in development indices. For a good critique of this rhetoric, read Nonica Datta's (2013) "The Language of Narendra Modi."

just minutes after having cast his vote in the city of Ahmedabad, the capital of the state of Gujarat (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Narendra Modi's controversial post-poll selfie tweet.

In a highly televised affair, Modi had also addressed a nearby gathering of voters while holding the party symbol. A First Information Report was filed against Modi for having flouted the provisions of the 1951 Representation of the People Act, whereby candidates are not allowed to hold meetings, campaign or address voters in any way that might influence the suffrage process. The Election Commission, which is the national body entrusted with ascertaining the smooth and fair conduct of the elections, alleged that Narendra Modi had "intended and calculated to influence and affect the result of elections in the constituencies going to polls . . . not only in Ahmadabad but also in all other constituencies in the State of Gujarat and elsewhere in the country" ("Read: Election Commission's notice," 2014). Sections 126 (1) (a) and 126 (1) (b) of the law under which Modi was charged, clearly state that no person can "convene, hold or attend, join or address any public meeting or procession in connection with an election" or "display to the public any election matter by means of cinematograph, television or other similar apparatus" for 48 hours after the conclusion of the polling process to ensure an unbiased and unmanipulated election. Section 3 of the Act defines "election matter" as "any matter intended or calculated to influence or affect the result of an election" (Representation of the People Act, 1951).

Although the law does not mention social media or selfies, it could be argued that the category "other similar apparatus" could be updated to include them, especially since the BJP's electoral symbol was foregrounded so strongly in the images. Though the investigation never achieved any closure, it was clear that the selfie was a force to be reckoned with, and it is easy to understand why it might have irked the Election Commission and competing political parties such as the Congress and the Aam Admi Party.

The content of the selfie featured Narendra Modi's face, unusually rounded due to distortion from the closeness of the cell-phone camera's wide-angle lens to the subject matter. This smiling image of the politician, almost homely in his disposition as he holds up the lotus cut-out, while prominently displaying the black ink stripe on the forefinger as a mark of having voted, is also an invitation to suffrage, as the tweet was accompanied by the caption "Voted! Here is my selfie" (Modi, 2014b). This is particularly significant, because the selfie now became a call to political action, wherein the invitation was not only to partake in the democratic process but to make the right choice by voting for Narendra Modi.

The persuasive idea of making the right choice by electing Modi was also evident in another selfie, this time featuring Modi with the author Chetan Bhagat. Bhagat, a vocal supporter of Modi's candidature and the purported development it would bring, (Srivastava, 2014)[9] posted a selfie of the two of them after a meeting on April 21 (see Figure 3). The selfie carried the caption "Met #namo. You know a leader has the youth pulse when he can discuss job creation and is still up for a selfie!" (Bhagat, 2014a) The image reiterated the rational values of the man of action that have been projected as Narendra Modi's unique selling point.

Figure 3. Narendra Modi's selfie with Chetan Bhagat.

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[9]   See   http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-modi-s-economic-agenda-is-good-for-india-will-generate-jobs-for-youth-chetan-bhagat-1962212.

When Modi shared the same photograph on his Twitter account on the occasion of Bhagat's birthday, Bhagat tweeted, "When the front-running PM candidate of the world's biggest democracy remembers your birthday and posts a selfie, have to say, it feels nice" (Bhagat, 2014b). The tweet reemphasized the aura of the everyman that has been central to Narendra Modi's candidature. A selfie that became viral *after* Modi was elected as prime minister again highlighted the idea of the accessible everyman that Modi was being made out to be (see Figure 4). This one featured Narendra Modi seeking "blessings from his mother," Hiraben, after having won the elections (Modi, 2014d).

Figure 4. Narendra Modi with his mother, Hiraben.

Modi's selfies with Chetan Bhagat and with his mother painted Modi's public image as a man of everyday, rational values for whom the mundane rituals of conversing and greeting and respect for preordained structures of the normative family were of paramount importance. Along with the "Chai Pe Charcha" (Conversation Over Tea) campaign in which Narendra Modi met and interacted with the public in a modified version of the over-coffee talk-show format, selfies such as these repeated the rhetoric of everydayness. The "rational" leader, after all, had to be a man of the everyday to be able to understand the travails of the common man, or so the rhetoric implied. The language of the selfie, therefore, was a

part of what Theodore Adorno (2002) has called "the jargon of authenticity" (p. 3). Adorno refers to the rhetoric of the everyday and the banal that allows certain ideological constructs to be projected as "authentic" experience that remains untouched by the seemingly corruptive influences of modernity. Such jargons of authenticity promise an absolute and pure experience of life and the world, which is, ironically, as artificially constructed as that which it promises a refuge from. Narendra Modi's authenticity has been repeatedly emphasized by the electoral campaign through various narrative modalities—that of talk show, the comic book, and the selfie.[10]

In effect, what social media and selfies helped Narendra Modi and the BJP attain was a consolidation of a political vantage point where the public image of the prime ministerial candidate could circulate virally at an accelerated pace. In *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks*, Tony Sampson argues that the viral inhabits "a space in which affects are significantly passed on, via suggestions made by others, more and more through networks" (2012, p. 5). Such was the nature of #NaMo, the digital avatar of BJP's electoral spearhead; #NaMo was a viral warhead that existed outside the time of the real world, yet claimed to be from within it. From suggestion to suggestion, image to image, #NaMo spread virally through an affectively charged electoral field, until #NaMo, the viral candidate was made flesh as Narendra Modi, the prime minister.

Selfie Grande: Subsumption and the Political Labor of the Selfie

From legal controversy to political advertising, Narendra Modi's digital presence and selfie imagery have intensively permeated the Indian mediascape. For instance, Amul, the Indian dairy cooperative that has conducted an ad campaign commenting on significant happenings through its mascot, the "Amul Girl" for more than five decades, also came out with a promotional image after BJP's resounding win in the general elections. The Amul image carried the caption "Ab Ki Baar, Bhajap Sweekar!" (This time, BJP is accepted), a clever play on BJP's election slogan, "Ab Ki Baar, Modi Sarkaar" (This time, Modi's government) (see Figure 5).

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[10] Adorno's analysis is pertinent to this case, because he warns against the potential for fascist absolutism in such jargon. Adorno speaks of the "cult of authenticity" in which "the authority of the absolute is overthrown by absolutized authority" (2002, p. 3). The potential of fascism is one of the strong critiques leveled against the Hindu right wing, which has been repeatedly implicated in attempts to impose an overarching pro-Hindu framework in India. For a more detailed analysis, see Vanaik (1997) and Natarajan (2009).
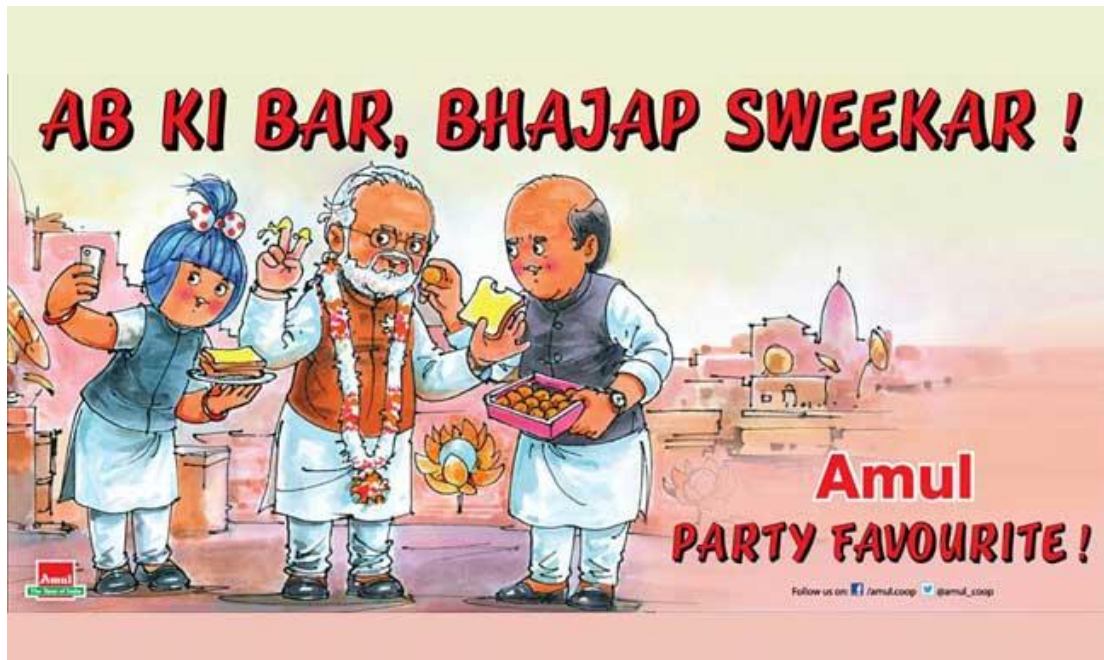
**Figure 5. Amul's Modi ad with the Amul Girl shown
clicking a selfie with the prime minister (Mishra, 2014).**[11]

The image shows the Amul Girl clicking a selfie with Narendra Modi as he holds bread and butter. The cartoonish reference to the selfie might be humorous, but given Amul's tradition of commenting on significant political and news events, the advertisement testifies to the viral impact of the Modi selfies. Perhaps Amul's nod to the selfie syndrome points toward a far more important issue, for the image might have worked even if the cell phone were to be omitted. If the selfie was important enough to be referenced in the Amul advertisement, it was probably proof that taking a selfie could indeed be political work.

This seems to complement Modi's polling-booth call to action—"Voted! Here is my selfie." In fact, Modi's polling-booth selfie was not an isolated element but rather a node in an intensive network of exchanges. As mentioned earlier, Modi supporters were encouraged to take selfies and upload them onto social media sites. On April 29, when posting his polling-booth selfie, Modi also tweeted "Selfie is in! Share yours using #SelfieWithModi & see what happens" (Modi, 2014a). On Twitter, images and tweets with the hashtag "#SelfieWithModi" began trending as Modi supporters started sharing post-poll selfies, often foregrounding, or even solely featuring, the forefinger striped with black ink as evidence of having voted. This was the other, paradoxical end of Modi's selfie experiment, as Modi himself does not appear in them. Rather, it is an invitation to be a part of a political phenomenon where the nomenclature "SelfieWithModi"

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[11] See http://www.india.com/whatever/when-amul-celebrated-ab-ki-baar-bhajap-sweekar-with-narendra-modi-selfie-60274/

belies the fact that Narendra Modi as a political personality remains largely inaccessible, at least in the way the word *with* might seem to imply (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Selfies uploaded by Modi supporters on Twitter (♛K°, 2014; Dev. 2014).[12]

If the black ink stripe was evidence of voting, the selfie became an index of not merely the vote but of *voting for* Narendra Modi. The idea of the secrecy of the ballot is destabilized here, as the selfie stands in as an evidentiary form whose production is not merely leisure or casual clicking but a kind of informal political labor. Here, the selfie becomes redolent of what Steven Shaviro (2013) describes as the total subsumption of life by labor in the neoliberal economy. For Shaviro, "Real subsumption leaves no aspect of life uncolonized. It endeavors to capture, and to put to work, even those things that are uneconomical" (2013, para. 10). As per this postulation, one is constantly laboring in the neoliberal economy, with value being extracted even from "feelings and moods and subjective states" in the creation of brands. The ostensibly casual selfie, then, is also laboriously produced—the "feelings, moods and subjective states" of Modi supporters in this instance were totally subsumed into the creation of the NaMo brand.

If the political potential of supporters' selfies was indeed subsumed within the field of electoral labor, there was another, more literal sense in which the selfie syndrome became subsumptive in the Narendra Modi case. The selfies uploaded by supporters were compiled into a photomosaic portrait of Narendra Modi. The statement on Narendra Modi's website explains:

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[12] See https://twitter.com/SD_1664/status/461372228425093120/photo/1 and
https://twitter.com/Kaushal_75/status/461369441838567424/photo/1

Selfies have re-defined the way we share our feelings. Make sure your selfie is a part of this historic victory mosaic, send your wishes with #congratsnamo. Find your selfie & even locate your friends who have shared theirs. Together, be a part of this new beginning & lay the foundations of a strong developed India. (Explore the Mosaic, n.d., para. 1).

The selfie is actively recognized as a form of political labor, but one that the BJP rhetoric claims to be both "patriotic" and "historical." Here, the selfie is not only accorded evidentiary value but is raised to the status of the archival and the narratological. The narrative is that of the patriarchal nation-state and that of the BJP's teleological understanding of progress and development. According to this narrative impulse, it would seem that the true history of the Indian state remains unwritten, but *can* be written, albeit under the censorial gaze of the new government.[13] The casual form of the selfie is mobilized here as an invitation to participate in a sort of an instant history that is a token participation at best, and a form of historiographic surveillance at worst. The form of the selfie is fused with a selective ideal of responsible citizenship and suffrage in which only that which adheres to the party ideology—whether knowingly or unknowingly—can be allowed entry into the realm of the historical. The historical is equated with BJP's ideological stance in the Modi Mosaic via the medium of the selfie, for the viewer is urged to find her photo *within* the portrait of Narendra Modi (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. The Modi Mosaic at different zoom levels.

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[13] For instance, soon after the BJP government came to power, Megha Kumar's book *Communalism and Sexual Violence: Ahmedabad Since 1969* was withdrawn from sales by the publisher Orient Blackswan under pressure from a civil lawsuit filed by Dinanath Batra of the Siksha Bachao Aandolan Samiti, which was also active earlier in the censorship of Wendy Doniger's *The Hindus*: *An Alternative History*.

The Modi Mosaic is the digital manifestation of the absolute fusing of the body natural and the body politic. As one zooms into the portrait, one begins to see thousands of individual selfies, similar to the ones on Twitter with the hashtag #SelfieWithModi. In an allegorical way, the body of the nation is equated with the body of Narendra Modi, the sovereign patriarch. The selfies, it would seem, form the genetic core of the prime minister's *other* body—a virtual body whose "virtual reality," to return to Shaviro (2013), "supplements and enhances physical, 'face-to-face' reality" (para. 9). Not without reason did one Twitter user claim, "This is #LEVIATHAN already! We have a Hobbesian #sovereign" (Solanski, 2014). The reference to Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651) on a Twitter newsfeed might be a stray reference, but the analogy is striking. The Abraham Bosse etching that forms the frontispiece to Hobbes' 1651 publication features a rendition of the body of the sovereign formed by numerous human bodies, as if to visually signify Hobbes' postulation that the social contract entered into by the multitude legitimizes the absolute authority of the sovereign (see Frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan, n.d.). Like Bosse's Leviathan, the Modi Mosaic seeks to confer a similar legitimacy onto Modi's prime ministership. More strikingly, the Leviathan reference is interesting because it points toward the idea that the sovereign might be created out of the multitude but is always above both the subject and the law, as the idea of an absolutist regime cloaked in the grammar of the popular looms large in Hindu right-wing ideology.

Conclusion: Selfie Is as Selfie Does

Whether it is as coded political messages or as affectively seductive viral marketing, the Narendra Modi selfies played an important role in the run-up to and aftermath of the 2014 general elections in India. It would be useful to point out that Narendra Modi's *own* selfies are perhaps slightly different from regular selfies, even those shot by his supporters. Modi's selfies are highly curated public performances that are part of a much larger public relations machinery including the hologram, the public forum, and the comic book. But what is crucial is the way the campaign made it *appear* as if these were regular selfies by fusing the political function with the language of the everyday.[14]

If the Narendra Modi selfies can be seen as one possible way in which selfie culture can move, what are the implications for a general theory of the selfie? To be sure, the selfie is not as casual a form as it is made out to be; maybe, in its projection as casual, the selfie hides a more deliberately performative disposition. What can be gleaned from the Narendra Modi example, perhaps, is a need to recognize the selfie's status as labor. The work of the selfie can be seen as coextensive with its materiality. Work does not exist outside of the selfie—the selfie itself *is* work, whether it is as visual evidence or, as in the case of Narendra Modi, the consolidation of the affective relations that *produce* the

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[14] In effect, the selfies along with the other public relations arsenal made Narendra Modi a star figure in the sense that Guy Debord has described in *The Society of the Spectacle* (2002), where he writes that such figures are "specialists of *apparent life* [and] serve as superficial objects that people can identify with in order to compensate for the fragmented specializations that they actually live" (p. 16). Debord goes on to elaborate an important point about social labor and stardom when he writes that stars "embody the inaccessible results of social *labor* by dramatizing the by-products of that labor which are magically projected above it as its ultimate goals—*power* and *vacations* . . . a governmental power may personalize itself as a pseudostar" (p. 16). This seems to translate very well in Narendra Modi's case as the PR machinery did play with the idea of political labor by making it look more recreational.

sovereign. In its status as work, the selfie constitutes a crucial object of knowledge. To borrow from Gilles Deleuze's (1992) postulation in "Postscript on the Societies of Control," technology does not exist in a vacuum, but instead expresses "those social forms capable of generating and using them" (p. 6). And it is in this expression of the selfie that the imprint of our times can be found—the selfie, after all, is what the selfie does.

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