Transatlantic Interdisciplinary Research Colloquium Small Forms. Aesthetics – Media – Modernity

Abstract

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Be Real: Selfies That Don't Lie

The relatively new app BeReal lets its users share one (two-part) unedited photo per day with friends, but only in a very short and "random" timeframe. The user simultaneously takes a photo of what is in front of them and of themselves. Only if they do so can they access their friends' photos (but also "discover" those of strangers). The app inherits and ostensibly deconstructs the concepts of Instagram and TikTok as well as the picture-based messenger Snapchat. In both its advertisement and interface, BeReal promises an approach to pictures opposed to the trend to stage one's life, or even the tendency to experience surroundings (just) in order to share them.

The app, which, on April 29, 2020, had a rating of 4.8/5, at 26.4k reviews, is above all popular among college students. In foregrounding creativity and honesty, it addresses its own ecology and challenges the more general conditions of social media—in offering a different approach within the same frame. Just like so-called "Finsta" accounts, BeReal calls on the "other" side of curated Instagram accounts and promotes "honest" relations to friends. At the same time, its distinct restrictions invite playing with the boundaries, above all the central claim of realness. And yet, although the time limit is flexible (one can take the photo later), every delay shows on the submission. In my contribution, I will explore the conditions and ecology of the app. What narratives does it allow for? What are the conditions of the communicative praxis that develops under the premise of honesty and immediacy when they are proclaimed goals of social media? Is or can there be a written version of BeReal? Analyzing both its aesthetics and its focus on ethics, I hope to also establish a connection to some textual short forms and their medium-specific conditions.