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# 'Ecce Ego': Apollo, Dionysus, and Performative Social Media

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## ABSTRACT

Epitomized in the bodily exhibitions of 'fitspiration', photo-based social media is biased toward self-beautification and glorification of reality. Meanwhile, evidence is growing of psychological side effects connected to this 'pictorial turn' in our communication. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche poses the question how ugliness and discord can produce aesthetic pleasure. This paper proceeds from an inverse relationship and examines why glorification of appearances and conspicuous beauty fails to do the same, and even compounds suffering. Drawing on the Apollo-Dionysus dualism undergirding Nietzsche's aesthetic philosophy, I posit a deeper relation between the saturation of visual self-exhibitionism typified in fitspiration and its empirical effects. Concentrating on the medium and self-representational photograph, I argue that Instagram is primarily an instrument of Apolline artifice and that the pictorial turn which defines the present centers Apolline mediation to the detrimental exclusion of meaningful communion with its Dionysiac antithesis. For users immersed in this Apolline sphere of visual self-representation, a fractured existence beholden to conditions of the image ensues—comprising surface-level appearances, deification of the moment, and loss of existential sustenance through myth. By positioning fitspiration not as an aberration but as the logical conclusion of the medium's intrinsic Apolline property, it becomes a litmus test of the entire visual landscape and illustrative of the implications that uncritical participation in it may bring.

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## 1. Introduction

We have entered the age of imagery. Modes of iconography have become the bedrock of modern culture, its language, and the symbolic setting through which it is interpreted and communicated. Amplifying what William Mitchell terms the 'pictorial turn'<sup>1</sup> (Purgar 2017), photo-based social media has transformed images into a primary vehicle of communication.<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, photography translates literally to 'writing with light', and with this ink of *phōs*, we tend unflinchingly to write in the language of aggrandizing self-representation.

Although photo-based social media has innumerable beneficial uses, there is growing evidence of its negative effects (see an exhaustive review by Haidt 2023; Haidt and

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Twenge 2023b). I have previously emphasized the prominent Instagram subculture centered on fitness, ‘fitspiration’,<sup>3</sup> as a particularly illustrative example of such effects. Manifesting as the fostering of narcissistic self-indulgence (Daudi 2022a), a hedonistic morality (Daudi 2022b), and paradoxical notions of empowerment (Daudi 2023),<sup>4</sup> this photographic subculture epitomizes several problems common to the broader culture of photo-based social media. These tend to stem from aspects endemic to the medium that invite users to engage with it in certain ways. While fitspiration ascribes itself to an external context of fitness, its fundamental aesthetic practice—photographic self-representation—is primarily a function of the medium and a common denominator across many of its applications.

Philosophical engagement with this topic is still limited, especially regarding the deeper aesthetic significance of our cultural turn towards image-based communication and the self-exhibitionism it invites. Although the above cited studies go some way towards remedying this, as it stands, our philosophical understanding of the practices typified in fitspiration remains lacking. It must be paired with a deeper examination of the self-representational photograph and the medium of photo-based social media itself, through which fitspiration is not only enabled but also stimulated. To accomplish this task, I turn to Friedrich Nietzsche’s aesthetic philosophy and the conceptual apparatus of the Apolline and Dionysiac.<sup>5</sup>

For Nietzsche, the Apolline is *inter alia* associated with surface and appearance, i.e. properties of the image; the Dionysian is associated with their opposites. Given their empirical effects (Haidt and Twenge 2023b), the sweeping attraction of the constitutive practices of photo-based social media raises important questions. What can be expected of a culture which increasingly relegates itself to the surface by means of its dominant communication technologies? Can we thrive in Apolline appearances only, when, as will be argued, theirs is a nature closely associated with illusions, bereft of the depth and symbolic significance of their Dionysiac antithesis? Reports to the contrary abound (*ibid.*). Whereas Nietzsche, in BT, proceeds from the question how ‘ugliness and discord, the content of the tragic myth, [can] produce aesthetic pleasure’ (BT, §24), we must proceed from the inverse relationship, examining why glorification of appearances and conspicuous beauty fails to do the same, and, indeed, compounds suffering.

As a matter of philosophical enquiry, this is what will be explored here. I will argue that our pictorial turn represents Apollo’s triumph over Dionysus. While Apolline mediation is indispensable to human experience, a culture whose overreliance on Apolline modes of conception causes a severance of its Dionysiac consciousness becomes ill-equipped to deal with its own mortality and the inescapability of human suffering. Thus, according to Nietzsche, it becomes incapable of constructively facing the reality of existence, which it instead obscures with palliative illusions. To this end, I maintain, the self-representational practices conspicuously exemplified in fitspiration have become instrumental. Embedded in Nietzsche’s BT is an exhortation toward a positive pessimism through which the truth of human existence can be both affirmed and constructively harnessed for existential sustenance. This constitutes a positive vision that could serve as an affirmative alternative to the one currently propagated by the culture of what I will call ‘performative social media’.

To make visible the relation of photo-based social media to Nietzsche’s aesthetic philosophy, I must first determine the former’s ontological characteristics. Thereafter,

I will outline the relevant elements of the Apollo-Dionysus dialectic. Then, I will draw on its explanatory potential to posit the deeper connections between the cultural saturation of visual self-exhibitionism and the empirical effects associated with it.

## 2. Toward an ontology of photo-based social media

The infinite iconographic collage produced on photo-based social media is home to untold numbers of self-representational photographs users would likely agree are not 'real'. That is, they are conspicuously edited, staged, exaggerated, or otherwise choreographed to produce something which deviates from 'reality'. But what of such cases where none of these augmentative practices play any obvious part—such as the recent trend 'Instagram vs. reality' (Tiggemann and Anderberg 2020)—are they 'real'?<sup>6</sup> Is the absence of augmentation in self-representational photographs proof of their indisputable realism? If so, photography as form would be but a 'transparent window on the world' (Mitchell 1984), neither adding nor subtracting any element that could be considered constitutive of it—when it seemingly does both.

The camera's rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses', writes Susan Sontag (2008, 18). A photograph essentially compresses a world comprised of infinite detail and complexity into a morsel accommodating the requirements of instant visual consumption. It reduces human experiences emerging out of and shaped by a three-dimensional space, mediated by the totality of human senses, into a lower-dimensional, single-sensory representation. That something is lost when translating reality into pure appearance might be readily grasped; what is lost in the process is harder to discern. Perhaps partly because the immediacy of the visual information on display so easily overwhelms any desire to scrutinize it for what is not there, we tend unwittingly to assign legitimacy to the photograph as a neutral canvas on which reality imprints itself. Unedited photographs require no captions urging us to accept them as truthful representations of reality. While they participate in processes of enunciations about the world, they offer 'no assertions to refute', and, so, are 'not refutable' (Postman 2005, 55). Our natural inclination is to accept 'the photographic image [as] the object itself' (Bazin and Gray 1960, 8). This reaction to consuming photographic content is very different from how we react to other reality-depicting mediums, like paintings or text. By demanding we 'accept as real the existence of the object reproduced' (*ibid.*), photographs naturally make higher order claims to ontological legitimacy than other representational arts and are epistemologically more persuasive. After all, seeing is believing, and believing is legitimizing. Thus, the visual medium of photo-based social media contains an epistemological agenda that invites no critical consideration or rejection, one that entails persuading us that it neutrally presents what it invariably simplifies and obfuscates.

Despite the above, photography obviously retains an unmistakable aspect of realism (Walton 1984). But if photographs posted to social media are indeed inherently incapable of depicting reality in its entirety, what do they depict? To begin untangling this ambiguity, Scruton's (1981) elaboration of the differences between the intentional process inherent in painting and the causal process inherent in photography is particularly helpful.

Paintings and photographs are sometimes considered foremost among the representational arts, chiefly due to the trait of sharing the appearance of their subjects.

According to Scruton (1981), their differences lie in the character of their relation to their subjects. The relation between a painting and its subject is determined by the intentions of the painter. That is, the representation occurs as the willing act of the painter, creating an intentional relation between painting and subject. The painter's intention is successfully realized when the painted appearance of the subject elicits its recognition from observers. However, a painting that represents a subject requires neither that the subject exists nor that, should it exist, it is represented in a lifelike manner. Contrastingly, the relation of a (unedited) photograph to its subject is one of causality (cf. Walton 1984): the subject causes the appearance of the photograph, which becomes 'a record of how an actual object looked' (Scruton 1981, 579). The causal process stems from the object being depicted and culminates with a reproduction of its appearance. Between the two, a causal relationship persists over which the intentions of the photographer exert no influence. Accordingly, the physical reality of the subject is confirmed by the existence of the photograph. This implies that the unedited photograph 'is incapable of representing anything unreal' (Scruton 1981, 588).

However, as Barthes (1981) has noted, the still nature of a photograph also allows it to convey something which cannot be deferred to mere objective conditions of the subject, something which appears as a function of the constraints inherent to the still image, not the subject. He calls it the *punctum*. It is an unexpected detail affixed to the representation by the photograph itself, experienced as an individual's subjective resonance with an image: for instance, an innocuous feature of a photographed body evoking desire in one and insecurities in another. More importantly, Scruton's view is further disturbed by the matter of posing. Here, fitspiration emerges as prototypical, as inseparable from the pose. However, beyond the posturing characteristic of fitspiration (see Daudi 2022a), posing also occurs necessarily in every voluntary self-representational photograph. It involves every subtle organization of one's self-presentation in anticipation of the visual outcome of a photograph. Even refraining from stereotypical posing becomes a pose; it is constituted by the arrest—'even in the interval of a millionth of a second' – impelled by the impending photograph (Barthes 1981, 78). To pose is to assume the desired appearance of the prospective photograph. It is to perform whatever is envisioned as the photograph's content, the aesthetic cues of which are determined by a culturally contingent awareness, and to project this visual performance into the camera.

Therefore, rather than directly reflect reality, posing momentarily displaces it with an artificial 'pseudo-context' (Postman 2005), where the self-conception of the subject is performed. It is a mimetic representation as envisioned from an external perspective and intended to be reflected in the picture. Moreover, rather than simply reflecting the perceived objective state of the subject, the medium is biased toward representations performed according to a certain style: a choreographed assemblage of traits, resulting in an idealized, artificial representation. The pseudo-context also implies that, in a photograph, the representation is fragmented, detached from both past and future. What is represented can always 'be separated, [...] made discontinuous, from anything else' (Sontag 2008, 17). Due to the causal character of the relation between subject and photograph (Scruton 1981), the representational act occurs not in the photograph but in the subject and is completed even prior to the photograph being taken. Thus, not only the resulting two-dimensional image but also what occurs in front of the camera, the

performed reality and self-experience of the subject itself, is artificialized. The camera points to the representation but also teases it out; the artificial pseudo-context does not arise but for the camera manufacturing it into being.

The question remains what relation the conveyed content of the self-representational photograph has to the subject. Kaufmann (1992, 78) argues that art should be regarded as more than imitation, reducible to a neutral reflection of its origin; rather, it bears 'its own distinctive level of reality'. Similarly, it is fitting here to distinguish between 'authentic' and 'apparent' levels of realism.<sup>7</sup> Consider the difference between regular wrestling and professional wrestling (as performed in the WWE).<sup>8</sup> While in the former, participants engage in physical contests, in the latter, they perform as if they were (see Barthes 1972). Both are real in an obvious, apparent sense, but the latter clearly differs in its ontological claims. Its realism is that of *illusion*.<sup>9</sup> The realism of illusions is quite palpable in that they possess a presence capable of affecting experiences of the reality onto which they are imposed (Todorović 2020). This also makes them potentially useful, sometimes necessary, cognitive tools (Smilansky 2000). However, by virtue of their transformative character, illusions also inherently distort the underlying authentic reality. Indeed, what makes something an illusion is that it convincingly presents as authentically real when it only appears to be so (McLaughlin 2016; Smith 2002). Hence, wrestling is authentically real, whereas professional wrestling embodies the apparent realism of illusion. The same relation persists between an actress and her character portrayal. By the same token, a subject's performed appearance in a self-representational photograph is real in the sense that the communicated visual representation informs experiential reality. Nonetheless, these self-representations are also choreographed enactments, aesthetic orchestrations, mimetic representations; they forego authentic realism in lieu of performativity. In other words, they embody the form of realism peculiar to illusions.

Clearly, apparent and authentic reality cannot be ontologically identical, defined solely by their common capacity for effectuating sense-experience. If the non-augmented self-representational photograph is 'incapable of representing anything unreal' (Scruton 1981, 588), it can only apply to the performatively, apparently real. Such photographs can only present their subjects reduced to two-dimensional appearances, but even the appearances assumed for the self-representations to occur preclude correspondence to their subjects' authentic realities. Furthermore, a self-representational photograph cannot transcend the apparent realism of the performance it invariably elicits. Therefore, although the self-representational photograph itself does not represent, in compelling representation from its voluntary subjects, it becomes incapable of conveying anything but mimetic, representational illusion.

To conclude this section, regardless of intent, photo-based social media does not comprise neutral experiences of authentic reality; rather, it constitutes a form of aesthetic practice equivalent to an enactment of reality: *illusion*, *performance*. Hence, for the remainder of this paper, fitspiration and its ilk will be conceptualized as 'performative social media'. As we shall see, this contrast between illusion and deeper strata of authenticity echoes the conceptual apparatus of the mythical deities undergirding Nietzsche's aesthetic philosophy.

### 3. Nietzsche's aesthetic philosophy

Nietzsche's corpus is permeated by his aesthetic philosophy. Its foundation was laid out in BT, the core of which is the dialectical relationship between Apollo and Dionysus. Although released to harsh critical reception, much of Nietzsche's exegesis has been vindicated by subsequent scholarship as, 'with the instinct of genius' (Harrison 2010, 476) and 'profound imaginative insight', having 'left the scholarship of a generation toiling in the rear' (Cornford 1991, 111; see also Silk and Stern 2016, ch. 10; Nussbaum 1991).

While some doubt has been levied toward the historical accuracy of certain details in Nietzsche's portrait of the Hellenic deities (Silk and Stern 2016, ch. 6–7), its significance is unclear. Nietzsche adopts what he calls a 'supra-historical' view of history, striving not primarily to impart *literal* accuracy but 'to elevate' cultural history 'into a comprehensive symbol' of timeless themes (UM II:6). Thus, Nietzsche draws not purely on factual inference, but on intuitions of thematic symbolism and a deep sensibility to the esoteric doctrines of Presocratic myths (BT, §1). Like 'a Greek born out of time' (Knight 1933, 9), Nietzsche's characterization of Hellenic religion is 'as vivid as if it were alive and tenable' (Silk and Stern 2016, 189). Moreover, his philosophical vision of its relationship to the existential needs of man and the modes of their expression are as timely as ever. Hence, this paper draws on the rendition of Apollo and Dionysus strictly as they appear in Nietzsche's BT, irrespective of any deviations from other sources.

#### 3.1. The Apolline and Dionysiac

In an ancient Greek folktale, King Midas of Phrygia searches the forests for the satyr companion of the god Dionysus: the wise Silenus. With Silenus finally in his grasp, King Midas demands to know what is best and most desirable of all for mankind. Goaded by the king, Silenus eventually exclaims,

Miserable, ephemeral race, children of hazard and hardship, why do you force me to say what it would be much more fruitful for you not to hear? The best of all things is something entirely outside your grasp: not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second-best thing for you – is to die soon. (BT, §3)

The tragic view of man conveyed in 'the wisdom of Silenus' is foundational to the Apolline-Dionysiac dichotomy and an enduring principle of Nietzsche's philosophy: acknowledgment of the ephemerality of life and inevitability of human suffering. Here, Nietzsche's influence by Schopenhauerian pessimism is apparent. However, already in BT, a differently constituted affirmative pessimism emerges—a 'pessimism of strength' (BT, P:1)—formative both of tragedy and later also of Nietzsche's own philosophy, especially in light of BT's amendment in the 1886 Preface. Schopenhauer's pessimism is characterized by resignation and a fundamentally negative stance towards life. Nietzsche's Greek pessimism of strength emphasizes the need to confront the truth of existence, drawing strength from it and ultimately rejoicing in its opportunities for growth and beauty.<sup>10</sup> He sensed in the tragic dramas of Aeschylus and Sophocles a model for not only courageously facing the wisdom of Silenus but also deriving from it the deepest affirmation of life 'as indestructibly powerful and joyful' (BT, §7). In the Apolline and Dionysiac, he saw

the all-pervasive symbols of their animating forces. While far from comprehensively exegeted, their most relevant features are detailed below.

Dionysus—god of wine, fertility, and ritual ecstasy—symbolizes the chaotic nature of existence, the coalescence of subjects, and the dissolution of individuality. He is associated with the non-visibility of music and represents the ubiquitous impulse of life that ‘can only be felt’ (Harrison 2010, 476). Nietzsche regards the Dionysiac as the sphere of the primal, irrational aspects of human experience. Through immersion in the mythic and artistic expressions epitomized in tragedy, it allows individuals to transcend the bustle of prosaism and its pervasive mendacities. In this state of mind, they may experience a sense of unity with the ‘primal essence’ of reality (BT, §17), where the ‘Dionysiac wisdom’ (BT, §7) reproduced in Silenus’ ‘terrible truth’ reveals itself. This truth forms the heart of tragic art. But revelations of the Dionysiac essence of reality also constitute an unbearable menace to the human will. It is the truth from which we cannot escape and, yet, whose unmediated force we cannot endure without succumbing to despair. Therefore, to turn ‘repulsion at the horror and absurdity of existence into ideas compatible with life’ (BT, §7), Dionysiac insight must integrate with and express itself through Apolline images and symbols. In tragedy as in life, chaos must unite with order, and Dionysus must become objectified into Apollo’s world of phenomena.<sup>11</sup>

Apollo, god of light and the fine arts, represents the force that gives form to a world in Heraclitean flux. He is associated with morality, rationality, and order (Silk and Stern 2016); with their imposition onto a world devoid of them; and, therefore, also with dreams (BT, §1). The form-giving Apolline drive aspires above all to the conditions of the image, defined by intelligibility and the reduction of the disorder of becoming into the order of being. Its desire for intelligibility stimulates ‘forceful and pleasurable illusions’ (BT, §3). In tragedy, this ‘impulse toward beautiful appearances’ (Nickolas 2014) serves as a necessary bulwark against the force of Dionysiac insight. Apolline images are made ‘to reflect the imageless manifestation of the Dionysia[c]’ revelations (Sallis 1988, 11), thus draping them in an aesthetically seductive veil even as they are revealed. From the Apolline we also derive the experience of individuality (*principium individuationis*),<sup>12</sup> rendering the world intelligible and allowing us to experience it as patterned in ways preconditioned by our ability to act meaningfully. Consequently, the everyday world is Apolline in terms of both the human faculties that generate our experience of it and the transfiguring illusions through which it appears amenable to our desires. According to Nietzsche, this Apolline experience forms a harmonious, structured dreamscape of the metaphysically ideal: a ‘transfiguring mirror’ (BT, §3) driving us to fashion ourselves ‘no less than works of art’ (Kaufmann 2013, 128).

In short, embodying the distinction between appearance and its antithesis (De Man 1979, 91), the Dionysiac impulse ‘pertains to the nature of reality’ and the Apolline to ‘the modes of its appearance’ (BT, xv).<sup>13</sup> They represent two contrasting drives that permeate human nature, psychology, cultural trends, and periods (Janaway 2014, 42), and they constitute the symbolic categorizations which regulate the spheres of human experience. Although they are constantly in tension, they are not mutually hostile, but equally necessary for cultural flourishing.

Nietzsche argues that even the mythology of the Olympian pantheon was created by the Apolline drive to beauty and sprung from the Greeks’ very awareness of the Dionysiac truth. This awareness compelled the interposition of the ‘radiant dream-birth of the



Olympians' (BT, §3)—a *screen*, as Janaway (2014, 43) puts it, between the unmediated Dionysiac and themselves. Only with tragedy was an aesthetic sensibility sufficiently developed for the alluring surfaces of the Apolline to properly unite with the Dionysiac core, harnessing a depth unattained by other cultural expressions (Young 2010, 127). For the Greeks, their highest greatness lay in the synthesis of this duality and in the capacity to alchemize the ineluctable suffering of existence into the aesthetically magnificent struggle of human life (Came 2014, 9). Ultimately, Nietzsche argues, the union of Apollo and Dionysus in tragic art made possible representations and embodiments of the deepest existential truth while simultaneously conveying the tragic beauty through which it becomes possible to bear.

### 3.2. Aesthetic principles as guides to life

Integral to the significance granted by Nietzsche to the aesthetic achievements of the Apolline-Dionysiac synthesis is the fact that his preoccupation with tragedy—and art in general—derives not from a belief in *l'art pour l'art*<sup>14</sup> (TI, IX:24). Rather, his motivations lie with the possibilities of articulating a philosophical justification for life dependent on aesthetic principles. In his view, aesthetic principles offer a distinctly human remedy for a uniquely human dilemma: the need for meaning in a world devoid of it.

For Nietzsche, every age faces the eternal struggle of securing meaning and justification for life despite 'the terrible truth' (BT, §7). This was the principal concern of what was to be his revaluation of values: not the inescapable suffering of human existence itself but the agony of its evident meaninglessness (Leiter 2002). To this fundamental question, history has responded with innumerable religions and creeds. Rarely is it consciously asked, nor its answers consciously sought. It is expressed, felt, and intuited symbolically through attunement with cultural values. Thus, for Nietzsche, values are the fertile soil for the highest potential growth of mankind and for its potential succumbing to psychological maladies. With BT—his 'first revaluation of values' (TI, X:5; cf. WP, §851–853)—he posited aesthetic values, seared into myths and entombed in aesthetic expressions, as the proper foundation for a justification and meaning to human experience. He writes that 'art—and not morality—is [...] the properly *metaphysical* activity of man' (BT, P:5). It is metaphysical both in the sense of facilitating man's understanding of himself and the world and because the affirmation of life is at bottom an aesthetic stance (Came 2014). One must 'learn to see [life] as beautiful' (GS, §276), because 'it is only as an *aesthetic experience* that existence and the whole world are eternally *justified*' (BT, §5).

This emphasis on aesthetic principles in the approach to human flourishing remains consistent throughout Nietzsche's philosophical evolution (Gemes and Sykes 2014; cf. GM, III:25; TI, IX:22, 24).

## 4. Apollo, Dionysus, and performative social media

Following a discussion of the ontological conditions bearing on performative social media, and an outline of the relevant features of Nietzsche's aesthetic philosophy, we can now integrate the two, allowing the latter to inform our understanding of the former and the aesthetic practices epitomized in fitspiration. The distinction between the self-representational photograph and the authentic nature of its subject reveals an

ontological divergence homologous to the relation between the Dionysiac nature of reality and the Apolline modes of its appearance. Performative social media exhibits some affinities with tendencies attributable both to the Apolline and Dionysiac, with transfiguring illusion and coalescing deindividuation alike. However, based on the highlighted properties of each, I contend that one pole has become eminently pervasive, potentially to the exclusion of any meaningful communion with the other. Ultimately, the emanations of the pictorial turn embodied in fitspiration invokes the spirit of Apollo.

#### 4.1. Apollo's triumph over Dionysus

A culture's primary instruments of communication constitute the means by which it interprets, represents, and defines human experience. As the instruments evolve, so does the symbolic environment of our conscious world. It comprises the elaborate arrangement of symbols, meanings, and cultural myths that shape our understanding of the world and our place within it. Increasingly, these are shaped by the medium of performative social media. The saturation of visual representations actively influences our understanding of reality, mediating it in accordance with the conditions of the image (Mitchell 1984, 2013). In the theoretic tradition spearheaded by Marshall McLuhan (2001) and Neil Postman (2005), all media are held to be biased towards certain forms of interaction, fostering some modes of communication while disinclining others. When our minds naturally dwell on the communicative content, we are left ignorant of how the very conditions dictating its character reside in the form specific to the medium. For performative social media, it is in its nature to make self-representational photography its *modus operandi* and to bend this practice to accommodate the human desire for social validation. As it increasingly influences the terms of human communication, the terms of cultural interaction necessarily comply.

Many studies report on the ubiquity of these self-representational practices across the medium (McLean, Jarman, and Rodgers 2019; Wendt 2014). This is a performing art, and like any good performance, its purpose is to elicit the applause of its audience, quantified into likes and comments. Self-aggrandizement is its *supra-ideology* (cf. Postman 2005, 156–158). This is significant because it not only means that performative social media makes visual self-aggrandizement the content of communication; it also means that social media becomes the central form for self-representation, while self-aggrandizement becomes the main content of self-representation itself. It thereby makes Apolline illusion the natural format for how we interpret and represent ourselves and a formative pillar around which our symbolic environment is reconfigured.

In the illusions of the Apolline impulse to beauty lies the desire to produce the 'ideal image of [one's] own existence' (BT, §3). The performance comprising the pose of the self-representational photograph essentially shares the same drive for self-glorification. Compelled by the biases of the medium and the properties of the image, this drive manifests in fitspiration through bodily exhibitions designed to maximize revenues of social capital (Daudi 2022b, 2023). Following Staten (1990, 189), we can distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' forms of Apolline representation. Good representations are so validated because they 'serve to make Dionysus present' by employing Apolline images to reflect the imageless manifestation of the Dionysiac.

Here, the Dionysiac remains the essence—the subject, we might say—of representation while assuming the appearance of Apolline artifice, the veil which enables its aesthetic representation. Tragedy is the artistic perfection of this relationship. Although Nietzsche never explicitly condones one mythological pole over the other, the significance which his analysis attaches to the Dionysiac, above all, makes unambiguous the fact that no purely Apolline activity can alone provide the aesthetic consolation achievable by its mooring in the Dionysiac. It is for this reason they must both be embraced.

Generally, the aesthetic experience of performative social media tends overwhelmingly toward self-enhancement and glorification of reality. Whereas the aesthetic experience of tragic art derives from the ugliness, discord, and suffering of life (BT, §24), the bodily exhibitions of fitspiration become its consummate reversal; they tell of the erasure of the discord and ugliness of life out of Apolline transfiguration. In the self-representational photograph, these Apolline appearances are performed as complete and authentic reality. The supra-ideology of social media invites users to sustain only the sphere of Apolline surfaces. But what does this surface level existence symbolize? Rather than provide any intimation of something for which the Apolline varnish is a visual manifestation, it propagates the idea that a complete representation of reality through images is possible. It seeks to present itself as reality represented in its entirety. That this is the nature of the image is part of the convictive agenda inherent to the medium. Here, the objective is not to speak truthfully, represent authentically, or inform, but to *appear* as if you are—in other words, to perform. It is not concerned with providing arguments, only impressions. The actual truth or falsity of any representation or caption recedes into the background as the medium demands no critical engagement, only instant consumption. It is a drama; the Apolline reflections of individuals are the performances. Implied in the drama is the observer's suspension of disbelief, a tacit acceptance of the terms of the performance as authentic.

What role remains for the Dionysiac in this conception of self-representation? In the Apolline subject of performative social media, Dionysus lacks presence. The relation that the supremacy of the Apolline dreamscape impressions to authenticity extirpates its Dionysiac counterpart from the symbolic environment and, with it, the cultural connection to the true nature of our shared reality. Following Staten (1990, 189), this can be termed the realm of bad representation, where connections to the Dionysiac wither. However, as the Apolline image of tragic art is illuminated from within by the Dionysiac spirit of music, so must the Apolline self-representative practices of a culture draw on the Dionysiac element for its lifeblood, lest it degenerates into the mere escapism of hollow illusions.

Nonetheless, in BT, Nietzsche occasionally appears to imply that the purpose of the Apolline drive is to supply the illusions in which we must live if we are to cope with, and ultimately be hidden from, the harsh reality of existence. This may suggest that the greater our immersion in Apolline illusions the better. However, such suggestions falsely represent Nietzsche's overall stance (Janaway 2014; Subic 2015). Whereas the argument in BT occasionally staggers from Nietzsche's early strained attempts to balance his own philosophy with Schopenhauer's and Wagner's, his later writings clarify his perspective. In BGE, he writes,

whoever stands that much in *need* of the cult of surfaces [...] can find the enjoyment of life only in the intention of *falsifying* its image (as it were, in a longwinded revenge on life): the degree to which life has been spoiled for them might be inferred from the degree to which they wish to see its image falsified, thinned down, transcendentalized, deified. (§59; cf. §39; BT, P)

Nietzsche's mature philosophy clearly condemns living in illusion and requiring the escape it affords to cope with life. Furthermore, the thematic continuity that persists between early and late Nietzsche reveals an enduring commitment to the intellectual conscience required for a life-affirmation unobstructed by the falsification of reality through palliative illusions (Janaway 2014). The fact that our dominant communications technology lends itself so persuasively to this form of (bad) Apolline representation (Staten 1990) becomes problematic. Namely, the more reliant on the transfigurative effects of Apolline illusion the aesthetic practices of a culture are, the more it exposes an underlying disillusionment with and inability to productively confront and embrace its own suffering. This makes the wider implications of normalizing the Apolline exhibitionism of fitspiration across photo-based social media fraught with detrimental potential.

Nietzsche states that any 'ardent longing for illusion and for redemption by illusion' (BT, §4) necessarily proceeds from some awareness or feeling of the 'horrors of existence'. The fact that our technological remedies are not producing the proper 'metaphysical consolation'<sup>15</sup> may be taken as further indication of the dissociation of their Apolline manifestations from Dionysiac insight. It is conceivable that the overwhelming sensations of beautifying illusions can triumph over the Dionysiac to the point of becoming independently self-perpetuating. As the Dionysiac connection dissipates, nothing remains but the Apolline illusions in which we become so entrenched that any realization of their inauthenticity becomes precarious. As they cement themselves so prominently in our cultural and social consciousness, the very integrity of the symbolic environment is apt to become increasingly dependent on their remaining intact.

Nietzsche criticized the European aesthetic culture of his time for having lost communion with the Dionysiac. The aesthetic practices of performative social media can be considered a contemporary manifestation of the same, albeit further advanced, transformation, whereby symbolic depth is further eroded through the hyper-Apolline superficial means of gratifying our need for soothing illusions. The cultural and technological developments that have resulted in the present 'cult of surfaces' seem to intensify this dissociation. According to Nietzsche, a culture that severs its connection to the Dionysiac must also lose touch with the fundamental truth of existence, whose synthesis with its dialectical opposite in the aesthetic stance of the Apolline makes possible not only bearing it but also relishing its beauty. In so doing, such a culture disengages the realm of 'good' Apolline representation from whence the ability derives to represent human experience in a courageous attitude of affirmation, embracing life not despite its true nature but because of it.

#### **4.2. The role of myth in the age of imagery**

An essential aspect of the potential complications following a dissociation of the Apolline from its Dionysiac antithesis is its effects on the relationship between culture and myth. While Nietzsche never supplies an exact definition of his use of myth, Poellner's (1998, 64–

65) clarification is particularly illuminating. For Nietzsche, myths are narratives that 'connect the temporal flux of appearances to an underlying ontological ground', colligating transient human experiences to this 'purposeful non-temporal order of reality' in a fashion uncapturable by purely rational interrogation. Myth is also 'the vehicle of Dionysiac wisdom' (BT, §10). To borrow an analogy from Schopenhauer (1930, 16), like water, Dionysiac truth 'can only be carried about in vessels'; it is 'inexpressible except by means of myth'. As condensed, universally significant archetypes of life, myths are entwined in the ethics of the cultures that sustain them. Without myths infusing meaning into ephemeral experience 'neither a people nor an individual human being can thrive' (Young 2010, 131).

In Nietzsche's view, Greek tragedy above all harnessed the life-promoting power of myths, and with its decline came the inevitable decline of myth. In the manifest dissatisfaction and 'great historical need' (BT, §23) that had come to characterize the post-Christian and post-metaphysical culture of modernity, he saw the acute effects of the loss of genuine myth. This abandonment of myth leaves unfulfilled the crucial human need to which the Dionysiac element of the symbolic environment corresponds. The need for myth in the vital construction of meaning is particularly emphasized in Nietzsche's early works, BT and UM. Having brought into being the conditions by which mythic content is rendered irreconcilable with their rationalistic optimism, modern humans can no longer assimilate what is adjudged mere naiveties (Gemes and Sykes 2014). However, since the need to anchor the range of human experience in something beyond the arbitrary hazard of nature is an ineluctable burden of human psychology, we are left to self-consciously construct compensatory mythologies fusible with this nakedly Apolline existence, through which it might be rescued from its otherwise all-too-apparent purposelessness. Thus, the Apolline dreamscape of performative social media begins to resemble a substitute for the 'mythical womb' (BT, §23), with users themselves at the center.

Dionysiac myth allows the imagination of the Apolline dreamscape to obtain the form and direction necessary to emancipate it from 'aimless wandering' (BT, §23), anchoring a 'people in the eternal, and redeeming it from the changing sphere of the momentary' (EI, III). Detached from the Dionysiac order, our self-consciously constructed myths drawn solely from Apolline artifices struggle to do so. Indeed, aimless wandering in the sphere of the momentary accurately describes the fickle flicker of imagery that characterizes the present cult of surfaces. The photograph has neither past nor future, and with no deeper symbolic significance at play, the cult of surfaces legitimizes itself only by the authority of the moment, and the flux of fad and fashion that animates it (Young 2010, 145). By surrendering culture to the technology (cf. Postman 1993) and influence of social media, we concede to an unstable, ever-changing 'pandemonium of myth-fragments piled up' in a disorderly heap (BT, §23) and beholden to the natural discontinuity of photo-based communication.

These performative myth-fragments predictably make for poor responses to humanity's psychological needs. A symbolic environment structured around this 'deification of everything human' will hardly suffice to stave off the existential angst or produce the justification of suffering, which Nietzsche regarded as so central to human flourishing. More likely, it becomes a Potemkin coulisse, whose appealing façade prevents honest assessment of the conditions of life. Instead of inculcating the pessimism of strength that invites a courageous embrace of the timeless wisdom of Silenus in an aesthetic stance of

affirmation, ‘the mythless “motleyness”<sup>16</sup> (Young 2010, 133) of the age of imagery leads to a ‘feverish quest’ for alleviating distractions through the ‘frivolous *deification of the present*’ (BT, §23, emphasis added). The promiscuously photographic culture of performative social media compels one to hold the transfiguring mirror to oneself for a performance in which, briefly, one finds oneself reflected as the Olympian protagonist of the Apolline dream. Although we present the resulting representations as significant, the entire enterprise is permeated by implications of their profound insignificance. Antithetical to a perspective on experience as *sub specie aeterni*<sup>17</sup> (BT, §23), social media mementos are nigh on defined by their ephemerality, gracing the screen mere moments before vanishing into irrelevance. However, because this aesthetic practice is so consciously appealing and because it is part of the supra-ideology of self-aggrandizement, we are seduced to overlook its Dionysiac destitution and perpetuate it ad infinitum.

## 5. Concluding remarks

Ernst Cassirer (1944, 43) once observed that if we envelope ourselves in a gush of ‘linguistic forms, in artistic images, in mythical symbols’ brought forth by external media, physical reality will recede as we diminish our ability to ‘see or know anything except by the interposition of this artificial medium’; we come to live ‘in illusions [...] fantasies and dreams’. Would this not render plausible our becoming increasingly detached from Dionysiac consciousness by entrenching ourselves in cultures of superficiality incapable of sustaining themselves except by continual falsification and self-deifying illusions? Whether the context into which they are inscribed is fitness or something else ultimately matters little if underneath is the common leveraging of the Apolline drive intrinsic to the medium, whereby fitpiration merely becomes a most conspicuous manifestation.

The framework outlined here promotes an understanding of the aesthetic practices of performative social media whereby they appear to steer their adherents toward a fractured existence beholden to the Apolline image—comprising surface-level appearances, the deification of the moment, and the loss of Dionysiac myth. In this Apolline sphere of glorified appearances, life’s tribulations are suppressed by the compulsion to maintain the illusion of one’s ideal existence, and the interposition of the screen-world disincentivizes communion with any deeper strata of authenticity. Performative social media tempts us into the escapism of pure Apollinism and to ‘falsify’ life by embracing palliative illusions. In doing so, we concede that its true character is unbearable—not, as Nietzsche (BT, §7) would have it, ‘at bottom indestructibly powerful and joyful’ despite the horrors of existence we must endure in order to experience its beauty.

The argument here is not that the interposition of Apolline mediation itself is problematic; even the Olympian mythology was created to ward against the unmitigated force of Dionysiac insight. Rather, it is necessary—so long as the *result* of mediation does not entirely obscure its *object*. Although social media is but one in a succession of tools whereby the human drive toward Apolline transfiguration finds expression, it deviates significantly from prior forms. Its uniqueness lies in its unprecedented ability to invade homes and minds, to overtake every refuge of privacy and induct it into its conspicuous Apolline dreamscape. We cause our visual self-representations, and performative social media makes self-aggrandizement their central content. Given our strong identification

with these self-representations, it follows that their fractured nature becomes transposed onto the conscious self-experience and -identification of users, who are immersed in the Apolline sphere of the medium in a manner wholly unique to it.

The esoteric character of aspects of Nietzsche's aesthetic philosophy admittedly strikes modern sensibilities as somewhat foreign. However, by resonating with those elusive dimensions of human circumstances stubbornly resistant to the purely rational, it affords us deeper insights regarding how we might conduct ourselves more prudently in this brave new world of visual communication. We learn, first, that a 'pessimism of strength' is generally absent from the symbolic environment constituted by the aesthetic practices of performative social media and, second, that to develop the pessimism of strength whereby acknowledgement of the Dionysiac nature of reality and an aesthetic derivation of the beauty of its struggles can both be affirmed, we must resist the alluring palliation of those aesthetic practices. This is especially germane to digital expressions of subcultures whose natural focus on the body makes its visual exhibition through the medium seem a matter of course while also making the call of visual self-aggrandizement stronger than ever. Due to its inherent body-centrality, the fitness dimension of fitspiration legitimizes the otherwise socially restrained but increasingly ubiquitous aesthetic practice of self-promotion through bodily displays and self-objectification (Daudi 2022b). If conceptually separated from this context, fitspiration emerges as an expression of the logic of its host medium and its intrinsic Apolline property. As Instagram comprises a medium of the Apolline, so also do aesthetically conforming visual displays of the body adhere to its standards. In fitspiration, these displays culminate in what is the logical conclusion of the instrument of Apolline artifice and the impulse to self-aggrandizement that permeates it. Rather than a discountable aberration, fitspiration therefore becomes a litmus test of our entire visual landscape.

Nietzsche titled his final book *Ecce Homo* – 'behold the man'. As the leitmotif and reflection of performative social media, the phrase may be aptly revised to *Ecce Ego* – 'behold me'. To maintain a consonance with these technologies while declining their invitation to the cult of surfaces, we should promote more critical vigilance concerning how they influence our behaviors and condition our experiences and what potentially profound implications may follow.

## Notes

1. The cultural shift in emphasis from linguistic to visual forms of representation.
2. In 2017, photographs posted to Instagram reached 52 million daily (Statistic Brain 2017). Estimates for 2023 are about 100 million daily and several times more when factoring in non-permanent 'stories' (Broz 2023).
3. A fusion of the words 'fitness' and 'inspiration'. For detailed descriptions of fitspiration, see Daudi (2022b); DiBisceglie and Arigo (2021).
4. This paper marks the culmination of a trilogy of papers on fitspiration published in *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*.
5. Nietzsche's works will be referenced using their standard abbreviations: *The Birth of Tragedy*, BT; *Untimely Meditations*, UM; *Genealogy of Morals*, GM; *The Gay Science*, GS; *On the Future of our Educational Institutions*, EI; *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Z; *Twilight of the Idols*, TI; *Beyond Good and Evil*, BGE; and *The Will to Power*, WP.
6. Austin (1964) tells us that our conception of 'real' inherently depends on and remains relative to an awareness of something not real. Whereas a color may be attributed to something

without neither knowing nor referencing what it is, attributing to something the status of real poses different demands; ‘the same object may be both a real *x* and not a real *y*’ (69) (e.g. a real toy duck, but not a real duck). Therefore, to adequately determine whether something is real or not requires first knowing *what* it is. And yet, distinctions between real and non-real need not imply any metaphysical disparity. What is not real is not necessarily non-existent (e.g. a toy duck, as opposed to a *real* duck), and what is existent may perfectly well not be real (e.g. the same toy duck) (68). Elaborating on Austin’s distinction between the ‘real’ and its representation, Danto (1981, 81) adds that a representation may have all the properties possessed by the ‘real’ and still be what we might call ontologically distinct from it—differentiated by the property of ‘aboutness’ unique to representations. The same ontological distinction will be retrieved here, between the subject and its photographic self-representation.

7. Although reminiscent of Kantian and Platonic categories, both invite connotations exceeding the intended scope of this distinction.
8. World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc.
9. While some scholars eschew the term ‘illusion’ (Wenderoth 1992), claiming it ‘connotes magic and deception’ (Weintraub 1979), others see it as perfectly adequate and well entrenched (Smilansky 2000; Todorović 2020). The appropriateness of its usage here will become especially apparent shortly.
10. For a detailed comparison of Schopenhauerian and Nietzschean pessimism, see Nussbaum (1991).
11. Edgar (2013) astutely notes that the Dionysiac’s dissolution of individuality throws into question the very possibility of its essence being knowable, since its presence presupposes the suspension of the knowing subject itself. To me, however, this only further suggests the dependency of Dionysiac expression on Apolline representation.
12. ‘The principle of individuation’, from Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation* (2014). It refers to the way in which human experience of the will (unity), especially in relation to self-experience, occurs as representation (individuation) through which the undifferentiated universal becomes individualized.
13. Here, we see paralleled a similar distinction as that between the authentic realism of the subject and the apparent realism of its aesthetic representation in the self-representational photograph of the previous section.
14. French proverb: art for art’s sake.
15. Younger generations especially—the most ardent social media-users—are more fractured and unhappy than ever (see another exhaustive review on teen mental health by Haidt and Twenge 2023a; cf. Haidt 2023).
16. Nietzsche’s Zarathustra symbolizes modernity as a ‘motley’ town.
17. ‘From the viewpoint of eternity’.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.



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