

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Inscribing security: The case of Zelensky's selfies

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## Abstract

'Visual turn' scholarship in International Relations (IR) acknowledges the importance of new information and communication technology for the production and circulation of images but lacks sustained engagement with the technologies themselves and how they interact with humans in the visual production of security. This article brings the visual turn into conversation with Science and Technology Studies (STS) and mobilises Latour and Woolgar's notion of inscription to show how the production of visual artefacts and their security effects are conditioned by human/device interaction. It advances the argument that the representational force of a visual artefact is dependent not only on the content and quality of the artefact itself, but also on the specific human/device relations that condition its production. To illustrate this, the article theorises the smartphone as an inscription device and the selfie as an inscription practice and analyses the case of Zelensky's selfie videos from the first few days after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Selfies inscribe meaning to security issues by mobilising the photographic affordances of indexicality, composition, and reflection in unique ways. Specifically, they focus images on the communicative acts of their producers and play on the relationship between human and device to invoke feelings of immediacy, authenticity, and intimacy.

**Keywords:** inscription; Science and Technology Studies; selfies; visual turn; Zelensky

## Introduction

On the second day of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky posted a video on social media, filming himself and his closest colleagues and advisers with the front-facing camera on his smartphone. The video shows Zelensky standing in the city centre of Kyiv, outside the presidential offices. He looks straight into the camera, speaks with a calm voice, and reassures his citizens that he, the government, and the Ukrainian army are present: 'We are all here. Our soldiers are here. The citizens of our country are here. We are all here protecting our independence.'<sup>1</sup> The video is, along with a second, similar selfie video<sup>2</sup> which was posted a day later, a landmark moment in the early stages of the war in Ukraine and instantly became an iconic image of Zelensky's heroic defiance. The videos have been hailed as effective political communication and taken to play an important role in motivating Ukrainian soldiers and civilians to strongly resist the

<sup>1</sup>NBC News, "'The citizens are here and we are here': Zelensky and team stand firm in Kyiv", available at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/video/president-zelensky-posts-defiant-selfie-video-from-ukraine-s-capital-134062661977>, accessed 15 August 2022.

<sup>2</sup>CNN, 'Zelensky posts video in the streets of Kyiv', available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2022/02/26/zelensky-selfie-street-video-vpx.cnn>, accessed 16 August 2022.

invasion.<sup>3</sup> Gathering attention and rallying support around Ukraine's defence, they arguably also took part in galvanising Europe's swift and united response to the invasion.<sup>4</sup>

In accounting for how visuals like Zelensky's selfie videos can impact processes of securitisation and the production of security imaginaries more broadly, the 'visual turn' in IR and Security Studies has shown how visual artefacts help 'generate international conflicts and impact debates over national, religious, or other collective concepts of security'.<sup>5</sup> An overlooked part of visual artefacts' representational force, however, is the technologies that are used to produce them and, importantly, the ways in which these interact with humans in the process and moment of image production. Indeed, 'Visual turn' scholarship has acknowledged the importance of new information and communication technology for the production and circulation of visuals. In particular, this scholarship highlights how the digitalisation of images impacts patterns of dissemination and engagement.<sup>6</sup> However, it generally lacks sustained engagement with the technologies themselves and more specifically, with how they interact with humans in the visual production of security.

In this article, I argue that the representational force of a visual artefact is dependent not only on the content and quality of the artefact itself, but also on the specific human/device relations that condition its production. This is because it is the human/device interaction that makes the production of visual artefacts possible in the first place, but also because this interaction is always present and perceptible in the artefacts themselves. In Zelensky's selfies, for instance, the gesture of the outstretched arm makes the videos immediately identifiable as selfies. As such, the smartphone – with its specific connection to the human body and unique way of reflecting the human self – enables the production of selfies but also becomes part of their iconography and hence central to their representational force. Part of a visual artefact's persuasiveness, appeal, and securitising potential can thus be connected to their genre, technique of production, and recognisability as a specific kind of image or video.

In pursuing this argument, I bring the 'visual turn' into conversation with Science and Technology Studies (STS) and in particular draw on Latour and Woolgar's notion of inscription practices to show how representational devices contribute to the visual production of security by interacting with humans and affording them certain ways of seeing, representing, and interpreting the world.<sup>7</sup> Using Zelensky's selfie videos as an illustration, I theorise the smartphone as an inscription device and the selfie as an inscription practice, highlighting how the smartphone's intimate

<sup>3</sup>Robert Mackey, 'Zelensky posts defiant videos from the streets of Kyiv as Putin's forces close in', *The Intercept*, available at: <https://theintercept.com/2022/02/25/putin-floods-airwaves-lies-zelensky-punctures-social-media/>, accessed 15 August 2022; Megan Garber, 'The grim stagecraft of Zelensky's selfie videos', *The Atlantic*, available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2022/02/zelensky-ukraine-president-selfie-video-kyiv/622949/>, accessed 15 August 2022; Luke Harding, 'Volodymyr Zelenskyy stands defiant in face of Russian attack', *The Guardian*, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/26/volodymyr-zelenskyy-ukraine-stands-defiant-in-face-of-russian-attack>, accessed 15 August 2022.

<sup>4</sup>Simon Shuster, 'Inside Zelensky's world', *Time*, available at: <https://time.com/6171277/volodymyr-zelensky-interview-ukraine-war/>, accessed 15 August 2022; Anjana Susarla, 'Why Zelenskyy's "selfie videos" are Ukraine win the PR war against Russia', *The Conversation*, available at: <https://theconversation.com/why-zelenskyy-selfie-videos-are-helping-ukraine-win-the-pr-war-against-russia-178117>, accessed 15 August 2022; Stephen Mulvey, 'Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelensky: The comedian president who is rising to the moment', *BBC News*, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59667938>, accessed 15 August 2022.

<sup>5</sup>Lene Hansen, 'Images and international security', in Alexandra Gheciu and William C. Wohlforth (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 593–606 (p. 600); Lene Hansen, 'Theorizing the image for Security Studies: Visual securitization and the Muhammed cartoon crisis', *European Journal of International Relations*, 17:1 (2011), pp. 51–74 (pp. 53, 55–7); Rebecca Adler-Nissen, Katrine Emilie Andersen, and Lene Hansen, 'Images, emotions, and international politics: The death of Alan Kurdi', *Review of International Studies*, 46:1 (2020), pp. 75–95; Axel Heck and Gabi Schlag, 'Securitizing images: The female body and the war in Afghanistan', *European Journal of International Relations*, 19:4 (2013), pp. 891–913. I

<sup>6</sup>Hansen, 'Images and international security', p. 596; Rune Saugmann Andersen, 'Video, algorithms and security: How digital mappings produce post-sovereign security articulations', *Security Dialogue*, 48:4 (2017), pp. 354–72; Roland Bleiker, 'Mapping visual global politics', in Roland Bleiker (ed.), *Visual Global Politics* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 13–43 (p. 13).

<sup>7</sup>Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

interaction with the human body offers new modes of representation. I mobilise Frosh's theory of the selfie in contending that the smartphone's size, one-handed operability, and front-facing camera give the selfie an *indexicality* that points to the present and thus invokes immediacy, a *composition* that is centred on the producer of the image and thus invokes authenticity, and a *reflection* that directly mirrors the photographing self and thus invokes intimacy.<sup>8</sup>

Importantly, the selfie is a photographic genre that is tightly connected to Internet culture and social media and, accordingly, invites and representationally plays on the possibility and even likelihood of fast and wide online sharing and engagement.<sup>9</sup> Through the visual sign of the outstretched arm, then, the selfie not only uniquely affords indexicality, composition, and reflection to strongly invoke immediacy, authenticity, and intimacy but also communicates that the visual is produced by a smartphone, with all the potential for shareability and engagement that this implies. In a sense, then, the selfie signals not only the smartphone's unique physical connection to the body but also how this connection entails an embodiment of Internet and social media connectivity.<sup>10</sup> As Ford and Hoskins argue, the smartphone is a tool used simultaneously for the representation and practice of war.<sup>11</sup>

The article begins with a discussion of the digital, visual production of security and war. Second, it argues that representational devices can helpfully be seen as agentic security devices and mobilises inscription theory to understand how representational devices act. In the third part, the article theorises the smartphone as an inscription device and the selfie as an inscription practice. Fourth, it illustrates this theorisation with the case of Zelensky's selfie videos. Finally, the article concludes by reflecting on how inscription theory might enrich the 'visual turn' more broadly.

### The visual production of security and war

'Visual turn' scholarship in IR and Security Studies highlights how visual artefacts take part in producing security imaginaries and can even contribute to the securitisation of political issues by linking intertextually with other discursive representations. Indeed, it is often argued that visuals are especially potent discursive representations and play a particularly important part in discursive economies, due to their ability to effectively fix the meaning of complex social and political phenomena.<sup>12</sup> Hansen more specifically contends that visual artefacts are distinct from textual representations and gain securitising potential by accentuating immediacy, circulability, and ambiguity. Immediacy refers to the visual's capacity to authentically represent a scene or an event, circulability to the ease with which visuals are disseminated, and ambiguity to the open-ended nature of visuals and their differential communication to and interpretation by various audiences.<sup>13</sup>

Analysing the production of security through war photography more specifically, Heck and Schlag argue that images are important for legitimising war, as they often take part in representing

<sup>8</sup>Paul Frosh, 'The gestural image: The selfie, photography theory, and kinesthetic sociability', *International Journal of Communication*, 9 (2015), pp. 1607–28.

<sup>9</sup>Bernd Leiendecker, 'Of duck faces and cat beards: Why do selfies need genres?', in Julia Eckel, Jens Ruchatz, and Sabine Wirth (eds), *Exploring the Selfie: Historical, Theoretical, and Analytical Approaches to Digital Self-Photography* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 189–210 (p. 194); Nishant Shah, 'The selfie and the slut: Bodies, technology and public shame', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 50:17 (2015), pp. 86–93 (p. 87); Julie Eckel, Jens Ruchatz, and Sabine Wirth, 'The selfie as image (and) practice: Approaching digital self-photography', in Julia Eckel, Jens Ruchatz, and Sabine Wirth (eds), *Exploring the Selfie: Historical, Theoretical, and Analytical Approaches to Digital Self-Photography* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 1–24 (p. 6).

<sup>10</sup>Håvard Rustad Markussen, 'Conceptualising the smartphone as a security device: Appropriations of embodied connectivity at the Black Lives Matter protests', *Critical Studies on Security*, 10:2 (2022), pp. 70–84.

<sup>11</sup>Matthew Ford and Andrew Hoskins, *Radical War: Data, Attention and Control in the 21st Century* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2022).

<sup>12</sup>Hansen, 'Theorizing the image for Security Studies'; Adler-Nissen, Andersen, and Hansen, 'Images, emotions, and international politics'; Heck and Schlag, 'Securitizing images'.

<sup>13</sup>Hansen, 'Theorizing the image for Security Studies', pp. 56–8.

specific war efforts as necessary, good, and just.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Campbell argues that photographs of war must be understood not as reports and ‘carriers of information’, but rather as ‘ciphers that prompt affective responses’ and legitimise action through the construction of identity.<sup>15</sup> Butler makes the case, moreover, for seeing photography of war as a political and even violent act of framing, since the selective inclusion or exclusion of something in the shot imposes meaning on a scene, which in turn has consequences for how it is possible and natural to react with affect to the pain and suffering of others.<sup>16</sup> As such, the ways in which publics and politicians in the West respond to wars elsewhere are in large part conditioned by the capacity of visual representations to frame events and to trigger emotion.

The digitalisation of visual artefacts, moreover, functions both to further reinforce and to counter these effects. On the one hand, digitalisation drastically increases the circulability of visuals, as it makes them far easier to share on social media platforms.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, digitalisation enables widespread fabrication and editing of visuals, which might weaken their claim to authenticity and also – with the addition of text in memes, through captions and comment sections, and with the proliferation of video that may include written or spoken messages – make them drained in discourse and thus less naturally ambiguous.<sup>18</sup> As Hansen explains, however, fabrication and/or editing does not necessarily hamper the capacity of a visual to ‘mediate or embody collective identity’, since the securitising potential of a visual through its perceived authenticity and invocation of immediacy does not depend on the visual’s ‘truthfulness.’<sup>19</sup> Relatedly, Butler points out how the ‘indefinite circulability of the [digital] image allows the event to continue to happen’ and even argues that, due to the potential for dissemination across both time and space that comes with digitalisation, ‘the event has not stopped happening’. Hence, digital visual artefacts produce social reality in ways that exceed their capacity to document the chronology of events or the unfolding of a scene.<sup>20</sup>

Pertaining to war photography in particular, moreover, the digitalisation of visuals has made war more participative, since the production of visuals can now, with the use of digital devices and their instant connection to social media, be produced by and spread to anyone. This may have the effect of disrupting or supplementing official, state narratives about war, because it allows other, typically non-elite actors to represent events and take active part in their intertextual/visual construction.<sup>21</sup> Some recent research has also pointed to how visual representations of war on social media can contribute to militarisation and more specifically the normalisation of war preparedness and the constitution of military masculinity. Hedling, Edenborg, and Strand, for instance, argue that ‘visual narratives of influencer marketing’ and the intimacy and availability afforded by social media communication can function to reconcile contradictions between the muscular/imperial and the democratic/progressive in the construction of military identities and accordingly the legitimisation of war.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Heck and Schlag, ‘Securitizing images’.

<sup>15</sup>David Campbell, ‘Geopolitics and visuality: Sighting the Darfur conflict’, *Political Geography*, 26:1 (2007), pp. 357–87 (p. 379).

<sup>16</sup>Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2016).

<sup>17</sup>Hansen, ‘Theorizing the image for Security Studies’, p. 57; Hansen, ‘Images and international security’, p. 600.

<sup>18</sup>Hansen, ‘Theorizing the image for Security Studies’, p. 58.

<sup>19</sup>Hansen, ‘Theorizing the image for Security Studies’, p. 56.

<sup>20</sup>Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 86. See also Constance Duncombe, ‘Social media and the visibility of horrific violence’, *International Affairs*, 96:3 (2020), pp. 609–29.

<sup>21</sup>Ford and Hoskins, *Radical War*.

<sup>22</sup>Elsa Hedling, Emil Edenborg, and Sanna Strand, ‘Embodying military muscles and a remasculinized West: Influencer marketing, fantasy and the “Face of NATO”’, *Global Studies Quarterly*, 2:1 (2022), pp. 1–12 (pp. 1, 2, 10). See also Katharine A. M. Wright and Annika Bergman Rosamund, ‘NATO’s strategic narratives: Angelina Jolie and the alliance’s celebrity and visual turn’, *Review of International Studies*, 47:4 (2021), pp. 443–66; Elsa Hedling and Niklas Bremberg, ‘Practice approaches to the digital transformations of diplomacy: Toward a new research agenda’, *International Studies Review*, 23:4 (2021), pp. 1595–618.

Although ‘visual turn’ scholarship has acknowledged the importance of new information and communication technology for the production, circulation, and consumption of visuals, however, it generally overlooks how the technologies that are used to produce visual artefacts and, importantly, the ways in which these technologies interact with humans in the moment of image production impact the representational force of visuals. Hansen points to how the digitalisation of photography and video impacts processes of securitisation by increasing visuals’ circulability and complicating their ambiguity, while others have highlighted how technologies can provide new modes of visuality that might function to motivate and legitimate security policy.<sup>23</sup> However, this literature generally lacks sustained engagement with the technologies themselves and more specifically, with how they interact with humans in the visual production of security. The next section turns to STS and inscription theory to account for how representational devices and their agency as it is actualised through interaction with human security actors contribute to the visual production of security and war.

### Security devices and inscription practices

Seeking to understand the role of technology in the visual production of security invites a turn to Science and Technology Studies (STS). Over the past decade, IR scholars have begun drawing on STS to account for how technology operates in the security domain. Security analyses that draw on STS typically come in the form of Latour’s actor-network theory<sup>24</sup> but also mobilise theories of e.g. materialisation<sup>25</sup> and co-production.<sup>26</sup> What they all alert us to, albeit in different ways, is how things as well as people have agency. This means that objects, materials, artefacts, and technologies are not passive entities that humans can use instrumentally, but rather agents that can cause effects in the world by themselves and have effects through interaction with humans.<sup>27</sup>

As part of this turn to STS, some security scholars have stressed the importance of attending to security devices – the instruments and equipment security actors use to practice security. Starting from the assumption that devices have agency and that they produce security in their interaction with humans, security-devices research locates politics in the relationship between people and things and studies security by examining the mediation of that relationship.<sup>28</sup> One such kind of

<sup>23</sup>Delf Rothe and David Shim, ‘Sensing the ground: On the global politics of satellite-based activism’, *Review of International Studies*, 44:3 (2018), pp. 414–37; Delf Rothe, ‘Seeing like a satellite: Remote sensing and the ontological politics of environmental security’, *Security Dialogue*, 48:4 (2017), pp. 334–53; Lauren Wilcox, ‘Drones’, in Roland Bleiker (ed.), *Visual Global Politics* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 129–33. Rune Saugmann, ‘The security captor, captured. Digital cameras, visual politics and material semiotics’, *Critical Studies on Security*, 8:2 (2020), pp. 130–44.

<sup>24</sup>Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). For a discussion of how actor-network theory is used in Security Studies, see Rocco Bellanova, Katja Lindskov Jacobsen, and Linda Monsees, ‘Taking the trouble: Science, technology and security studies’, *Critical Studies on Security*, 8:2 (2020), pp. 87–100 (pp. 92–3). For an example of security research mobilising actor-network theory, see Stefan Borg, ‘Assembling Israeli drone warfare: Loitering surveillance and operational sustainability’, *Security Dialogue*, 52:5 (2021), pp. 401–17.

<sup>25</sup>Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007). For an examples of security research mobilising materialisation theory, see Claudia Aradau, ‘Security that matters: Critical infrastructure and objects of protection’, *Security Dialogue*, 41:5 (2010), pp. 491–514.

<sup>26</sup>Sheila Jasanoff, *States of Knowledge: The Co-Production of Science and the Social Order* (London: Routledge, 2004). For an example of security research mobilising co-production theory, see Katja Lindskov Jacobsen, ‘Experimentation in humanitarian locations: UNHCR and biometric registration of Afghan refugees’, *Security Dialogue*, 46:2 (2015), pp. 144–64.

<sup>27</sup>Matthias Leese and Marijn Hoijtink, ‘How (not) to talk about technology: International Relations and the question of agency’, in Marijn Hoijtink and Matthias Leese (eds), *Technology and Agency in International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 1–23 (p. 1); Benjamin Meiches, ‘Non-human humanitarians’, *Review of International Studies*, 45:1 (2019), pp. 1–19.

<sup>28</sup>Anthony Amicelle, Claudia Aradau, and Julien Jeandesboz, ‘Questioning security devices: Performativity, resistance, politics’, *Security Dialogue*, 46:4 (2015), pp. 293–306; Samuel Tanner and Michaël Meyer, ‘Police work and new security devices: A tale from the beat’, *Security Dialogue*, 46:4 (2015), pp. 384–400; Nicole Sunday Grove, ‘The cartographic ambiguities of HarassMap: Crowdmapping security and sexual violence in Egypt’, *Security Dialogue*, 46:4 (2015), pp. 345–64; Govert Valkenburg and Irma van der Ploeg, ‘Materialities between security and privacy: A constructivist account of airport security scanners’, *Security Dialogue*, 46:4 (2015), pp. 326–44.



mediation is appropriation. Appropriation happens when devices that are not originally made for security purposes are used in security practices. As such, 'artefacts are used as security devices on a daily basis even if they have not been made or validated for such purposes', and 'banal consumer goods' that are re-used in innovative ways enter the security domain and influence the practice of security in unexpected and unintended ways.<sup>29</sup>

From this new materialist perspective, devices as well as the humans using them can be seen as security actors in the sense that they influence their users not merely by offering them technical solutions to given problems. Devices also alter the very way in which humans comprehend these problems. Latour has explained this interaction and argued that humans and technical objects exchange properties to form human/device hybrids. On this account, agency is distributed between human and device, and action springs from their hybrid form, rather than from one or the other. As much as humans can manipulate devices for their own ends, then, for example, through security appropriation, devices can impose on humans to 'displace [their] goals, and contribute to their redefinition'.<sup>30</sup>

One specific way in which devices interact with humans to condition their security practices is by offering new technologies for inscription. Inscription is the process by which something in the world is given meaning through capture or other technology-aided interpretation.<sup>31</sup> An inscription device is thus a technology that can 'transform pieces of matter into written documents' or 'a material substance into a figure or a diagram'.<sup>32</sup> Drawing on an ethnographic study of how scientific facts are produced in a laboratory, Latour and Woolgar give the example of how a lengthy and intricate procedure of scientific examination that included extracting samples from rats and processing large amounts of data files resulted in the presentation of a 'single elegant curve'.<sup>33</sup> The curve was thus the visible end product of a number of transformations by which complex and sometimes even invisible processes were rendered comprehensible.<sup>34</sup>

Because inscriptions such as this curve are 'regarded as having a direct relationship with "the original substance"', moreover, they are taken to represent the truth about that substance or a wider phenomenon.<sup>35</sup> As such, the transformation of abstract and complex substances and phenomena into neat and comprehensible facts is mistaken for correct reproduction, which gives the technologies and techniques for such transformation tremendous power in the construction of scientific facts as well as truthful knowledge about the social world. From this perspective, knowledge about substances and phenomena does not 'depend on certain material instrumentation'.<sup>36</sup> Instead, it is 'thoroughly constituted by the material setting' of its construction so much so that 'reality ... takes on the appearance of a phenomenon by virtue of its construction through material techniques'.<sup>37</sup> Hence, substances or phenomena do not exist without the inscription devices that transform them but exist precisely by virtue of, and come into being with, the inscription devices and their specific techniques for transformation.

For inscriptions to be effective, moreover, they need to be so-called immutable mobiles. First, inscriptions must be mobile, meaning they travel easily across networks and reach large audiences. Second, inscriptions must be immutable, which means that they must remain unchanged and retain their shape and form through and sometimes despite their travels. Only in this way can they shape intersubjectively constructed meaning about social and scientific phenomena and in turn take part in constituting collective identities. If an inscription is not mobile and/or immutable,

<sup>29</sup> Amicelle, Aradau, and Jeandesboz, 'Questioning security devices', p. 301.

<sup>30</sup> Bruno Latour, 'On technical mediation: Philosophy, sociology, genealogy', *Common Knowledge*, 3:2 (1994), pp. 29–64 (p. 34, 38, 45–6).

<sup>31</sup> Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*, p. 50–2.

<sup>32</sup> Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*, p. 51.

<sup>33</sup> Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*, p. 50.

<sup>34</sup> Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*, p. 50.

<sup>35</sup> Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*, p. 51.

<sup>36</sup> Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*, p. 64, italics in original.

<sup>37</sup> Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*, p. 64, italics in original.

it may not have this effect, either because its form and content is challenged or even dissolved by alteration, or because it fails to reach enough people to have a proper impact.<sup>38</sup>

Inscription devices can be analytic laboratory devices used in the natural sciences. These require professional and specialised training to operate and read and often render physically invisible substances or processes visible. However, inscription devices can also be more easily operable, accessible, and interpretable technologies, which do not render invisibles visible but make things visible in new ways. Rothe and Shim, for instance, argue that satellite images offer a techno-scientific gaze that inscribes meaning by giving a seemingly neutral and objective representation of reality,<sup>39</sup> while Wilcox shows how drone vision renders some bodies legitimate targets by offering unreliable ways of distinguishing between civilians and insurgents.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, Saugmann argues that the digital camera works as an inscription device because it can fix the meaning of political scenes. In this sense, the political scene that the camera is pointed at can be considered an abstract and complex material substance, the meaning of which is inherently in flux and often politically contentious, while the digital image captured of the scene can be considered a kind of document, figure, or diagram that fixes its meaning.<sup>41</sup>

As digital images are often and increasingly disseminated on social media, moreover, their capacity for effective inscription arguably increases. With higher circulation comes stronger impact, since it allows a visual to more forcefully shape collective imaginations. At the same time, higher circulation, especially in digital spaces, also increases the manipulability of visuals, which in turn threatens to weaken their epistemic authority. In other words, digital visual artefacts are – as inscriptions – more mobile but less immutable: they travel fast and therefore also inevitably transform. Latour stresses, however, that ‘immutability is ensured by the process of printing many identical copies’, indicating that it is not the absence of alteration in itself that makes a mobile immutable in practice, but rather the number of identical reproductions to counterweight potential alterations.<sup>42</sup> As Gershon writes, ‘immutable mobiles are, for Latour, actants that remain stable enough to retain their shape or configuration as they circulate through and across networks’.<sup>43</sup> Saugmann similarly suggests that the increased circubalibity of digital photos compensates for the risk of manipulation. This means that, even if edited and forged, original visuals are spread with such a high speed and to such large audiences that their alteration become nothing more than ‘identifiable ... outliers in the mass of identical images’.<sup>44</sup>

On this account, the visual production of security happens not only in processes of representation and intertextual/visual interaction. Rather, the ways in which security problems and issues are represented visually is dependent on how these visuals are produced, and as such, on the technological agency exercised by inscription devices – such as cameras – in their interaction with human security actors. In other words, the specific way in which a camera captures a political scene matters, as different techniques and modes of using a camera constitute the substances and phenomena they capture in varying ways. As most cameras are now digital, moreover, their modes of use and thus inscriptive effects are tightly connected to social media activity and especially the circulation and manipulation of visuals. Understanding the visual production of security, then, and the processes by which security issues such as Ukraine’s defence against Russia gather the attention required to legitimise certain security policies, such as economic sanctions and the supply of weapons and ammunition from the West, demands engagement with different techniques for such visual production. Selfies, which made images of Zelensky in the streets of Kyiv an instant,

<sup>38</sup> Bruno Latour, ‘Drawing things together’, in Michael Lynch and Steve Woolgar (eds), *Representation in Scientific Practice* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 19–68.

<sup>39</sup> Rothe and Shim, ‘Sensing the ground’.

<sup>40</sup> Wilcox, ‘Drones’.

<sup>41</sup> Saugmann, ‘The security captor, captured’, p. 134.

<sup>42</sup> Latour, ‘Drawing things together’, p. 32.

<sup>43</sup> Ilana Gershon, ‘Bruno Latour (1947–)’, in Jon Simons (ed), *From Agamben to Žižek: Contemporary Critical Theorists* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 161–76 (p. 168). Emphasis added.

<sup>44</sup> Saugmann, ‘The security captor, captured’, p. 137.

global icon,<sup>45</sup> is a prominent among these techniques. In the next section, I turn to selfie scholarship to theorise the smartphone as an inscription device and the selfie as an inscription practice.

### The selfie video as inscription practice

A selfie is 'a photograph one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website'.<sup>46</sup> Emerging from a long history of self-portraiture, the selfie has become a full-fledged and even respected genre of visual production and culture. Aided by technological developments, in particular the smartphone's incorporation of the front-facing camera, its size, easy one-handed operability, and permanent Internet access, and the more general spread of smartphone and social media use, the selfie presents a new way of portraying the self that is characterised by the inclusion of the image's producer in the shot.<sup>47</sup>

As an inscription practice, the selfie first and foremost does what all images do: it contributes to establishing truths about the social world through a distinct visual expressiveness that triggers emotions and fixes meaning. Furthermore, as a digital image, the selfie establishes truths, triggers emotion, and fixes meaning also by circulating quickly online and by risking manipulation. However, the selfie also fixes meaning in ways that are unique to the selfie as an inscription practice. Mobilising Frosh's theory of the selfie, it is possible to identify three main categories of photographic affordances that define how the selfie functions as an inscription practice: indexicality, composition, and reflection.<sup>48</sup> Affordances, as Adler-Nissen and Drieschova explain, are 'inherent action potentials of a given technology' that 'expresses the interrelation between technological functionality and social features'.<sup>49</sup> Conceptualised as affordances, then, indexicality, composition, and reflection can be seen to enable the use of selfies as a security practice and, in broader terms, condition the effects they have on the visual production of security. On this account, the agency of the smartphone as an inscription device does not compromise the agency of the person using it. The act of taking a selfie is thus a performative, political, and potentially violent act of framing a political scene, even if this performance is conditioned by the technological features of the device. Although the three selfie affordances and the effects of their mobilisation overlap and work together, the selfie's mobilisation of the three affordances can overarchingly be said to produce three different effects. Selfie indexicality invokes immediacy, selfie composition invokes authenticity, and selfie reflection invokes intimacy.<sup>50</sup>

*Indexicality* refers to the 'physical relation between the object photographed and the image finally created'.<sup>51</sup> This explains why the photograph is so commonly assumed to reflect reality. The thing or event that is depicted in a photograph must have been in front of the camera at the time

<sup>45</sup>Lene Hansen, 'How images make world politics: International icons and the case of Abu Ghraib', *Review of International Studies*, 41:2 (2015), pp. 263–88.

<sup>46</sup>Oxford University Press, "'Selfie' named Word of the Year 2013', available at: {<https://global.oup.com/news-items/11001744/word-of-the-year-selfie-2013?cc=no>}, accessed 16 August 2022.

<sup>47</sup>Eckel, Ruchatz, and Wirth, 'The selfie as image (and) practice', p. 4; Aaron Hess, 'The selfie assemblage', *International Journal of Communication*, 9 (2015), pp. 1629–46 (pp. 1629–30); Florian Krautkrämer and Matthias Thiele, 'The video selfie as act and artifact of recording', in Julia Eckel, Jens Ruchatz, and Sabine Wirth (eds), *Exploring the Selfie: Historical, Theoretical, and Analytical Approaches to Digital Self-Photography* (London: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 239–59 (pp. 241–2); André Gunthert, 'The consecration of the selfie: A cultural history', in Julia Eckel, Jens Ruchatz, and Sabine Wirth (eds), *Exploring the Selfie: Historical, Theoretical, and Analytical Approaches to Digital Self-Photography* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 27–47; Kris Belden-Adams, 'Locating the selfie within photography's history – and beyond', in Julia Eckel, Jens Ruchatz, and Sabine Wirth (eds), *Exploring the Selfie: Historical, Theoretical, and Analytical Approaches to Digital Self-Photography* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 83–94.

<sup>48</sup>Frosh, 'The gestural image'.

<sup>49</sup>Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Alena Drieschova, 'Track-change diplomacy: Technology, affordances, and the practice of international negotiations', *International Studies Quarterly*, 63:3 (2019), pp. 531–45 (pp. 532, 534).

<sup>50</sup>Frosh, 'The gestural image'.

<sup>51</sup>Tom Gunning, 'What's the point of an index? or, Faking photographs', in Karen Redrobe Beckman and Jean Ma (eds), *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 39–49 (p. 40); Andersen, 'Video, algorithms and security', p. 357.



and place of depiction and so must have existed or taken place. The selfie specifically indexes the real, moreover, by ‘pointing’ instead of ‘tracing.’<sup>52</sup> Conventional photography theory commonly understands the index as a trace, where subjects and objects leave imprints on the photograph through physical and chemical processes of image creation. On this account, the image signals a ‘temporal relation of pastness with its original event’: the event happened in the past because it is visible in a photograph in the present.<sup>53</sup> The selfie, on the other hand, alerts us to how the index can also function as deixis – or ‘the pointing finger’ – where more than leaving an imprint, the subject in front of the camera points at something and directs attention to a present event. Centring the image on its photographer, the selfie ‘points to the performance of a communicative action rather than to an object.’<sup>54</sup>

The selfie *video*, moreover, arguably points even more firmly to the present than the still photograph, because it can, even when uploaded post-event, give the impression of being a live recording.<sup>55</sup> As a result, the selfie aesthetic, especially when aided by the dynamism and urgency of the moving image, induces a visual with liveness as much as realness<sup>56</sup> and, as such, communicates a strong sense of immediacy that demands reaction and response here and now. Importantly, the selfie’s affordance of deictic indexicality and invocation of immediacy is enabled by the smartphone’s provision of constant and arguably embodied internet access and accordingly the possibility of instantly uploading content to social media. In a sense, the possibility of immediate uploads plays with and reinforces the immediacy of deictic indexicality by giving the visual act of pointing to the present a concrete outlet. With the help of social media connectivity, the liveness of the selfie’s visual expression is matched and strengthened by the liveness of its dissemination.

*Composition* refers to the way in which different components of an image are arranged and oriented. In conventional photography, composition is invariably conducted from behind the camera. As such, it is characterised by the ‘spatial separation between photographed objects and the photographer’s body’ and conditioned by a ‘foundational cleavage between seeing and being seen.’<sup>57</sup> With the selfie, however, this has changed. Given the smartphone’s design – its size, easy one-handed operability, and inclusion of a front-facing camera – photography can now transcend this cleavage and enable compositions where the subject is seeing and being seen at the same time.<sup>58</sup> In this way, the selfie offers ‘an externalized inward look’ which embeds the subject of the photograph in a localised, everyday time and place.<sup>59</sup>

This arguably decreases the violent potential in the act of framing which Butler refers to, since the subject of the photograph and the victim of its political and selective inclusion and exclusion is in control of the framing. Moreover, the extended-hand gesture,<sup>60</sup> and the internalised coordination of device, body, and backdrop that marks it, is also a gesture of inclusion.<sup>61</sup> Reaching out and leading inward, the selfie invites the viewer ‘to look, to be with, and act’ and thus generates ‘kinetic

<sup>52</sup> Frosh, ‘The gestural image’, p. 1609.

<sup>53</sup> Frosh, ‘The gestural image’, p. 1609.

<sup>54</sup> Frosh, ‘The gestural image’, p. 1610; see also Eckel, Ruchatz, and Wirth, ‘The selfie as image (and) practice’, p. 6; Sabine Wirth, ‘Interfacing the self: Smartphone snaps and the temporality of the selfie’, in Julia Eckel, Jens Ruchatz, and Sabine Wirth (eds), *Exploring the Selfie: Historical, Theoretical, and Analytical Approaches to Digital Self-Photography* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 213–38 (pp. 214–17).

<sup>55</sup> Krautkrämer and Thiele, ‘The video selfie as act and artifact of recording’, pp. 242, 250.

<sup>56</sup> Wirth, ‘Interfacing the self’, p. 227.

<sup>57</sup> Frosh, ‘The gestural image’, p. 1611.

<sup>58</sup> Frosh, ‘The gestural image’, p. 1611; see also Krautkrämer and Thiele, ‘The video selfie as act and artifact of recording’, pp. 241–2.

<sup>59</sup> Anirban K. Bayshia, ‘#NaMo’, *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015), p. 1688; Hess, ‘The selfie assemblage’, pp. 1633, 1636–7.

<sup>60</sup> Julia Eckel, ‘Selfies and authorship: On the displayed authorship and the author function of the selfie’, in Julia Eckel, Jens Ruchatz, and Sabine Wirth (eds), *Exploring the Selfie: Historical, Theoretical, and Analytical Approaches to Digital Self-Photography* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 131–65 (pp. 131, 142).

<sup>61</sup> Frosh, ‘The gestural image’, pp. 1613, 1619; Krautkrämer and Thiele, ‘The video selfie as act and artifact of recording’, pp. 242–4.

relations between viewer and viewed.<sup>62</sup> This dynamic is especially evident in group selfies, as they embed the photographer socially as well as spatially and require dexterous, social, unifying coordination when being composed. In a sense, the selfie thus transforms the practice of composing into ‘com-posing’, as it makes composition an act of posing together instead of just arranging the different elements in the photo.<sup>63</sup>

This spatial and social embedding of the photographing subject transmits authenticity because it shows where and with whom the subject is. The gestural character of the image – its ‘shaky, handheld aesthetic’<sup>64</sup> – reinforces this by giving the visual an air of amateurishness that makes the photographing subject seem more approachable and real. The selfie’s affordance of subject-centred composition and invocation of authenticity is also reinforced by the smartphone’s enforcement of embodied connectivity, since the gesture of com-posing and its invitation to interact depends on quick sharing of content. Indeed, the act of inclusively com-posing that is enabled by the selfie is predicated on an online media environment where visuals are swiftly uploaded and receive immediate engagement.

*Reflection* refers to the photograph’s ability to mirror the photographing self. In conventional photography, this ability is limited by the cleavage between producer and the scene of the photograph and only made possible by techniques such as turning the camera around and technologies like the self-timer.<sup>65</sup> With the introduction of the smartphone and in particular the front-facing camera and the showing of the image-under-production on the smartphone screen that enables the taking of selfies, however, reflection in terms of mirroring has become much easier and even a commonplace, everyday practice. In particular, selfies ‘show a self, enacting itself’,<sup>66</sup> as they allow the photographer to respond to their self-reflection in the moment of production.

As such, selfies also make photography a sociable, connective practice.<sup>67</sup> For by reflecting the self in the moment, it is simultaneously producing and being produced, the selfie encourages imitation and hence ‘summons us to do more than look’.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, the recognisable and relatable ‘sensorimotor ... inscription of a bodily gesture’ that the selfie constitutes, invites ‘communicative gestural responses’ from others.<sup>69</sup> This has led to the development of a specific visual grammar for the social media selfie, as templates for posture and mimicry have been recreated time and again, ultimately establishing a distinct, recognisable visual expression. It is thus not only the gesture of the outstretched arm that signals that ‘this is a selfie’, but also poses as well as facial and bodily reactions. Notably, the ‘duck face’ and the celebrity meet are postural expressions specific to the selfie. Moreover, template postures and reactions can be happy in nature, as the selfie is used to capture moments of elation and celebration such as a graduation or an engagement, but can also be graver in character, as selfies are increasingly used for news reporting, witnessing, and political communication as well.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>62</sup>Frosh, ‘The gestural image’, pp. 1617, 1619.

<sup>63</sup>Frosh, ‘The gestural image’, p. 1612.

<sup>64</sup>Krautkrämer and Thiele, ‘The video selfie as act and artifact of recording’, p. 252.

<sup>65</sup>Frosh, ‘The gestural image’, p. 1620; Angela Krewani, ‘The selfie as feedback: Video, narcissism, and the closed-circuit video installation’, in Julia Eckel, Jens Ruchatz, and Sabine Wirth (eds), *Exploring the Selfie: Historical, Theoretical, and Analytical Approaches to Digital Self-Photography* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 95–109 (p. 96).

<sup>66</sup>Frosh, ‘The gestural image’, p. 1621. See also Wirth, ‘Interfacing the self’, p. 226.

<sup>67</sup>Frosh, ‘The gestural image’, p. 1621; see also Krautkrämer and Thiele, ‘The video selfie as act and artifact of recording’, pp. 240–1; Krewani, ‘The selfie as feedback’, p. 96; Eckel, ‘Selfies and authorship’, p. 132.

<sup>68</sup>Frosh, ‘The gestural image’, pp. 1621–2.

<sup>69</sup>Frosh, ‘The gestural image’, pp. 1621–2.

<sup>70</sup>Ilan Manor and Louis Soone, ‘The digital industries: Transparency as mass deception’, *Global Policy* (2018), pp. 1–11 (p. 17); Leiendecker, ‘Of duck faces and cat beards’; Achilleas Karadimitriou and Anastasia Veneti, ‘Political selfies: Image events in the new media field’, in Athina Karatzogianni, Dennis Nguyen, and Elisa Serafinelli (eds), *The Digital Transformation of the Public Sphere: Conflict, Migration, Crisis and Culture in Digital Networks* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 321–40; Michael Koliska and Jessica Roberts, ‘Selfies: Witnessing and participatory journalism with a point of view’, *International Journal of Communication*, 9 (2015), pp. 1672–85.

In video selfies, the gestural pull of the visual is arguably even stronger, as it often includes the performance and documentation of a bodily activity and allows for direct and seemingly personal communication.<sup>71</sup> The selfie's direct, mirror-like reflection of self thus invokes a feeling of intimacy with the photographing subject.<sup>72</sup> This affordance too is reinforced by the instant social media connection that the smartphone offers, both in the sense that it enables the selfie-taker/subject to upload content directly to the feeds of its audience, which accentuates the intimacy of the communication, often by making public figures more available to the public, and in the sense that it enables the audience to engage directly with the visual and potentially with a public figure, through comments, reactions, shares, and even imitation. Through reflection and its play on the spectre of social media in the shot, the selfie also offers a way for public figures to construct 'visual narratives of influencer marketing' and use them for the branding and legitimation of state activities.<sup>73</sup>

As an inscription practice working on the visual production of security, then, the selfie video can in sum be said to transform abstract social and political substances and phenomena, such as identities or a conflict, into a document, figure, or diagram, by fixing their meaning through a play on the technological affordances of indexicality, composition, and reflection. In particular, the selfie video mobilises deictic indexicality, composition that includes the producer, and direct, gestural self-reflection, in ways that strongly invoke immediacy, authenticity, and intimacy. This account of how the selfie enables security appropriation of the smartphone and the selfie through technological affordances also shows how the smartphone device is not a passive instrument for the practice of security, but rather an agent in the production of these practices. Since 'smartphones have ... technologically implemented and materially stabilized the photographic practice of the selfie',<sup>74</sup> the device itself, and the specific ways in which it enables a new and different kind of inscription through intimate interaction with the human body and self, is complicit and active in the visual production of security. Moreover, this intimate interaction offers and is established through the smartphone's provision of constant and instant internet and social media presence. As such, much of the smartphone's agency as an inscriber of security through the selfie genre must be attributed the specific media environment it gives access to, and the practices and cultures of mass sharing and communication that it enables.

### The case of Zelensky's selfie videos

In this section, I use Zelensky's selfie videos to illustrate the theorisation of the selfie as an inscription practice that can contribute to the production of security imaginaries. The analysis focuses on the two selfie videos posted by Zelensky on 25 (V1, [Figure 1](#))<sup>75</sup> and 26 (V2, [Figure 2](#))<sup>76</sup> February 2022. This is because they, among a series of other selfie videos posted later, were instant, global icons of Zelensky and Ukraine's defiance and defence in the early phases of the war. Icons are especially efficient in condensing and fixing the meaning of complex political events,<sup>77</sup> which makes V1 and V2 likely to have had a substantial impact on the production of security imaginaries about the war. The analysis employs a thick interpretivist approach, meaning it assumes that selfies, like any textual or visual discursive representations have constitutive rather than causal effects.<sup>78</sup> They did not cause anyone to react in a certain way, for instance in terms of weapons supplies, the imposition of sanctions or alliance building. Instead, they took part in producing the discursive conditions that made such reactions possible.

<sup>71</sup> Krautkrämer and Thiele, 'The video selfie as act and artifact of recording', pp. 242–6; Wirth, 'Interfacing the self', pp. 220–1.

<sup>72</sup> Frosh, 'The gestural image', p. 1622, italics in original. See also Eckel, 'Selfies and authorship', pp. 148, 154–5.

<sup>73</sup> Hedling, Edenborg, and Strand, 'Embodying military muscles and a remasculinized West', pp. 1, 2, 10.

<sup>74</sup> Eckel, Ruchatz, and Wirth, 'The selfie as image (and) practice', p. 5.

<sup>75</sup> NBC News, 'The citizens are here and we are here'.

<sup>76</sup> CNN, 'Zelensky posts video in the streets of Kyiv'.

<sup>77</sup> Hansen, 'How images make world politics'.

<sup>78</sup> Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 26–8.



**Figure 1.** Zelensky's selfie video posted on the 25th of February 2022. Screenshot taken from Zelensky's official Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/zelenskiy.official>).

### *Indexicality*

In V1, Zelensky is on the streets outside the presidential offices in the evening, along with a group of his colleagues and advisers, to show that they are alive, present in Kyiv, and ready to fight. In V2, Zelensky is alone in the streets the morning after to show that he is still alive and to counter Russian propaganda claiming he is laying down arms and fleeing the country. The videos inscribe meaning through indexing the real first of all by indicating a physical relationship between the object of the videos and the security imagery they ultimately produced. The videos show Zelensky and his advisers, and Zelensky alone, in the streets of Kyiv and as such provide a physical trace of the event. As a kind of photography and accordingly a representation that is normally considered reliable and even factual,<sup>79</sup> the videos thus go a long way in proving that 'this happened'.

Besides providing a physical trace of the event, however, the video mobilises the selfie medium in order also to point to the present and highlight the liveness of the event. For beyond showing that Zelensky and his colleagues and advisers were alive and present in Kyiv, the videos show Zelensky's extended arm and capture his direct address to the smartphone's front-facing camera through a shifting and slightly shaky frame. This aesthetic makes the videos instantly recognisable as selfies and, as such, highlights the communicative act of recording a selfie as part of the imagery, and even the iconography, of the videos. By saying that 'this is a selfie', the videos are not mere reproductions of events, but also manifestations of a particular way of communicating that is associated with social media activity, networked conversations, live sharing, and instant response. Here, the smartphone's simultaneous provision of the front-facing camera and instant Internet and social media access plays an important role, as it connects the photographic affordance of deictic indexicality with the immediacy offered by rapid dissemination. In inscribing the conflict with meaning

<sup>79</sup> Andersen, Vuori, and Mutlu, 'Visuality', pp. 94–6.



**Figure 2.** Zelensky's selfie video posted on the 26th of February 2022. Screenshot taken from Zelensky's official Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/zelenskiy.official>).

by showing Zelensky and his colleagues' presence in the streets of Kyiv, then, and through their quick upload to various social media platforms and hasty dissemination across the Internet, the selfie videos not only went a long way in proving that 'this happened' but also seem to have insisted that 'this is happening now'.

The textual content of the videos, moreover, plays on the liveness of the medium and in this way reinforces the visual impression of presence and immediacy that the videos give. In V1, Zelensky says repeatedly that 'we are here'. He mentions all his advisers by name and/or title to say outright that they are present in Kyiv at the exact moment of recording and nods his head in a reiterative, underscoring tone at every repetition of the word 'here'. The caption for the video as it is posted on Facebook reads: 'We are here. We are defending Kyiv. We are defending Ukraine.' In another explicit act of pointing to the present, Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal, standing to Zelensky's right, holds up his own smartphone to show the time and date on his lock screen. In V2, Zelensky similarly states that 'I am here'. Moreover, he actively uses the video to counter false information from Russia, thus using the selfie to link the claim of presence with the capacity to speak the truth. 'There is a lot of fake info that I am telling our army to lay down arms', he says; he continues: 'I am here. We are not putting down arms. We will be defending our country, because our weapon is truth.' The caption of the video reads 'don't believe the fakes'.

Seen in relation to each other, moreover, the videos' act of pointing to the present seems even more active and effective. The first video was uploaded in the evening of 25 February, while the other was uploaded in the morning of 26 February. The first video was filmed in the dark of the evening, and the second was filmed in the light of the morning after. In this way, they come together to show the passing of time. Watching the one and then the other, as many of Zelensky's followers on social media would have done, the two videos give the impression that what was being shown



on the screen via Zelensky's social media profiles were updates from the live development of the situation. This indicates that the selfie's effects as an inscription practice are connected not only to its photographic affordances, but also to the online media landscape in which they operate. Zelensky's selfie videos pointed to the present by showing the communicative act of shooting the video but also articulated urgency through serial, instant uploads that anticipated quick consumption and dissemination.

In this way, the selfies' mobilisation of indexicality inscribed meaning to the conflict by communicating the liveness of events and thus stressing the urgency of the situation. As Zelensky's mobilisation of selfie indexicality was dependent on the extended-arm gesture, moreover, the invocation of immediacy was also conditioned by the specific ways in which human and smartphone interact. The smartphone was thus not a passive vessel that Zelensky could use instrumentally to construct the conflict as he pleased, but rather an agentic device that imposed its features on him and conditioned his use of the device and communication through social media. For it was only given the embodied and recognisable hand gesture that the videos could point to the present by showing the communicative act of taking the selfie. Moreover, it was the quick upload of the videos to social media that circulated the immediacy-invoking sentiment of this communicative act and thus actualised its latent potential to securitise.

### Composition

Both V1 and V2 were composed around Zelensky himself and according to the way in which he operates his smartphone to frame the shots. In V1, the shot moves to capture each of Zelensky's colleagues in turn, and to capture the whole group together. In V2, the shot is always directed straight at Zelensky's face but at the same time clearly captures the famous and (to some) easily recognisable presidential residence in the background.<sup>80</sup> Both videos show how selfie composition breaks down the barrier between seeing and being seen by placing the photographing self in the frame. More specifically, though, the videos respectively speak to two different, important compositional dynamics of the selfie. V1 demonstrates how group selfies require sociable composition, while V2 demonstrates how selfies demand mediation of the relation between body, device, and backdrop.

Starting with V1 and the group selfie, the video shows Zelensky moving the camera and shifting the position of his body to make different people fit in the frame at different times. He stands in the middle of a group of five people and begins the video by directing the shot at himself and the two people on his left, before directing it at himself and the two people on his right. At the end of the video, the camera is still directed at Zelensky but captures all four people in the background at the same time. As Zelensky mentions their names and positions, he points to the four people in turn, and they respond with an affirmative nod to the camera. When the shot captures the whole group towards the end of the video, Zelensky iterates with gusto: 'We are all here.' The video is not, as it would be in conventional photography, composed by a distanced, behind-the-camera producer. Instead, it is produced by the producer's own actions in the scene of the visual, and indeed, other people's response to those actions. As such, the video effectively turns composition into com-position, in the sense that the 'arrangement of elements'<sup>81</sup> happened through an 'act of posing together':<sup>82</sup> Zelensky did not ask the others to pose for his camera but posed with them while producing the visual. Constituted by social interaction and in the same turn socially embedding the actors present in the shot, V1 thus mobilises the selfie function's affordance of producer-centred composition to instil feelings of togetherness and unity. As the audience can see in the video – precisely due to its selfie form – Zelensky was defending capital and country, and he was doing it shoulder to shoulder with a close and unified team of colleagues.

<sup>80</sup>Harding, 'Volodymyr Zelenskiy stands defiant.'

<sup>81</sup>Frosh, 'The gestural image', p. 1611.

<sup>82</sup>Frosh, 'The gestural image', p. 1612.

In V2, Zelensky is alone on the streets of Kyiv, addressing his audience by speaking directly to the camera. Zelensky's outstretched arm is always, if slightly, visible in the shot as it reaches towards the left margin of the frame, indicating with surety that he is filming himself. In the opening seconds of the video, Zelensky films himself walking against a split background: half of it showing an empty street and the other half a building. Soon after, however, Zelensky adjusts the shot so that the building – the presidential residence – is centred within the frame, is visible primarily over his left shoulder, and fills almost the entire background. Accompanied by a bit of natural, shaky hand movement, the video stays in this primary composition throughout. As with V1, the selfie medium allows V2 to be composed around the producer of the visual. However, V2 replaced the social embedding conducted by V1 with geographical, spatial embedding. Placing Zelensky in front of a – to Ukrainians – well-known building that is symbolic of Ukrainian sovereignty, the selfie video established his position in space and even pinpointed his location to specific geographical coordinates. Due to this active use of a well-known backdrop, and the use of the front-facing camera of a smartphone to show the producer of the video against the backdrop, viewers of the video could thus find Zelensky's current position on a map. Moreover, the early adjustment of the shot to properly capture the building in the background shows that it was a deliberate choice and important for Zelensky to communicate that he was at this particular location. It also shows how selfie composition is conditioned not only by the merging of producer and product positions, but also by the active and dexterous coordination of device, body, and backdrop.

Importantly, the two videos' compositions can be seen to aid efforts to communicate with specific audiences. Both videos arguably first and foremost speak to Zelensky's social media following, given that they were uploaded to his social media profiles on Facebook and elsewhere. Moreover, in both videos Zelensky speaks in Ukrainian, which indicates that he primarily speaks to the citizens of his own country. The act of social embedding in V1 seems to accentuate this by placing Zelensky amid politicians who would be known to Ukrainian citizens but not to a foreign audience. Similarly, the act of spatial embedding in V2 places Zelensky against a background that is recognisable and heavy with symbolism primarily for Ukrainians. At the same time, the instant upload of the videos to social media ensured that they were disseminated quickly. This led to swift translations of Zelensky's Ukrainian in the comment sections and elsewhere, and the videos were soon picked up and reproduced by international news media. As such, the subject-centred composition afforded by the selfie, and the social and spatial embedding of the photographing subject that it enables, in this case functioned to reinforce a directed communication. Due to the circularity of digital visual artefacts, however, this did not compromise the videos' ability to speak to a broader and more diverse, even international, audience. Indeed, one can easily imagine that the directedness of the communication, as aided by the specificity of selfie compositions and their invocation of authenticity, was important for the videos' resonance with international viewers as well.

In this way, the selfie inscribed meaning to the conflict by establishing the social and geographical position of Zelensky in a trustworthy way. And here too, the selfie's affordance of composition was dependent on human/smartphone interaction and in particular the extended arm dexterously operating the device. Moreover, it also seems like the selfie's affordance of producer-centred and producer-animated composition complemented and arguably amplified its affordance of deictic indexicality in the case of Zelensky's selfie videos. Through both the group selfie in V1 and the active use of backdrop in V2, the selfie enabled composition that also pointed to the here and now instead of documenting the past. For precisely by placing Zelensky at the centre of the shot, the selfies were constituted by his seemingly live actions, be that in social interaction with his colleagues or on a morning stroll outside of his residence. As such, the authenticity produced by selfie composition goes hand in hand with the immediacy produced by its indexicality.

### *Reflection*

In both videos, Zelensky – the producer of the visual – is mobilising the hand-held operability and front-facing camera of the smartphone when addressing his audience. As such, the videos do not

indirectly reflect their producer via e.g. compositional strategies, play with light, choice of scene and subject(s), etc., as is the case with conventional photography. Instead, they reflect their producer directly by showing his face and body in the moment of production. Indeed, such direct reflection is the essence of the selfie as a form and genre of visual representation.<sup>83</sup> And as we can see from Zelensky's selfie videos, it has the effect of giving a sympathetic and compassionate impression, creating intimacy between the subject of the visual and the audience.

As V1 begins, Zelensky has a serious, grave, urgent facial expression, which he maintains during the presentation of his colleagues. About halfway through the video, however, when the video shifts from presenting the people in the background and into Zelensky's primary address, his mien changes somewhat. He is still serious but now gives a slight, knowing smile. Conversely, in V2 Zelensky starts off smiling as he walks the street, wishes his supporters a good morning, and begins to adjust the shot to capture the building in the background but adopts a more serious expression once the background is in place and he moves on from well wishes to discussing the war.

These little shifts are significant in the context of the present study, not because they unearth Zelensky's use of moods and facial expressions as a means of strategic communication, but because they show how the selfie enables direct self-reflection and especially intimate communication. As Zelensky films himself, he sees the product on the screen of his smartphone while producing it, and, as such, the production of the visual is conditioned by his real-time reactions to and modifications of the image he sees of himself. The videos thus show Zelensky as a 'self enacting itself': he sees his reflection and adjusts his performance accordingly, continuously negotiating how he comes across to himself and his audience. This makes the communication especially intimate, because the changing facial expression is revealing of how Zelensky saw himself, and even how he wished to be seen. Although the videos might have been edited before they were posted, they are nonetheless unfiltered in the sense that they show something that cannot be edited away from a selfie video, namely how Zelensky reacted to his own self-reflection in minuscule but familiar and relatable ways.

Relatedly, the videos' direct reflection of Zelensky contributed to making the visuals gestural in tone and attitude. For while invoking intimacy, the familiarity of the activity of taking a selfie also invites imitation. We can see this dynamic in Zelensky's selfie videos because, as discussed above, a constant compositional feature of the videos is the outstretched arm, which along with the recognisable shifts in facial expression make them instantly identifiable as selfies. As such, the video not only reflects Zelensky's face in the moment of production, but also the distinct and also familiar activity of taking a selfie. The videos' reflections thus actively gesture towards the viewers and encourage them to engage: to comment, like, love, share, and even take selfies of their own. In this way, the reflection of the activity adds a sense of communion to the intimacy, as if Zelensky – arm outstretched in a relatable, everyday pose, even in the most extreme of situations – is saying 'we are in this together', but also, 'you can do this too'.

While the selfie's affordance of subject-centred composition aided Zelensky's efforts to speak directly to a Ukrainian audience and more indirectly to international viewers, then, the selfie's affordance of intimate, gestural reflection enabled him to speak directly to an audience of social media users. Regardless of nationality, location, familiarity with Ukrainian and cultural signs of the audience, which the selfies' composition mobilised, the videos' reflection of the photographing subject spoke a visual language that all social media users understand. Because the people in the audience knew how to – and likely often did – take selfies of their own, the recognisable intimacy of the reflection in Zelensky's selfies helped him communicate directly to a large audience of social media beings.

Relatedly, the intimate and gestural reflection afforded by the selfie, aided by the selfie's upload to social media, made Zelensky appear as a kind of influencer. Speaking a close-to-universal language of social media expressions and bodily postures, and likely arriving in his audience's feeds alongside other celebrities and social media personalities, Zelensky made his rather exceptional message

<sup>83</sup> Frosh, 'The gestural image'; Krewani, 'The selfie as feedback', pp. 95–6.

come off as quite mundane. In doing so, he mobilised established visual templates for the selfie and, at the same time, developed these templates by deploying them in a new context. Hence, the selfies' reflection took part in enabling Zelensky to build his wartime communication as a 'visual narrative of influencer marketing',<sup>84</sup> which has the effect of increasing availability and which might even function to imbue otherwise muscular and military affairs with a sense of softness and progress.

As such, intimate, gestural reflection inscribed meaning to the war by forging stronger and closer bonds between Zelensky and his citizens, but also, and in the same turn, by showing the Western public as well as political leaders – who are all social media beings – the strength and unity of Ukrainian defiance. It also seems to have complemented deictic indexicality and producer-centred composition in the inscription work conducted by Zelensky's selfies. By giving the visual an unfiltered expression by reflecting mimicry directly, V1 and V2 both made the videos more vibrant and lively, and hence more urgent and authentic. Furthermore, the encouragement to engage with the videos by inviting imitation reinforced the immediacy of their message. As well as pointing to the present, the selfies – by enforcing miniature responses to the photographing subject's reflection on the screen at the end of his outstretched arm – also implored viewers to act in the here and now. Selfie reflection is thus evidently reliant on and conditioned by the tight, physical relationship between human and smartphone, and importantly, the social media-specific visual language that emerges from the connectivity that this entails. It was Zelensky's embodiment of the smartphone's features – front-facing camera, one-handed operability, and real-time social media presence – that made possible confidential, revelatory, and inviting communication.

### Conclusion: Rethinking visual security through inscription

The above theorisation and analysis of the smartphone as an inscription device and the selfie as an inscription practice explored how the specific ways in which the smartphone interacted with and exchanged properties with human security actors can condition the visual production of security. In this way, this article enhances the understanding of 'visual turn' literature of the conditions for and the processes by which visual artefacts come to produce truths and facts that inform public and political opinion about security issues.

More specifically, approaching photography and in particular the selfie as an inscription practice deepens our understanding of the politics involved in the photographic production of visual artefacts. Showing that the device with which a photograph or video is captured imposes its features on humans and thus changes who they are and how they think and act, inscription theory highlights how representational devices do not aid human vision but rather constitute it. As such, the specificities of the inscription devices that are used for the representation of security issues, and indeed the particularities of their relation to the human body, matter. In the case of the selfie, the smartphone's interaction with the human body through its one-handed operability, front-facing camera, and instant connection offers novel ways for the human to mobilise classic photographic affordances and accordingly distinct and consequential ways of capturing complex social and political phenomena on camera. Moreover, because the outstretched arm makes the image immediately identifiable as a selfie, the interaction and specific relationship between human and device comes to animate the shot. As we have seen, the promise of instant sharing and wide dissemination through social media is an important part of the selfie's visual expression and force. The outstretched-arm gesture implies the presence of a smartphone and thus also hints at the media environment in which the visual is likely to operate. In this way, selfie technology influences the image's representational force both by enabling its production and by being perceptible in the image itself.

The analysis of Zelensky's iconic selfies illustrates this well, as it shows how the smartphone's interaction with the human body enables new ways of seeing, representing, and interpreting the world. Zelensky utilised the smartphone's photography features, and crucially his dexterity with

<sup>84</sup>Hedling, Edenborg, and Strand, 'Embodying military muscles and a remasculinized West', pp. 1, 2, 10.

and even embodiment of these, to mobilise the affordances of indexicality, composition, and reflection in ways that are unique to the selfie. As the smartphone's implicit visual presence vitalised the videos, moreover, so too did the spectre of social media. For perceptible in the smartphone's implicit presence in the scene – made visible by Zelensky's right arm reaching towards the edge of the frame – was the videos' potential for wide circulation and active engagement. This arguably functioned to accentuate the selfies' photographic affordances.

It is important to note, though, that the seeming effect of the selfies in this case does not solely come down to the technological agency of the smartphone and the photographic affordances of the selfies. First, the selfies' effect can be partly explained Zelensky's communication skills and especially his handle on social media, which enabled him to make good use of the selfie affordances. Inscription devices exert agency by conditioning rather than determining the actions of human actors, and so the selfie should be seen as a potential rather than a certain securitising practice, depending on the performance of the actor conducting it. Second, the selfies' effect can also be attributed to the ways in which they interacted with other textual and visual representations of the war. As 'visual turn' scholarship alerts us, a visual artefact does not 'speak security by itself' but by linking intertextually with other representations.<sup>85</sup> While representing the war in their unique, technologically afforded way, then, the selfies gained their securitising force also by working with Zelensky's other screen-based communications, perhaps most notably his live speeches to Western politicians, and with the wider discursive landscape consisting, for instance, of political debate, press coverage, and social media engagement.

Moreover, the case of Zelensky's selfie videos shows that inscription theory can be of value to the 'visual turn' more broadly. 'Visual turn' scholarship does acknowledge the importance of new communications technology for the production and circulation of images and recognises its centrality to processes by which 'international security issues and events become known to the wider public.'<sup>86</sup> In this way, it is also attuned to the importance of new media in the visual production of security, in particular with regards to patterns by which visual artefacts spread and reach the audience with which they come to have security effects. However, 'visual turn' research generally pays little analytical attention to technologies themselves. As Hansen programmatically writes: 'it is important to warn against technological determinism, that is a view of technology as acting independently of human agency.'<sup>87</sup>

One recent contribution to the visual turn that illustrates Hansen's view is Shetty's analysis of the visual securitisation of asylum seekers in Calais. He argues that eyewitness videos captured by people at the scene enabled non-elites to participate in processes of securitisation. According to Shetty, smartphones and algorithms were important for the production, circulation, and thus impact of the videos. However, his analytical focus remains on 'depictions of asylum seekers' and how they were interpreted by an audience. This leaves production and circulation technologies in the background as mere preconditions for the productive effects of the videos.<sup>88</sup> Another recent contribution that can serve as an illustration is Danielson and Hedling's study of virtual summitry, i.e. international summits conducted on digital communications platforms. They show how the use of digital communications platforms at the G20 summit during the coronavirus pandemic made political leaders 'responsible for their own staging', which enabled new and unpredictable practices of visual status-seeking. Yet the platforms and the recording technology that the diplomats interacted with to produce the visuals in question are reduced to a notion of 'digitalisation' in the analysis, and thus considered passive enablers more than agents of change.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>85</sup> See Hansen, 'Theorizing the image for Security Studies', p. 53.

<sup>86</sup> Hansen, 'Images and international security', p. 596.

<sup>87</sup> Hansen, 'Images and international security', p. 596.

<sup>88</sup> Vaibhava Shetty, 'The role of non-elites and eyewitness videos in the visual securitisation of Calais asylum seekers', *European Journal of International Security* 7:4 (2022), pp. 1–22.

<sup>89</sup> August Danielson and Elsa Hedling, 'Visual diplomacy in virtual summitry: Status signalling during the coronavirus crisis', *Review of International Studies*, 48:2 (2022), pp. 243–61.



The view of technology that is offered by inscription theory can heighten our analytical sensitivity to the role played by technology in processes of visual security production, while avoiding the determinism that Hansen warns against. Understanding technology as agential and interactive, inscription theory posits that humans and devices (re)constitute each other through the specific ways in which they interact. Neither human nor device has an essence prior to their interaction; they come into being in their subject and object positions precisely through that interaction.<sup>90</sup> Far from the deterministic, then, inscription theory leaves ample room for human agency in technologically mediated representational practices – not in terms of mastery over passive representational tools or circuits and patterns of dissemination but seen as technologically conditioned creativity. The materialist ontology that grounds inscription theory does thus not imply that technology acts independently of human agency but insists that both humans and technology act in a dependent, co-constitutive relationship. As Latour explains, ‘no materialist claims that guns kill by themselves.’<sup>91</sup> Of course, the same goes for cameras: they need human operation or at least involvement to capture a scene or event, but at the same time they condition the ways in which humans can visually represent the world.

From this perspective, the production and circulation of visual artefacts emerge as more than technical preconditions for representation. Making the representational agent a human/machine hybrid, the interaction between human and device that happens in the moment of production actively animates the produced visual artefact as well. It does so through its implied presence in the visual but also by linking the visual to a specific media environment. This is especially evident in the case of selfies, where the human/smartphone relation is even visible in the shot and since the selfie as a photographic genre is so tightly connected to Internet culture and social media activity.

However, representational devices’ animation of the produced visual is also evident in other genres. In the eyewitness videos analysed by Shetty, the shaky frame indicates that they are filmed with smartphones, which, in a way that is similar to Zelensky’s selfies, hints at the speed with which the visuals are about to spread and the level of engagement they are likely to receive. In the video calls analysed by Danielson and Hedling, miniature responses to the self-window might reveal the use of a webcam, which contrary to Zelensky’s selfies indicates that the visuals are not intended to go viral but instead to communicate a message to a particular and more limited audience. Effectively closing the time gap between production and representation by seeing production not as preceding representation but instead involved in it, inscription theory thus offers a way for ‘visual turn’ scholarship to engage more deeply with representational technologies. By accounting for the human/machine entanglements that condition the visual production of security, we get a fuller understanding of the politics involved in the production of security imaginaries that make security and defence policy possible.

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<sup>90</sup> Latour, ‘On technical mediation’, pp. 32–6.

<sup>91</sup> Latour, ‘On technical mediation’, p. 31.