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## Digitale dubbelgangers: identiteit in de verbeeldcultuur

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# Summary (Engelse samenvatting)

## Digitale dubbelgangers – identiteit in de verbeeldcultuur Digital Döppelgangers – Identity in the Culture of Imagination

The aim of this dissertation, as formulated in the Introduction, is to gain insight into the role that the visual digital doubles that are part of today's onlife culture play in the formation of human identity. To this end, I formulated the following research question: 'What is the ontological status of the doubles created by the digitally mediated (re)visual culture, what is – on a conceptual and qualitative-empirical level – the impact of these digital doubles on our self-understanding, and why do these doubles evoke (potentially) uncanny identity experiences?'

In **Chapter 0** I translate this research question into three sub-questions, which I approach from three different disciplinary angles: 1. the question of the ontological status of visual digital doubles – *the image aspect* – from the perspective of visual culture studies and media studies; 2. the question of the impact of technically mediated doubles on our identity – *the human aspect* – from philosophical anthropology and philosophy of technology; and 3. the question of the uncanny dimension of our identity – *the identity aspect* – from philosophical anthropology and the human sciences (in particular psychoanalysis and role theory). The answers to these questions takes place within a hermeneutic-phenomenological model of man and human culture, in which various qualitative theories from the aforementioned disciplines are used, applied in a multifocal way. Based on the theoretical findings from chapters (1-3), which are devoted to the three sub-questions mentioned, in chapter 4 three cases in which three manifestations of the digital doppelgänger were central (selfies, internet memes and deepfakes) were analyzed and interpreted in an exploratory way. In doing so, I focus in particular on the following two interpretative hypotheses, namely:

1. That the production of digital lookalikes in visual culture brings about a new medium-specific experience in individuals who either produce their own digital doubles or are confronted with *doppelgängers* of themselves produced by other individuals or algorithms; and
2. that the production of look-alikes can involve uncanny feelings, which are more intense the less the person has control over different dimensions – persistence, accessibility and manipulability – of this production.

**Chapter 1** focuses on the *image aspect* of the digital doppelgänger. After a general introduction to the (post)modern (re)visual culture and the 'becoming image' of the world' (Heidegger), I discuss the role that mechanical reproduction (Benjamin) and digital recombination of these technical images (Flusser) play in the play visual culture. In the second part of the chapter, I subsequently map out the numerous connotations of the image (Mitchell) and I considered ambiguity and ambivalence of the image in the strongly ocularly oriented Western culture (Jay), which has led to both image idolization

and image rejection. Special attention is paid to the panopticon and the digital variants based on it, which have more recently developed in the visual and visual culture. The third part of this chapter is devoted to the long history of the imagination of doppelgängers, culminating in the digital doubles that populate our culture today. In the fourth and final part of the chapter, I discuss three dimensions by which the imagined digital doubles can be ordered: persistence, accessibility and manipulability.

In **chapter 2**, the digital doppelganger is analyzed and interpreted from *the human aspect*. The point of departure is Plessner's philosophical anthropology. In the first part of this chapter, I explain on the basis of this that human beings share a centric positionality with other animal life forms, but differs from it in that they simultaneously occupy an excentric position, as a result of which they occupy an objectifying position with regard to their inner world, the outer world surrounding them and the fellow world supporting them. The eccentric positionality makes human beings artificial by nature, they can only realize themselves through the detour of cultural and technical artefacts, although this realization must inevitably remain utopian because of their excentric position. In the second part I explain that the eccentric positionality also makes the doppelgänger a fundamental feature of the human life form, characterized by a fundamental brokenness. This is explained on the basis of the psychoanalytic theory of the mirror stage (Lacan). In the third part, the focus is on the way in which technologies function as forms of self-reflection. On the basis of the theory of technological mediation (Ihde, Verbeek), different types of human-technology relationships are distinguished (varying from incorporation to immersion), in which the smartphone emerged as a 'relationship broker' that links the various human-technology relationships together. Connecting with the incorporation relationship, it is argued that in man-technology relationships, in addition to incorporation, there can also be excorporation, which is accompanied by a more or less radical self-alienation. In the fourth part, this chapter also concludes with an analysis of the dimensions persistence, accessibility and manipulability of the digital double, this time from the anthropological perspective.

**Chapter 3** focuses on the identity aspect of technological mediation, with a focus on the uncanny nature that technologically mediated identity formation can exhibit to a greater or lesser extent. After the logical, psychological and ontological dimension of human identity is explained in the first part, the doppelganger that characterizes human identity is analyzed in more detail in the second part with the help of Plessner's sociological theory of role play. Subsequently, the uncanny character of the doppelganger is elucidated on the basis of a series of reflections devoted, in the footsteps of Jensch and Freud, to doubles in literature and technologically mediated visual culture (Lacan, Barthes, Foucault). This results in the description of five aspects of *unheimlichkeit*: unfamiliarity, loss of control, the becoming visible of what should have remained invisible, involuntary repetitions and the blurring of the distinction between reality and fantasy. The third part then looks in more detail at how these five characteristics are mediated in the digital technology era. This chapter also concludes with an analysis of the dimensions persistence, accessibility and manipulability, this time with regard to the uncanny identity.

In **chapter 4**, the findings from the previous three theoretical chapters are applied to and tested against three qualitative cases relevant to the emergence of uncanny identity: *selfies*, *internet memes* and *deepfake videos*. The relevant imaging technology is successively analyzed and interpreted from the image aspect, the human aspect and the identity aspect. Although the degree of familiarity and control in the selfie is considerable, phenomena such as 'selfie dysmorphia' show that this type of

'identity management' can easily lead to a blurring between reality and fantasy and thereby also evoke uncanny feelings and alienation. The case of the internet memes shows that the latter is even more the case with these digital lookalikes. This is mainly due to the fact that in this case images of existing persons are constantly mutated by other persons, resulting in a strong loss of control in the persons affected, which can only be partly compensated by the fact that victims often appropriate meme personality and monetize it, or derive a certain cult status from it. The deepfake case, which focuses on the increasingly common pornographic subgenre (for example, in the form of revenge porn), showed that the victims of this subgenre experience the strongest feelings of *unheimlichkeit*. Not only do they lose control over their digital doubles, but the involuntary repetitions and the blurring between reality and fantasy mean that this form of 'digital sexual abuse' evokes similar physical reactions in the victims as an offline rape.

The conclusion recapitulates the findings of the investigation. The limitations of the research are explained and the importance of education, design and legislation is pointed out to prevent the *unheimlichkeit* that is inevitable for humans from taking pathological forms.