

Proud archives: selfies and zines as practices of care and (in)visibility in the Czech and Slovak struggle to reclaim “queer”

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This paper deals with how queer people in Czechia and Slovakia employ visual modes of self-representation to negotiate, articulate, and perform their identities at Pride-like events and within the complex conditions of increasing visibility, progress, but also social assimilation and political backlash. Visual media have long enabled queer people to contest dominant narratives, reconfigure normative visual regimes, but also claim and *queer* often exclusionary spaces—both online and offline—that have marginalised them. Yet the current visibility of queer people is marked by paradoxes. As queer people become more publicly visible, they also find themselves at a bigger risk of being rendered invisible in their complexity and subjected to a self-disciplining effect.

Pride events offer a particularly rich context for observing these dynamics, as they operate as sites of identity production (Ammaturo, 2016). There, participants not only offer their gaze but also subvert the normative gaze presented by both mainstream media and sometimes by the events themselves. On the other hand, it is also important to note that participants of Pride events can also undermine this subversive potential and reproduce the normative status quo.

Against this backdrop, selfies and DIY media, such as zines, operate not only as a creative practice but also as crucial sites of resistance, belonging, self-representation, and altogether as counter-visibility (Mirzoeff, 2011). Selfies, despite the risks of hyper(in)visibility and of being trapped in algorithmic manipulation and compliance, still function as inclusive digital networks and practices of care (Woolley, 2025). Zines operate within similar practices (Burkholder et al., 2023), albeit offline, and their increased production corresponds with the current material turn. And it is through the production of selfies and zines that queer people articulate, perform and disrupt or consolidate their complex identities.

This paper is guided by three research questions: (1) How do queer people in Czechia and Slovakia use modes of self-representation to negotiate and perform their identities? (2) How do queer people in these two countries use zines as another mode through which identities are also negotiated and performed? (3) How does the socio-political and cultural context of individual events and countries’ specificities influence these visual practices of self-representation?

That is why this paper’s theoretical framework combines Jack Halberstam’s (2005, 2012) notion of queer gaze with Nicholas Mirzoeff’s (2011) concept of counter-visibility. Queer

gaze functions as a counter-hegemonic strategy that deconstructs the hegemonic, normative, binary, and heteronormative view of the world (Halberstam, 2005, 2012; Burston & Richardson, 1995; McNealy, 2021). It becomes an inclusive symbolic space which operates as a societal critique while accentuating play, parody and the so-called low culture. Mirzoeff's countervisuality provides a conceptual lens through which normative visual regimes can be challenged and disrupted. Together, these frameworks provide a way to analyse visual self-representations as resistant forms of subjectivity.

Methodologically, this paper draws on ethnography (Leavy, 2020), qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Krippendorff, 2019) of selfies, and semiotic analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) of zines. The corpus consists of two types of material. Firstly, it includes 100 selfies taken at Pride and Pride-related events across Czechia and Slovakia, which were posted publicly on Instagram during the 2025 Pride season. The selfies were gathered using specific hashtags, such as #praguepride. The second body of material contains DIY artefacts, primarily zines, produced between 2020 and 2025 at Pride and Pride-like events, such as community workshops.

Overall, this paper argues that visual self-representations reveal specific socio-political and cultural tensions. These result from the intersection of global and local politics of Pride and queer issues. In Czechia, the growing number of smaller and community-driven Pride events reflects on and critiques commercially oriented Prague Pride and its supposed alignment with neoliberal values. These grassroots organisations advocate for intersectional, more radical and inclusive queer activism. Moreover, the situation of queer people in Slovakia—a country which shares cultural and historical ties with Czechia—is marked by a more repressive sociopolitical climate. Recent constitutional changes, slowing down the progress of queer rights and violent attacks, including a terrorist attack outside a queer club, suggest that queer visibility might also come at a greater cost, and therefore becomes a profoundly political act.

Preliminary results suggest three emerging visual strategies in selfies: (1) some participants adopt Pride's festive, carnival-like aesthetic; (2) others use Pride as a space to perform their identities, constructing an "imaginary somewhere" in which these identities can be temporarily visible without restrictions; while some (3) reject the party-like framing, emphasising the notion of Pride as a protest. Zines, utilising the affordances of print and materiality, enable people to create specific relational formations. They operate as platforms where personal intersects with broader social realities—merging personal and shared trauma, imagined or desired queer futures with broad societal critique, which supports the understanding of queer as a symbolic space which welcomes and embraces diverse marginalised identities.

Ultimately, this paper contributes to the broader debate on self-representation practices and the representation of queer people, particularly by situating the research in post-socialist Central European countries. This region finds itself at the intersection of progress, mainly inspired by the Western discourse on human and LGBTQ+ rights, and regression, which is both the heritage of the totalitarian past and the current political status quo. Within this space of ambivalence, selfies and zines offer queer people the opportunity to perform and articulate their subjectivity, make themselves (in)visible, and also resist being involuntarily looked at and seen as a fixed subject.

Keywords:

Pride, queer gaze, self-representation, selfies, zines