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# BLOWING UP the **BRAND**

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON PROMOTIONAL CULTURE

EDITED BY MELISSA ARONCZYK AND DEVON POWERS



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## The Consuming Self

### From Flappers to Facebook<sup>1</sup>

*Jefferson Pooley*

This chapter argues that we ought to revisit a rich, half-neglected tradition of thinking on the twentieth century consuming self. This includes figures like David Riesman, Philip Rieff, Daniel Bell, Warren Susman, Erich Fromm, Jackson Lears, and Christopher Lasch. Their accounts overlap; they clash too, but in revealing ways. They do not form anything like a self-conscious school, but there are family resemblances among them. At the very least, this body of work is good to think with, but it is my stronger claim that when read charitably, in an imagined conversation with one another, they have identified the contradiction that is at the core of the modern American self. That contradiction could be summed up as: Be true to yourself; it is to your strategic advantage.

In describing this self, some of the thinkers—Lears, Rieff, Bell, and Lasch especially—stress the new yearning for individual self-fulfillment through authentic experience. We are called on, say Lears and the others, to embark on quests of self-discovery that promise to affirm our uniqueness. This deeply felt demand is tapped into, but also intensified and rechanneled, by the self-improvement industries and especially advertising. For Lears and the others, the consumer-culture form that self-fulfillment takes on is shot through with contradiction. It is shallow, narcissistic, and not at all authentic.

Some of the other thinkers invoked here—notably Fromm and Riesman—place the accent elsewhere: on performance. They show how we are called upon to stage-manage the impressions we give off to others as the essential toolkit for success. Whether a passing conversation or the lifelong stewardship of one's "brand," we face an injunction to present our selves in a flattering light. As Fromm draws out most vividly, this involves a certain

detachment from oneself, as a project to be managed and promoted. To Fromm and Riesman, we are all marketers and salesmen.

There are obvious tensions between these two injunctions: to find and express your true self but also to carefully curate your impressions. Each of the thinkers invoked above—whether they stress performance or self-fulfillment—registers this tension. Perhaps Warren Susman's account of what he calls the "culture of personality" best captures the self's Janus-faced aspect: as early as the 1920s, Susman (1979) argues, the new "personality" ideal joined yearning for authentic experience to calculated self-promotion, with a focus on the conscious staging of an attractive exterior.

Promotion and authenticity are deeply interwoven into the fabric of the ideal American self, even if they make for an oxymoronic coupling. The thinkers referred to above do make this point, but they do not really trace the "prehistory"—nor the ongoing dynamism—of these dueling injunctions. For that prehistory, we might turn to Charles Taylor's (1989) account of the self's sources; and to Lionel Trilling (1972) for the dynamism.

The contradiction between self-promotion and expressive distinction, bound up as it is with a highly adaptive market economy, is in fact self-feeding. That is, the pervasiveness of what might be called "calculated authenticity" leads, as Trilling shows, to rejectionist forms of authenticity—*real* authenticity, untainted by the professional smile and the glad hand. These flights to deeper kinds of authenticity are, however, marketed in turn—returned, that is, to the promotional fold. The result can be thought of as an "authenticity bind," as I discuss below.

In the conclusion, this analysis is applied to Facebook, the social networking site founded in 2004. The self that is performed on Facebook is beset by the same dueling injunctions that Lears and the rest identify with the rise of a consumer culture. Facebook is especially fit for the arts of expressive self-performance; indeed, this chapter highlights some of its distinct aspects, including the fact that performer and audience are mutually aware of the performance *as* performance. On Facebook, self-disclosure is by definition managed, and we all know it. It's the song of myself, but with the lyrics tapped out very carefully. It is, with apologies to Lewis Hyde, extroversion with a motive. In the artful profile photo, in the status update witticism, we find the same contradiction between authenticity and promotion—only intensified.

### The Cultural Contradictions of Consumerism

There is something absurd about the sheer number of adjectives that scholars have affixed to the word "self": commodity, therapeutic, other-directed, plural, postmodern, protean, empty, belabored, branded, performing, market, minimal, narcissistic. There are others: punctual, expressive, dramatized, homeless, consuming. It's a messy, cross-disciplinary literature, and the temptation to fasten yet another adjective onto that inviting word can be overpowering—if only to impose some order on a topic of extraordinary complexity. The half-neologisms abound, each new one getting lost in a Babel-like din—which, paradoxically, offers a license for thesis overreach.

This chapter isolates just two strands of an impossibly tangled yarn of selfhood. Even *that* twisted mess, if it could be untangled, is particular—a product of a specific history, the modern West's, and, in the form under discussion here, the United States. To take the point further: this mode of selfhood wasn't lodged in each and every American's head from birth. Most of the figures referred to here describe the ways that particular aspects of this self emerged first among the relatively well off, and then trickled down unevenly over the course of the twentieth century. The chapter mainly discusses the self in an ungendered way, without reference to other kinds of difference—and without considering the effects of migration and contact with non-Western modes of selfhood.<sup>2</sup>

Qualified in this way, the history of American consumer culture helps to explain some of the contradictions of self-fulfillment. In particular, there is that body of literature produced from the late 1940s to the early 1980s: Erich Fromm's *Man for Himself* (1947), David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), Philip Rieff's *The Triumph of the Therapeutic* (1966), Daniel Bell's *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976), Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* (1978), Warren Susman's "'Personality' in the Making of Twentieth Century Culture" (1979), and Jackson Lears's *No Place of Grace* (1981). These authors are nearly all sociologists and historians, whose books were very often bestsellers though unevenly influential. With the partial exceptions of Susman and Lears, none of them is much read anymore. They advance broadly resonant arguments, though they are not anything like a self-conscious school. If it's a tradition, it is a partially invented and fractious one. But there are traceable lines of influence.

What the authors have in common is a loosely overlapping argument about the emergence, in twentieth-century America, of a "therapeutic

ethos.”<sup>3</sup> An older culture—normally placed in the nineteenth century—had emphasized thrift, restraint, and self-control. It was a “bootstrap” ideal of delayed gratification—the Protestant ethic so aptly summarized in Benjamin Franklin’s ([1793] 2003) list of 13 virtues. By the 1920s, a new individualism had supplanted the denialist ideal, one focused on self-realization and expressions of vitality. This “gospel of self-fulfillment,” as Rieff (1966: 251) called it, preached release and psychic health.

Common to all these works is the claim that social structure and character are bound up with one another—a major theme of the undergraduate University of Chicago course that Rieff, Bell, and Riesman taught together in the late 1940s and early 1950s.<sup>4</sup> The shift, in particular, from an economy oriented around production to one dependent on consumption—nineteenth-century scarcity to twentieth-century abundance—is crucial for each account. A new, aspirational advertising culture adopted and adapted the spirit of self-fulfillment for its promotion of consumer goods. The drive to realize oneself was not confined to consumption as such but found expression across a range of twentieth-century cultural phenomena: in pop psychology, liberal Protestantism, entertainment media, celebrity worship, and self-help literature. The authors writing in the 1970s and early 1980s saw the self-fulfillment ideal in aspects of the New Left, in the counterculture, in the human-potential movement, in management literature, and in the spread of New Age spirituality. The old producerist ethic had long since been replaced by the credit card and the bikini.

This “therapeutic ethos” tradition is very keen to point to the ways that our twentieth-century questing for self-fulfillment is shot through with contradiction. As Lears and the rest want to say, so much of our seeking after personal meaning ends up in the consumption of “fulfillment” that’s prepackaged, mass-produced, and shallow. We assemble our identities with the colorful, store-bought baubles of the consumer culture and channel our energies into prettifying our exteriors. What’s worse is that much of this self-absorption is taken up as a strategic command: you will succeed if you carefully cultivate a charming persona. As Bell, Susman, and the rest see it, we are very far indeed from the authentic self-realization that is the culture’s stated ideal.

Yet there is one glaring mismatch among these works, on the important question of explanation. That is, what exactly brought about the transition from self-denial to self-gratification? The weakest accounts rely on an underarticulated functionalism—the idea that new social and economic orders

somehow generate just that modal self that suits them best. Rieff blames errant, libertine intellectuals. Riesman points to large-scale demographic shifts. Some of the authors—notably Lasch and Bell—aren’t even internally consistent about what has driven the shift. Nearly all of them, however, at least gesture toward the experience of rapid and disorienting social change in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; for Lears and Susman, especially, this is the primary factor.

They have in mind the whole bundle of social changes often summed up as the transition from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*. The rise of the bureaucratic state, with its rational-legal tentacles. The late industrial revolution, with the uprooting of primary communities—“whole populations conjured out of the ground,” as Marx put it—bound for the city and the factory floor ([1848] 2002): 225). Social life increasingly governed by contract, exchange, and expediency—Carlyle’s “cash nexus” ([1839] 1971): 199). The sped-up pace of life, helped along by rapid technological change from the railroad to the telegraph. The explosion of visual stimuli brought on by new image technologies like the photograph and the motion picture—Daniel Boorstin’s (1962) “graphic revolution.” A new national market, populated by transcontinental corporations, financial institutions, and department stores. Though with much longer and more complicated histories, the claims, too, of scientific rationality and the decline in religious certainty—what Max Weber referred to as the “disenchantment of the world” (1946: 155).

It is the *experience* of living through these changes that Susman, Lears, and the others count as significant. Especially the pace of change itself: the ceaseless flux of modern life generated by a world without clear limits yielded disorientation, anomic, and unease. The new prominence of impersonal exchange and faceless bureaucracy gave rise to a sense of impotence, amplified by the jostle of urban life. As Georg Simmel observed, the city brought on an “intensification of nervous stimulation,” and with it “swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli” ([1903] 1950: 410). To Lears especially, these conditions, along with the loosening grip of religion, generated a sense of weightlessness and unreality, mainly among the upper classes.

The claim by Lears et al. is that the older, fixed ethic of self-control could not cope with the new anxiety. A yearning for intense, vital experience—often but not always articulated in personal terms—was expressed around the turn of the century in a number of places, including liberal Prot-

estantism, the new therapeutic professions, and (in the early years of the twentieth century) on film screens and in the dance halls. A growing consumer economy harnessed itself to this longing for personal fulfillment, in part by speaking to public anxieties in the language of story-driven advertising. The result was the "democratization of desire," as William Leach calls it (1993: 4–5)—a kind of unfulfilling fulfillment in which felt needs are only momentarily sated, and require still more short-lived relief in endless cycles of consumption and surface-level reinvention.

It is worth talking about this "therapeutic ethos" tradition because I believe they got it mostly right. Lasch and the others are correct, in part, that we have been rolling around in a more or less shallow mud-pit of debased self-fulfillment for almost a hundred years.<sup>5</sup> They are also right in their claim that the anxieties and weightlessness of turn-of-the-century life produced a yearning for personal meaning—and they are right, too, that a consumer-driven market economy responded, in profitable ways, to those intensely felt needs.

But the "therapeutic ethos" tradition also got it wrong; in certain respects they went too far, and in others they did not go far enough. They went too far because they largely ignore the way in which that nineteenth-century ethic of self-denial, and the twentieth-century drive for self-fulfillment are both genuine moral ideals. These ethics have a long history, and they continue to resonate as moral ideals—not as the products of a J. Walter Thompson bull session.

The "therapeutic ethos" theorists did not go far *enough* because they did not consider key implications of the self-fulfillment culture's contradictions. In his 1989 magnum opus *Sources of the Self*, Taylor provides a sweeping and astonishingly rich account of the development of the Western self. His method is perhaps too dependent on exemplary thinkers—Montaigne shouting, across the valley of centuries, to Rousseau—but he insists, and mostly follows through, on his claim that the currents he is following are often generated in, and manifest themselves at, the level of everyday life (see Taylor: Ch. 12).

Taylor identifies two powerful moral ideals that have evolved out of the history of the modern West, especially since the seventeenth century. The two ideals—self-responsible freedom and expressivism—map on very nicely to that nineteenth-century ethic of self-mastery and the twentieth-century self-fulfillment imperative, respectively.

Taylor traces the first ideal, of self-responsible freedom, to Rene Descartes and his crucial detachment of the self from the body and the rest of the material world. Only by looking inward, to the rational mind, can we secure knowledge and proof of God's existence. To Taylor, the next important step was John Locke's and involved extending disengagement and control to one's own self. This ideal of self-objectification is what C. B. Macpherson (1962), in a nastier tone, refers to as "possessive individualism," which he also finds exemplified in Locke. This ideal of disengaged, self-responsible freedom informed the radical Enlightenment and various strands of liberal thought and stresses our dignity as self-transforming agents.

The other ideal, expressivism, depended too on the turn inward, but emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in part as a reaction *against* disengaged rationality. The ideal, anticipated by Rousseau but fully articulated by German Romantics like Johann Herder, depends on the idea that we have inner depths that are unique to each of us. In order to discover my originality, I need to explore these depths and express—give voice to—what I find there. "Being true to myself means being true to my own originality," summarizes Taylor, "and that is something only I can articulate and discover" (1992: 28–29). Taylor calls this "expressivism," or the ethic of authenticity—and in his view that ideal animates the twentieth-century culture of self-fulfillment, including what he calls its "most degraded, absurd, or trivialized forms" (29).

There is a reason—or really a pair of reasons—why this back story matters. First, thinking about authenticity as a pre-existing moral ideal fills a hole in the story told by the therapeutic ethos tradition: in those accounts, the drive for self-fulfillment comes off as always already debased and seems—despite impressive intellectual gymnastics—to come out of nowhere. A more convincing explanation is that an already resonant moral ideal, expressivism, was adapted to cope with the wrenching social change that Lears and Susman describe. The expressivist ideal—giving voice to one's uniqueness—offered a solution to the problems of anonymity and the cash nexus. What's missing in Taylor is what Lasch and the rest provide: an account of how and why the drive to realize oneself came, in fact, to be trivialized.

The second reason why the back story matters is that, as Taylor points out, reports of the Protestant ethic's death have been greatly exaggerated, certainly by Lasch and the others. We are indeed, as Bell himself concedes with puzzlement, "workers by day and swingers by night" (1979: xxv).

It is my view that the two ideals—the expressivist and the possessive—are locked in a tight embrace, and that the market has a bear hug around both. The result is that we are asked to find ourselves but at the same time to work on ourselves. The injunction to explore and realize one's true self is hopelessly mixed up with the demand to treat oneself as an object. There is an obvious contradiction here. The culture's advice often takes this form: the best way to work on yourself is to consciously cultivate an authentic persona. Authenticity, in other words, is presented as a means to the end of promotion. The result is a potent and contradictory cocktail of self-promotion and expressive distinction, stirred by the self-improvement industries, the therapeutic professions, and especially advertising. This is why, everywhere we look, we see instances of what I call *calculated authenticity*.

If this is right, it helps explain an otherwise puzzling tension in the "therapeutic ethos" tradition. Many of the authors, notably Lears, Bell, Rieff, and Lasch, highlight self-absorption and even solipsism—the "pursuit of happiness to the dead end of a narcissistic preoccupation with the self," in Lasch's words (1978: 21).

But another strand in the tradition, best represented by Fromm and Riesman, points instead to a heightened sensitivity to *others*—not to one's self. Fromm (1947) calls it the "marketing orientation," and he means that we are called on to sell ourselves on the "personality market"—to develop those features which "can best be sold" (69, 77). This quality results from our experience of ourselves, Fromm says, as "the seller *and* the commodity to be sold" (70). Riesman's concept of "other-direction" is an admitted reformulation of Fromm's "marketing personality," though shorn of its Marxist roots.<sup>6</sup> Riesman's "other-directed" type, who he takes to be dominant, has a finely calibrated radar to pick up others' signals, and adjusts his behavior accordingly.

These two strands of the "therapeutic ethos" tradition reflect the two sides of that tight embrace mentioned above: to promote oneself, but as an attractive and sincere being. Warren Susman, alone among the "therapeutic ethos" scholars, brings these two strands together in his classic 1979 article. He contrasts a nineteenth-century "culture of character" with a twentieth-century "culture of personality," by comparing what we would call self-help literature from the late 1800s with the teens and twenties. In the first period he finds words like "work," "duty," and "integrity" throughout the advice manuals, but by the 1920s a new vocabulary—"fascinating," "glowing," "creative"—had taken its place. The new self-help literature instructed read-

ers to stage-manage an attractive front, through grooming, dress, and a charming personality. Susman summarizes the new message: "One is to be unique, be distinctive, follow one's own feelings, make oneself stand out from the crowd, and at the same time appeal—by fascination, magnetism and attractiveness—to it" (289). It is, of course, a contradictory message, but a pervasive one—and arguably the main theme of twentieth-century advertising.

### Calculated Authenticity and Its Discontents

Nowhere is the blend of strategic performance with the trappings of authenticity on more vivid display than in Dale Carnegie's 1936 *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, which remains in print today after 16 million sales. Under the banner "Six ways to make people like you," Carnegie instructs readers to "Become genuinely interested in other people," and to "Make the other person feel important—and do it sincerely" ([1936] 1982: 105). This is what I have been calling calculated authenticity. It's the glad hand; it's what David Foster Wallace called the "professional smile" (1996: 43n15). It's the off-the-cuff joke that's rehearsed. It's being, in short, instrumental about authenticity. Think of Apple's "Here's to the Crazy Ones" ads,<sup>7</sup> or Pepsi's Obama-knock-off bus wraps, complete with "Hope" and "Together" in the proper font. Calculated authenticity is marketing Burt's Bees as mom-and-pop long after it's part of Clorox (Whitfill 2009). It's Tom Peters exhorting his readers to imitate the black church. It's Steven Covey imploring managers to recognize employees as "whole persons" rather than as "things"—because things take time and money to motivate.<sup>8</sup> It's the normalization of plastic surgery. It's what Arlie Hochschild (1983) has called "emotional labor"—training employees to act perky, for example. It's promoting already signed artists on YouTube with grainy, living-room video, as Hollywood Records has done recently (Smith and Lattman 2007). It's stealth person-to-person marketing. Even the "benign fabrications" (Goffman 1974: 87) that we are compelled to make in everyday interaction—the shifting, audience-dependent performances that we enact dozens of times a week—force us all, arguably, into the role of bit-part glad-handers.<sup>9</sup>

Here's where Trilling comes in. His 1972 book *Sincerity and Authenticity* is a brilliant meditation on *deep* authenticity, which he sees as a flight from the inauthentic sort. As he writes,

Society requires of us that we present ourselves as being sincere, and the most efficacious way of satisfying this demand is to see to it that we really are sincere, that we actually are what we want our community to know we are. In short, we play the role of being ourselves, we sincerely act the part of the sincere person, with the result that a judgment may be passed upon our sincerity that it is not authentic (10).

What Trilling captures is the disgust that all the bad faith provokes. Deep authenticity, he argues, is a rejectionist ideal—a “cosmic defiance” of the “coercive inauthenticity of society” (99, 168). His view is that the reaction can take two distinct forms. The first is to reject society outright—to deal “aggressively with received and habitual opinion” (94). He points to the “mocking laughter” (130) of some modernist art, as well as the extremist offshoots of New Left protest. There is something nihilist and violent—a psychopathic and Promethean isolation—in the repudiation that deep authenticity calls for (167–168).

Trilling is much more accepting of the second kind of response, an ultimately serious form of irony. He calls it the “doctrine of masks,” which he reads in Oscar Wilde’s playful dismissals of sincerity (118–120). “Man is least himself when he talks in his own person,” said Wilde. “Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth” (qtd. in Trilling 1972: 119). The idea is that irony, with its engaged disengagement, is more authentic than the sincere expression of insincerity.

Trilling’s account of deep authenticity helps us to understand the range of responses to what we might think of as the colonization of the apparently earnest. We can build on his insights without assuming, as Trilling seems to, that the rejectionist impulse need issue in the Weathermen or the embrace of insanity. Softer forms of rejection are all around us, most notably in various youth subcultures. Indie college radio, or the rave scene that Sarah Thornton (1996) studied, draw on a vocabulary of deep authenticity—identities contingent on a contrast with a mainstream “sellout” culture. There is a “community of the saved,” last remnant character to many subcultures but without the cult of holy madness that Trilling fears.

Trilling also helps us to re-interpret the pervasive ironic stance in American cultural life in deep authenticity terms. The irony we encounter isn’t necessarily as high-minded as Oscar Wilde’s, but even the “air quotes” sarcasm, as Joshua Glenn (1998) calls it, of much hipster culture can be read as a defensive gesture—a fear of being taken in by the apparently earnest.

For all of Trilling’s insight, it is perhaps less important to fret over rejectionist nihilism than over the market’s uncanny ability to incorporate these

softer forms of deep authenticity. As Thomas Frank (1997a, 1997b, 2000) has shown in his hilarious and sobering send-ups of “liberation marketing,” capitalism rides these waves of dissent because restless innovation and the great refusal, properly filtered, bolster the bottom line. Dionysus is welcomed with enthusiasm into the boardroom, mainly because apocalyptic moods and antirational modes of behavior sell emphatically well. Frank has repeatedly documented the widespread uptake of what he calls the “countercultural idea” in marketing and the rest of mainstream popular culture. The hip versus square contrast with gray-flanneled, 1950s-styled organization men is a well-established advertising trope. In his essay “Why Johnny Can’t Dissent,” Frank (1997a) concludes:

The people who staff the Combine aren’t like Nurse Ratched. They aren’t Frank Burns, they aren’t the Church Lady, they aren’t Dean Wormer from *Animal House*, they aren’t those repressed old folks in the commercials who want to ban Tropicana Fruit Twisters. They’re hipper than you can ever hope to be because hip is their official ideology, and they’re always going to be there at the poetry reading to encourage your “rebellion” with a hearty “right on, man!” before you even know they’re in the auditorium. You can’t outrun them, or even stay ahead of them for very long: it’s their racetrack, and that’s them waiting at the finish line to congratulate you on how outrageous your new style is, on how you shocked those stuffy prudes out in the heartland (44–45).

In some respects, the market is merely answering our yearning for the authentic in an inauthentic culture. It’s also true, as Marshall Berman (1982) argues, that the very logic of competition and profit seeking has an anti-nomian character. Capitalism, he writes,

...requires constant revolutionizing, disturbance, agitation; it needs to be perpetually pushed and pressed in order to maintain its elasticity and resilience, to appropriate and assimilate new energies, to drive itself to new heights of activity and growth. This means, however, that men and movements that proclaim their enmity to capitalism may be just the sort of stimulants capitalism needs (1982: 117–118).

If deep authenticity is all about “dealing aggressively with received and habitual opinion,” as Trilling (94) claims, we can’t ignore that the market is singularly good at melting solids into air.

The ironic stance, too, is susceptible to market repackaging, in the form of Old Navy ads and celebrity fare like *Best Week Ever*, or even the humble Snuggie. As the *New York Times* revealed (Newman 2009), the company behind the wearable blanket deliberately deployed the Chia Pet-style cheesy infomercial. It was, in other words, a self-conscious attempt to trigger hipster parody and ironic uptake. Its sales figures suggest the tactic has worked



brilliantly. In a similar vein, David Foster Wallace's essay on television and postmodern fiction salutes the idealistic irony of an earlier generation of postmodern novelists but despairs that the hip irony of younger novelists has been "absorbed, emptied and redeployed by the very televisual establishment that [the first generation] had originally set themselves athwart" (1993: 184). Wallace finds himself glancing back, wistfully, at what he calls "single-entendre values" (192).

The result of these contradictions is an "authenticity bind." What I mean is that the tension between the self-fulfillment ideal and the injunction to work on oneself as an object is a *productive contradiction*. That tension, as we've seen, yields a calculated authenticity that is then amplified by the market, in advertising and self-help culture. The felt need for authenticity remains unmet and leads at least some of us to go deeper in search of the real thing. But the coolhunters are never too far behind, and the rejectionist strands of authenticity get peddled back to us—thereby rendering those deeper strands inauthentic too. One can imagine the pattern repeating, as a kind of self-feeding cycle. As Hochschild wrote, "the more the heart is managed, the more we value the unmanaged heart" (1983: 192).

This talk of authenticity and the unmanaged heart may appear hopelessly naive. To refer to "calculated" authenticity is to imply that there is a meaningful opposite in the form of "real" authenticity, a claim that can bring our sighs of frustration. To be clear, I am not claiming that "real" authenticity exists nor that the ideal is written into the human soul. Expressivism is the product of a specific history; if it has a hold on us, it is not because of some universal human need. Academics are often driven by a denaturalizing zeal, quick to unmask the putatively natural as historical and contingent. This is all for the good, but there's also a corrosive edge to that unmasking, which implicitly discredits the thing that has been revealed as historical and contingent. Yes, the ethic of authenticity is a product of history, but that does not mean that we should dismiss its claims on us. It has become a widely resonant moral ideal; it is part of who we are. Admitting this much allows us to develop an immanent critique—to point to the ways that our culture of self-fulfillment contradicts the moral ideal it purports to express. We can point to internal contradictions but also to contradictions between expressivism and other deeply felt ideals, like the strand of self-governing freedom discussed above. As we have seen, the picture is made more complicated because the market has a parasitic relationship with both

ideals, which in the case of authenticity leads to increasingly desperate forms of expression.

### Facebook and the Consuming Self

All of this is a prelude to a brief, concluding discussion of Facebook. The rapidly growing social networking site recently added its 350 millionth member, and its estimated value is more than \$6 billion (Oreskovic 2009). If you do not already have a Facebook account, you have no doubt been exhorted to sign up by friends and family. It is, at this point, nearly impossible to hold out; Farhad Manjoo (2009), writing recently in *Slate*, even accused non-Facebookers of an affectation—akin to the cellphone holdouts of a few years back.

In my view, the expressivist/self-promotional cocktail is a fundamental aspect of the Facebook experience. The site may also be a great platform for activism, a site for new kinds of interaction, and certainly an efficient way to reconnect with old friends. But it is also a calculated authenticity machine, where we are asked to carefully curate our identities.

All social interaction is performative; there is no such thing as a nonperformative, "authentic" self-disclosure, on Facebook or in person. Rather, I am interested in the ways that Facebook provides a new space for a particular *kind* of performance, expressed by Susman's "culture of personality"—that unhappy blend of authenticity, self-promotion, and the modern experience of anonymity. This chapter intends to argue against the claim, made by danah boyd and others, that Facebook and social media have ushered in a *new form* of sociality. Instead it stresses the continuities in the performance of identity throughout the modern American consumer culture. At the same time, it points to features of Facebook that serve to *amplify* the already potent "culture of personality" ideal.

Facebook has evolved dramatically over the last few years, but its invitation to present a magnetic, distinctive self has remained an open one. The most obvious space for this on the site is the profile itself, the place for various kinds of personality disclosures: favorite music, interests, TV shows, quotations, and so on. In a straightforward way, we populate these fields to project the identity that we want others to take in. When we list *Little Miss Sunshine* as our favorite movie or *Catcher in the Rye* as the book we most treasure, we are creating a literal "personality" profile, in a series of



inescapably self-conscious acts. The implicit demand is to present oneself as interesting and distinctive.

The static profile has, however, been largely displaced by the newsfeed—the fast-moving stream of status updates, tagged photos, quiz results, clip postings, and mafia results. The newsfeed is a much more dynamic, real-time performance, a frequently refreshed advertisement for oneself. All of this represents, as many others have noted, the Twitterization of Facebook, up to and including the newer option to take one's page public.

Consider the care with which users tap out their status updates. The *Times* video critic calls them "spontaneous bursts of being" (Heffernan 2009). Instead it seems that there is a kind of wittiness imperative. Or witness the speedy cycle of profile photo replacement, and the virus-like spread of the "25 random things about me" chain postings. Or Facebook's most intriguing aspect: the conversations that take place on users' "Walls" in response to a status update—in which one-to-one or one-to-a-few chats are broadcast to the whole community of friends. On Facebook, close to two thirds of communication between users takes this "pubversational" form, as opposed to private chats (boyd 2007).

Even the profile photo has taken on the character of a status update. Many users replace their profile shots regularly, often as an allusion to a recent event or as a visual proclamation of fun-loving zaniness. Photos, more broadly, have become the indispensable vehicle for self-disclosure on the site. Isn't it true that parties are, first and foremost, photo opportunities? Forty-five years ago, Daniel Boorstin wrote about pseudo-events: gatherings staged for the press that, he claimed, were only ambiguously real. Like Boorstin's politicians, revelers sometimes seem less interested in fellow partygoers than in the snapshot-viewing Facebook audience to come.

Two aspects of Facebook in particular have the practical effect of intensifying its self-consciously performative character. Both can be drawn out by comparing the site to Erving Goffman's analysis of face-to-face interaction. Goffman observes that we are called on to present ourselves in a number of distinct contexts in our everyday lives (1959: 48–49). Such "audience segregation" requires that we tailor our performances according to the current audience; that is, our roles shift when we leave a job interview to hang out with friends. He also proposes a contrast between *frontstage* and *backstage* regions (106–140). The backstage is inaccessible to the audience; it is the

space where performers can step out of character. For Goffman, this is a relative distinction, since any backstage with two or more people has a performative aspect.

It is clear that Facebook, to some extent at least, disrupts these features of everyday performance. In *No Sense of Place* (1985), Joshua Meyrowitz made a parallel argument about television. On Facebook, the audience is no longer neatly segregated; your boss, your mother, and your best friend are all reading your status updates and viewing your photos. It is true that the site enables you to manipulate its privacy settings to prevent your mother from clicking on the keg-stand photo, but most Facebook users do not take advantage of these settings (Debatin et al. 2009: 85–86; Tuunainen et al. 2009). As danah boyd (2006) has observed, there is now one big audience containing hundreds of spectators from every corner of your life; but it is in effect invisible. On Facebook, we are all invited backstage—or at least to a loosely patrolled middle-stage.

There is another important difference between Facebook and everyday interaction offline. In face-to-face settings, there is a great deal of apparent spontaneity—what Goffman calls "presumably uncalculated behavior" (1959: 8). Facial expressions, hand gestures, and even certain kinds of speech are typically treated as unrehearsed—even if, as Goffman notes, they may well be. On Facebook, by contrast, there is no apparent spontaneity. We are all—newsfeed reader and status-updater alike—aware that each update is a conscious act. There is, in other words, a mutual awareness of performance *as performance*.

Some of this comes out in the advice to be a careful custodian of your online brand—because if you don't then Google will (see, for example, Tugend 2009). More to the point, the mutual awareness factor means that, even if you *are* interesting and distinctive, you are still forced to self-consciously present those traits. Everyone knows that everyone else asks the question, "How is that going to look on Facebook?"

Both of these features—the mutual awareness factor and audience de-segregation—help to awaken that rejectionism and refusal that I have referred to as "deep authenticity," if only because they make the contradictions between authenticity and self-promotion more palpable. Obscure band references can signal membership in subcultures, for example, and some users populate their profiles—or update their status—with nonsensical, or deliberately mystifying phrases. Then there are the internal émigrés, the ones who have joined Facebook but are gripped by a kind of

expressive paralysis, who leave their profile fields empty and rarely if ever post a status update. This is a much larger group than we normally acknowledge. The problem is that Facebook obscurantism, Facebook irony, even Facebook refusal are all susceptible to commercial repackaging.

It was inevitable that viral marketers would turn to Facebook, with paid status updates, phony Facebook groups, and sponsored, paid-for gift-giving. A small industry of firms, like PayPerPost and Magpie, pay Facebookers and Twitterers to post ads as status updates. In a tip for posters, PayPerPost (2009) advises: "Advertisers often appreciate personalized experiences as they relate to the topic of the post, too...readers are smart folks—if your content seems insincere, it loses meaning and will lead to lower traffic long term." And the cycle continues: the more the heart is managed, the more we value the unmanaged heart.

## Notes

1. I want to thank the editors, Brooke Duffy, Heidi Khaled, Brett Bumgarner, and Joel Penney for helpful criticism.
2. This is not to hide something particular in universalist packaging. My neglect of difference is, in part, a product of space constraints but also grounded in the fact that most of the broad historical changes I invoke below were experienced across lines of difference, producing similar (if not identical) dilemmas of self-understanding. No doubt the distinct positions that women, or African Americans, or working-class Americans brought to epochal, turn-of-the-century social change led to distinct experiences, but it is my view that most of these relate to timing and the pace of diffusion. Women, for example, were addressed (and imagined) as consumers first and more regularly, so that many of the tensions between authentic expression and self-promotion were, and continue to be, more deeply felt. Even so, Americans of diverse backgrounds have been, over time, recruited unevenly into the same culture of performative self-fulfillment.
3. The "therapeutic ethos" phrase first appeared in Rieff (1966: 254).
4. The class was the legendary "Social Sciences 2" (or "Soc 2"), part of the required social science sequence at the College of the University of Chicago. See the many excellent essays, including Riesman's own reflections, in MacAloon (1992).
5. I say "in part" because, depending on the author, the indictment is stretched too far and made to include too much.
6. In a footnote, Riesman (1950) credits Fromm: "This picture of the other-directed person has been stimulated by, and developed from, Erich Fromm's discussion of the 'marking orientation' in *Man for Himself*" (22).
7. Under the long-running "Think Different" campaign, created by TBWA/Chiat/Day in 1997, two "Crazy Ones" television commercials were widely aired and featured black-and-white images of prominent iconoclasts, including Albert Einstein, Bob Dylan, Martin Luther King, Jr., John Lennon, and many others. The voiceover for the one-minute version begins, "Here's to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers.

The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. They're not fond of rules. And they have no respect for the status quo. You can praise them, disagree with them, quote them, disbelieve them, glorify or vilify them" (see Shields 2001).

8. Peters, in *The Pursuit of Wow!* (1994: 113): "Typically dull white folks (of any denomination) could learn a lot from the best inner-city African-American churches, starting with Reverend Cecil Williams's inspiring, energetic Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco. (Hint, for starters: Glide doesn't have 'services', it has 'celebrations'" (quoted in McGee 2005: 168). Covey (2004: 23): "The point is if you neglect any one of the four parts of human nature, you turn a person into a thing, and what do you do with a thing? You have to control, manage and carrot-and-stick them in order to motivate them" (see 21–25).
9. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman observes: "...there is hardly a performance, in whatever area of life, which does not rely on the personal touch to exaggerate the uniqueness of the transactions between performer and audience" (1959: 50).

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