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[Id]entities as a Multilayered Self

**The Individual Pervasiveness
of Social Networks**

The dissolution of the 'identity' as we used to know it (before the networks) has led to an ongoing fragmented and fast evolution. In a networked society, identities can be formed by extremely varied and juxtaposed layers of what results finally as an "enriched self." In fact, there's a constant mediation that is applied to every single identity through multiple platforms and standards usually identified with the popular "web 2.0" expression. This mediation leads to multiple partial representations of the self in a multilayered form. What happens is that out of the ordinary physical life, our mind has already started to think in these terms. We feel our identity not anymore as an indivisible whole, but as composed of different pieces that are deeply and reciprocally influenced by our online experience. For example it's psychologically challenging that now we're able to retrieve people we should have simply lost in the past (old friend, old boy/girlfriends, etc). This scattered pieces have different shades of transparency, and they are redundant, hosting similar scattered bits of personal content. And the transparency of the self seems to be reflected in different fields. We can find it in the booming of the gossip news production in the last decade that seems to have at least influenced new levels of social transparencies both virtual and real. In the Standard Hotel in Manhattan, for example, most customers are behaving as exhibitionists near the room's big windows facing a popular public park, almost encouraged by the hotel personnel. And what we used to call "avatar" has evolved from an iconic pixelated representation of the physical self (either the real one or the imagined one) into only one of the many virtual layers on which we stratify our public online presence.

Online identities can be typified in a sort of "species" taxonomy. It'd be summarized as: 1. the real person; 2. a real person assuming a famous character and playing as him/her; 3. a real person creating and playing a plausible fictitious character; and finally 4. a computer generated and self-sufficient character. Cheating in the description or the use of an online profile is as common as the projection of a desire or an emotion on a networked environment, and in the end conscious and unconscious emotions are actively building the "enriched self." It's also about the intertwining of the

different relationships that starts to move on the network where the loosely attached piece of the self move onto. Then hundreds of Facebook “friends,” for example, coupled with the offline ones, and the others scattered on the other different platforms are “writing” a sort of automatic narrative that can always be dreamed as “fatally wonderful” at some random point. In this sense “The Big Plot” by Paolo Cirio is a multifaceted plot that intertwines the paths between its four protagonists. The pieces of their respective identities are created not by short descriptions or memory flashbacks as they are in a typical serial narration of a fiction book. They are scattered in different platforms carefully using the respective reference media (video, picture, CVs, bits of personal activities and so on). Actually there’s no software tool able to effectively combine all these different data sets into an (incomplete) human profile, so the user role is both strategic and uniquely revealing. And so the definition of a character becomes so ethereal that any possible manipulation seems to be possible. It’s a whole amount of information just properly structured, but potentially re-combinable ad infinitum. The induced vertigo, then, is of infinite characters misplaced between reality and fiction, infinitely programmed and stitched with real facts and data. So this fast recombination of data and the fast conglomeration of a trustable fictive identity is a process that pushed to the extreme can populate the social networks with patched human-like figures. They should populate the networks, reflecting physical reality and its dynamics, and contributing to shape an online landscape that includes these soon-to-become “extensions” of our daily life. And this leads to the continuously promoted self. In this respect, there’s an induced process of stratifying layers that are artificially connected, owned by corporation licenses, often overlapped and meant to be accumulated through a chimeric currency called “social networks reputation.” But is this implying a real commodification of relationships? Absolutely, even if it’s not a pure commodification. It’s better defined as a bastardization of the beautiful and free spirit of human relationship, shamelessly mixing old friends, fresh self promotion and desperate need to feed self esteem in an overcrowded networked environment. And the border of bastardizing and then eventually commodifying personal relations is easily crossed, inducing a mutual public “profiling” that has no end. The fragile digital identity is then not only scattered around the different identity-related entities, but also shaped around a production of elements that are both personally and randomly collectively generated. And here it lies the biggest potential: intertwining personal and public acts in an inextricable way, in order to build something that is not a “narrative” in strict sense anymore, but a new hybrid that embodies the definitive merging of real life and digital life, with no chance anymore to distinguish one from the other.

References

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