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On the Dissipation of the Authentic

Authenticity as it relates to representation has always been associated with the concept of essence circumscribed, at least in part, by its opposite, non-essence. We have established, quite logically, marked differentiations between essence, purity, truth, and uniqueness, on the one hand, and fusion, hybridity, compromise, and multiplicity, on the other. To Gilles Deleuze, “the primacy of identity, however it may be conceived, defines the world of representation. But the modern world is a world of simulacra where man does not outlive God and where the identity of the subject does not survive that of substance. All identities are simulated, produced in the same way as an optical illusion, by means of a much more profound play between difference and repetition.”¹ This prophetic commentary is an excerpt from the preface to *Différence et répétition*, a work written in 1968, at the height of the student unrest in France – that is, before the inception of virtual reality, before the advent of personal computers, faxes, and global internet communications.

In this mediated world, where our experiences of essence or truth are few and far between, issues pertaining to authenticity often revolve around pragmatic questions of authentication. Are these rhinestones or genuine diamonds? Are these the real fake pearls worn by Jackie Kennedy? Japanese investors are now asking, Is this an authentic Van Gogh or the work of one of his contemporaries? The answer to that question represents fifty million dollars to Yasuda Fire and Marine Insurance Company; in our market-driven society, this is an important measure. In museums around the world, the process of authentication never ceases: famous works are being re-evaluated and, in some cases, devalued, while others are given new status. Even Walter Benjamin could not have foreseen the degree of importance, or preciousness, that this society would ascribe to the aura surrounding an original work of art.

But at the same time, in an era devoted to the simulacrum, the characteristic of originality has but a limited power of attraction. The elite, those with wealth, power, or education, may appreciate and prize the authentic, but it would appear that the vast majority of the Western world would rather be entertained. As Frederic Jameson pointed out, this society seeks its truth in the reassuringly familiar, the cliché. Vast theme parks re-create everything from ancient Egypt in Las Vegas to the Wild West at EuroDisney. To accommodate the flow of tourists, for example, plans have been set in motion to reproduce ancient Rome, in a scaled-down version, just outside present-day Rome.

It would seem that the simulated now holds as much appeal as the real – if not more – that the lines between the two have been blurred. Barbie, for instance, has been a mainstay of the toy industry for several decades, and her popularity is showing no signs of abating. Some have even pushed their admiration of her so far as to modify their own faces and bodies according to her proportions, a daunting task indeed if we consider that as a woman she would be six feet tall and have measurements of 38", 18", and 34". Faced with a growing controversy over Barbie's absurd proportions, the company has issued a new, thicker-waisted doll, one that is more realistic. Collectors have already been quoted as saying that they prefer the original Barbie, and the new realistically proportioned Barbie has been dubbed the New Dumpy Barbie. Does this make the recent modified issue a knock-off? And what of the human Barbie? Which of the two Barbies is real? Is the human one a fake? Is the Barbie doll real?

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And if we were to extend this logic, could performance artist Orlan be viewed as an assemblage of forgeries of famous artworks? At the very least, she is a composite of reproductions. We have come to look upon human appearance as infinitely modifiable, all the more so, because our current icons have few qualms about improving on nature. This is, after all, the age of plastic surgery, a time when states such as California are devoted to the cult of beauty, or to what constitutes the ideal of beauty in the Western world. This is an era when entire countries, such as Argentina, view plastic surgery as an integral part of their health-care systems – where not only models, actors, and politicians, but also a large portion of the general population acquire through surgical means a more acceptable symmetrical appearance, a concept of beauty based on reassuringly familiar ideals.

For the most part, these ideals are based on theories of pleasing and harmonious proportions borrowed from Antiquity, when the concepts of truth and beauty were intermeshed. We should not be surprised that standards of beauty continue to be inspired by Hellenism. Many Hellenistic revivals have occurred throughout the history of Western art; architects such as Vitruvius, with his *De Architectura*, had a profound influence on Renaissance architecture and Western art in general. In the nineteenth century, critic John Ruskin² was among the first to establish the teaching of art history in a European university. Our ties to Hellenism are deeply rooted.

Hellenistic thought has also had a strong influence on the discourse surrounding authenticity. In philosophical terms, most of the early disquisitions on authenticity revolved around the question of truth; Plato thought that if human beings behaved according to a code of authenticity, they would find truth, and through their actions they would partake, as subjective beings, in the discovery of truth and justice. Many centuries later, Martin Heidegger was to rework this question, going beyond the concepts of being and beingness to develop a theory of *destruktion*, a process of dismantling in order to reveal essence. The existentialists took up some of Heidegger's concepts on authenticity and integrated them into their vision of responsibility. Today, Jacques Derrida is one of many philosophers who have re-examined Heidegger's understanding of *Dasein*, as the field of the manifestation of the presence of a being. There is, in fact, a long-standing tradition of conceptualizing the discourse on technology in Heideggerian terms, using the notion of presence and, by extension, its opposite, absence. There are two essays in *Being and Time*, “Modern Science, Metaphysics and Mathematics” and “The Question Concerning Technology,” that theorists have viewed as seminal texts. Heidegger fell into disfavour, in part because it was discovered that he had had ties with the Nazi Party, and in part because of the dissemination of post-structuralist theories to North American universities. These theories were to keep the academic world entranced for at least a decade.³

The eighties were also marked by the advent of the personal computer, a technological tool that would have a profound effect on our habits at work and at play. From this point on, our reliance on technology was to increase exponentially.

A few years ago, Dr. Katherine Hayles gave a talk at Concordia University in which she asked the question, Are we post-human? She also spoke of the paradigm of presence and absence, of how this

paradigm had dominated our analysis and understanding of technology for many years. According to Hayles, mathematicians, scientists, and those involved in the development of virtual-reality systems are now viewing the scientific and technological world in terms of a new paradigm, that of pattern and randomness. Pattern and randomness as a philosophical duality is not new – it is an issue that has been debated since the pre-Socratic philosophers – randomness is now, however, being viewed in a new light. In the eighties, chaos theory, a mathematical theory based on differential equations, gave a better understanding of chaotic motion, but it also redefined the meaning of randomness as having some describable order. In this context, pattern and randomness would therefore be defined as an understanding of the world as divided between obvious and recurrent order, on the one hand, and subtle, inherently context-dependent variations, on the other. Scientists such as Dr. David Bohm say “that the notion of ‘a total lack of order’ has no real meaning.”⁴ Randomness would no longer be considered diametrically opposed to pattern. From this standpoint, could other dichotomies also be viewed as non-antithetical or newly hybridized?

In “Two Lessons from Burroughs,” Steven Shaviro posits that “postmodern biology thus deals not with fixed entities and types, but with recurring patterns and statistical changes in large populations – whether these be populations of genes or populations of organisms.”⁵ And, according to Shaviro, “postmodern biology is increasingly oriented toward what might be called an *insect paradigm*” in which “postmodern bodies are neither ‘vitalistic’ nor ‘mechanistic.’ They are structured through principles of modular interchangeability and serial repetition.”⁶

In the eighties, one brand of science fiction became very popular, devoted to a hybrid being, the cyborg. Though cyborgs had appeared in sci-fi literature before that time, it was not until the publication of such books as *Neuromancer* by William Gibson (1984) or the wide distribution of films such as *Blade Runner*, or *The Terminator* series, that “cyborg” became a household word. If the history of automata goes back to ancient times – their development often derived from mythological texts – the concept of the robotic human has been with us since the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the present one. How has this concept changed? How have human beings been changed by it? According to Hayles, being posthuman would signify being in constant interface with our computers, being dependent on them to the point of no longer being capable of spending a day away from them. I shudder to think of the growing number of us who qualify for this classification.

Fundamentally, though, whatever effect this daily cybercommunity may have on us, we are faced with having to redefine ourselves, and in this society where individuality has always been important we are faced with rethinking our very identity. In her now famous “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” Donna Haraway states that “no objects, spaces, or bodies are sacred in themselves; any component can be interfaced with any other if the proper standard, the proper code, can be constructed for processing signals in a common language.”⁷ Whether these writers and theorists call this paradigm shift *insect* or *pattern and randomness*, they all seem to concur that the concept of the human body as a self-contained and autonomous entity has been replaced. This is perhaps why a large number of contemporary artists are using the body – dead or alive – as a territory for discovery. The body is being fragmented and dissected, sometimes quite literally.

Feminists have long understood the power of imaging the self. Mary Kelly and Luce Irigaray, among others, have been influential in proposing guidelines for the representation, or non-representation, of women. In Canada, investigations on and around this topic were carried out in the seventies and eighties by a large contingent of feminist artists, such as Kati Campbell, Martha Fleming and Lyne Lapointe,

Tanya Mars, Mary Scott, and Lisa Steele, to name but a few. Younger artists are also currently working in this vein; Anette Larson’s work with self-portraiture is a case in point. In the world of art, the body as subject has gone mainstream, a trend so conspicuous that *The Globe and Mail* devoted an entire page to it recently. In Robert Enright’s article, Geneviève Cadieux, Donnigan Cummings, Orlan (of course), Andres Serrano, Cindy Sherman, Diana Thorneycroft, and Joel-Peter Witkin are cited as examples. For the most part, these artists represent the body as contaminated, invaded, putrefied, altered, sometimes violently disassembled and reassembled. There is no doubt that some of these images are deeply disturbing, that many may find them shocking; however, the abject does exert a fascination over us. Perhaps what is most frightening to us is the loss of definition, of fixed points of reference, of boundaries for the body and its representation.

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva elucidated the phenomenon of seduction and repulsion that human beings experience in the face of the abject. Kristeva devotes an entire chapter to the importance of the boundary between what is outside the body and what is inside, what it contains. Spillage is thus viewed as a transgression around which the Christian faith has constructed elaborate rituals of sublimation. In the Western world, this boundary has been a long-standing taboo; its dissipation is bound to illicit fear or, at the very least, discomfort. If we cannot define the boundaries of our bodies, or our bodies themselves as finite individual entities, how are we to define the essence of being, or authenticity for that matter? Or should we simply let go of the concept altogether? Steven Shaviro seems to believe that our theoretical constructs are already indicative of this. In “Two Lessons from Burroughs,” he states,

Postmodern biology . . . tends to emphasize anomalous phenomena like retroviral infections and horizontal gene transfers; in such encounters, alteration “ceases to be hereditary filiative evolution, becoming communicative or contagious” (Deleuze and Guattari). Postmodern biology moves directly between singularities without identity and population multiplicities, without having recourse either to intervening, mediating terms, or to overarching structural orders. It rejects the “holism” formerly attributed both to the individual organism and to the larger ecosystem.⁸

What remains to be seen is whether we will embrace this vision of ourselves, whether we will feel any nostalgia for the authentic or any regret for its dissipation.

Francine Dagenais

1. Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1972, 2^e ed.), p. 1 (translation).
2. Ruskin was first Slade professor at Oxford and first professor of art in England. During this time, other universities in Europe were also establishing art history as a distinct discipline, and all were under the fascination of Hellenism.
3. In the late seventies and early eighties, Paul de Man’s theories on deconstruction swept across North America. After his death, in 1983, de Man himself was found to have had a literary column in a pro-Nazi newspaper between 1940 and 1942. As a result, his work, like Heidegger’s, is being reassessed.
4. David Bohm and F. David Peat, *Science, Order, and Creativity* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), p. 127.
5. Steven Shaviro, “Two Lessons from Burroughs,” in *Posthuman Bodies*, ed. Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 50–51.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
7. Donna Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s,” *Socialist Review* 80 (1985): 65–107.
8. Shaviro, “Two Lessons from Burroughs,” p. 49.