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7 *From Authenticity to Proflicity:*
8 *A Critical Response to Roberto Simanowski*
9 *and Others*
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14 Paul J. D'Ambrosio and Hans-Georg Moeller
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Some see the internet as an outlet for more or less accurate “self-representation,” while others think that it drastically alters who we are and how we interact with the world around us.¹ Many of those who think that using the internet changes us caution that it often does so for the worse. Although those are perhaps the loudest voices, the new media also has its defenders and, of course, the billions of daily participants who, at least in practice, go along with the idea that the internet might not be so bad. In this article we seek to provide a more accurate diagnosis of some wider social changes reflected by internet usage. We think that the increasing significance of online *and offline* profiles indicates nothing short of a paradigm change going beyond the debate over potential harms or benefits of widespread internet use.

Roberto Simanowski is one of the most philosophically engaging theorists working on the relationship between the internet and the humans who communicate through it. Though he is firmly in the “The internet changes us,

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1. In the first group, see Thompson, *Smarter Than You Think*; and Walker-Rettberg, *Seeing Ourselves through Technology*. In the second, see Carr, *Glass Cage*; Carr, *Shallows*; Turkle, *Alone Together*; and Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*.

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1 and not always for the better” camp, his article “Instant Selves: Algorithmic
2 Autobiographies on Social Network Sites” (2017) and his book *Facebook*
3 *Society: Losing Ourselves in Sharing Ourselves* (2018) are representative of
4 the most penetrating insights this field has to offer. In these texts Simanowski
5 is concerned with how the internet transforms our understanding of ourselves,
6 others, and the world—or our “identity.” Three key concepts summarize his
7 standpoint: instant selves, episodic selves, and the Facebook eye. The first,
8 instant selves, expresses the idea that online algorithms narrate our lives for
9 us. We are now less likely to reflect deeply on our experiences and therefore
10 prone to compose our life stories mindlessly and sporadically. Social media
11 constantly presents ready-made and intermittent narratives. The lack of contin-
12 uous narratives fragments our identity and provides us eventually with episodic
13 selves. Encouraged by social media’s abridged storytelling formats, we more
14 and more live as tourists, hopping from one experience to the next with only
15 thinly construed coherence. Thus reality is seen through a Facebook eye—
16 relationships are dissected, experiences are split apart, and the world is pre-
17 sented and seen in terms of what promises to garner the most “likes.”

18 These three notions provide valuable insights into the way the digital rev-
19 olution affects human life. However, they are each narrow in taking into
20 account only certain direct and more readily apparent effects of the internet
21 and its associated technologies. In this article we offer avenues for expanding
22 these insights.

23 First, we believe that Simanowski’s three concepts all reflect an
24 authenticity-based value system. The notions of an instant and episodic self
25 critically imply that self-reflectiveness and self-coherence are in danger of
26 being lost in social media communication. This, in turn, implies the desirabil-
27 ity of a more real and less virtual, a more complete and less shattered, a more
28 profound and less random self—in other words, a self that is deeply grounded
29 in itself and thereby self-sustaining. Such a conception of an original and inde-
30 pendent self, however, is neither timeless nor universally applicable. It is a con-
31 tingent conception of the self rooted in the recent “age of authenticity,” to use
32 Charles Taylor’s expression.²

33 Second, the notion of the Facebook eye suggests that concern with public
34 appreciation in the form of “likes” is a product of the social media. Speaking
35 of a “Facebook society” similarly indicates that Facebook, or social media,
36 single-handedly brought about significant changes in society. A Facebook soci-
37 ety, Simanowski explains, is a “society whose forms of communication and
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39 2. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 473.

1 cultural techniques are significantly determined by the practices of self-
2 representation and world-perception on Facebook.”³ We think that the ascription
3 of such a monocausal determinism to social media (Simanowski uses the
4 term *Facebook* metonymically for not only this but other similar platforms)
5 may run the risk of giving them too much credit. We therefore intend to show
6 how contemporary modes of generating attention and acclaim should be under-
7 stood in a much wider context. Society as a whole operates today in a mode
8 of “second-order observation,” where social value, including personal value,
9 emerges as the result of a validation by what we call “general peer” groups
10 that exist as much offline as online. As Erving Goffman shows, the necessity
11 of “the presentation of self in everyday life” is not limited to, and was not
12 invented by, Facebook.⁴ Social media only enhance, or prey on, more general
13 social features that predate them.

14 The unease and fear over potentially “inauthentic” social media selves
15 expressed in Simanowski’s notions, and shared widely in academic circles
16 and older generations, may indicate that the age of authenticity itself is coming
17 to an end. If this is so, it is of little use to describe newly emerging, or newly
18 dominant, forms of identity assembly only negatively, that is, in terms of what
19 is lost or perceived as lacking. Instead, a new conceptual vocabulary is needed
20 to go beyond the semantics of an age of authenticity. If this age is approaching
21 its demise, then it is time to question its semantics and to look for possibilities
22 of a different and less anachronistic conceptual framework to describe issues of
23 selfhood and identity. In our view, present-day identity formation, both on and
24 off the internet, can no longer be adequately understood with reference to
25 authenticity. For this reason, we propose a new term to describe an emerging
26 profile-based form of achieving identity, namely, “proflificity.”⁵

27 *Losing Ourselves Online: Simanowski and Others*

28 *Instant Selves*

29 Simanowski’s article “Instant Selves” looks at how self-narration has become
30 automatized in social media. Social media, Simanowski argues, manufacture
31 life stories for their users as a result of the algorithms built into the sites. These
32 “selves” are instantly created and automatically composed by the sites and as
33 connections, status updates, and media uploads are arranged into narrative
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37 3. Simanowski, *Facebook Society* (hereafter cited as *FS*), xiii.

38 4. Goffman, *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.

39 5. We are grateful to David Stark for his help in coining this term.

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1 frameworks. For Simanowski, authorship, which for him means self-creation,
 2 in social media is distinct from the reflective and noninstant authorship and
 3 self-invention traditionally pursued through nonautomatized, self-written life
 4 stories. Using Hegelian terminology, Simanowski postulates an “imperative of
 5 ‘*Bildung*,’” that is, a demand that one ought to view one’s life as a project that
 6 needs to be reflectively narrated by and to oneself in conversation with other
 7 self-narrating selves.⁶ An instant, algorithmically written narrative violates
 8 this imperative and thus, strictly speaking, is no real narrative at all. Here a
 9 machine intervenes in the intersubjective narration process and sabotages it.
 10 Real selves, to the contrary, must engage in the constant work of building (*Bil-*
 11 *dung*) their own ongoing stories through self-reflection—otherwise they are
 12 exposed to the danger of “losing themselves,” as the subtitle to *Facebook Soci-*
 13 *ety* warns us.⁷

14 Simanowski’s narrative of narratives is not only inspired by G. W. F.
 15 Hegel but also by more recent authenticity-focused thinkers such as Alasdair
 16 MacIntyre and Taylor. MacIntyre argues that a narrative process is integral to
 17 identity construction:

18 Thus personal identity is just that identity presupposed by the unity of the
 19 character which the unity of a narrative requires. Without such unity there
 20 would not be subjects of whom stories could be told. . . . The unity of
 21 human life is the unity of a narrative quest. . . . But the only criteria for suc-
 22 cess or failure in a human life as a whole are the criteria of success or failure in
 23 a narrated or to-be-narrated quest.⁸

24 In a similar vein, Taylor demands that “we must inescapably understand our
 25 lives in narrative form, as a ‘quest.’ . . . [We] must see our life in story.”⁹ And
 26 the demand to achieve selfhood through a narrative quest is directly related to
 27 Taylor’s understanding of authentic selfhood, which he defines as an “under-
 28 standing of life . . . that each of us has his/her own way of realizing our human-
 29 ity, and that it is important to find and live out one’s own, as against surrender-
 30 ing to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or
 31 the previous generation, or religious or political authority.”¹⁰ Simanowski’s
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33 6. Simanowski, “Instant Selves” (hereafter cited as IS), 209.

34 7. Alessandro Farrara argues that self-reflection, along with autonomy, are the markers of authen-
 35 ticity (*Reflective Authenticity*).

36 8. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 218–19.

37 9. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 475.

38 10. Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, 66.

1 “imperative of *Bildung*” clearly mirrors both MacIntyre’s and Taylor’s concep-
2 tion of authentic identity, which we adopt in this article. Accordingly, persons
3 develop their own and unique stories through their creative and intellectual
4 agency, rather than by submission, to combine Taylor’s and Simanowski’s
5 words, to “a model imposed on us from the outside, by Facebook society.”

6 So what exactly is an instant self created with the help of an algorithm? A
7 simple form is the number-based and data-driven “quantified self.” Pedometers
8 (step counters) are included in most smart phones today and are on the wrists of
9 millions of people (e.g., Fitbits). They instantly measure the number of steps
10 one takes in a given period. Advanced versions can differentiate between run-
11 ning and walking and have ways to quantify various activities including climb-
12 ing, swimming, cycling, and even having sex. When used with a calorie intake
13 app, they enable one to receive equally instant or nearly instant information
14 about weight gain or loss. These data can be compared to previous data, and
15 thus a story of “progress” or “decline” takes shape. For Simanowski, such a
16 story based on automated measurements represents “an ontological differenti-
17 ation between the terms *data*, *information*, *knowledge*, and *Bildung*” (IS, 210).
18 A merely quantified story composed of self-tracking information has little to
19 do with conscious self-reflection of one’s personal and social growth. Sima-
20 nowski extends this “ontological differentiation” to far more complex digital
21 narration tools, including social media sites such as Facebook. Here, too, tech-
22 nologically produced stories emerge. And while platforms such as Facebook
23 are based on more complex quantifications and algorithmic procedures than
24 simply counting steps or calories, Simanowski finds them equally if not more
25 problematic.

26 Websites like Facebook, or apps like Foursquare’s Swarm, in connec-
27 tion with related technologies, such as wearable cameras and smartphones,
28 instantly manufacture data-driven life stories. Some apps focus on particular
29 niches and offer, for example, ready-made templates for baby albums or work-
30 out routines. They ask users to enter information (text, photos, videos) into pre-
31 scribed slots and thus can produce a story of a person’s life.

32 Some authors, such as Jill Walker-Rettberg, find such instantly and
33 mechanically created life stories inaccurate. Walker-Rettberg points to the
34 fact that steps taken when a device is not worn are not counted and that sex
35 includes “caresses, kisses or whispers” as well as emotions, none of which can
36 be measured by a “spreadsheet” or device.¹¹ Her goal is to bring awareness to
37 these potential flaws and encourage the creation of better tools to achieve a
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39 11. Walker-Rettberg, *Seeing Ourselves through Technology*, 73.

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1 more appropriate and complete “self-representation.” Simanowski’s critique,
 2 however, is much more fundamental. He argues against these tools from a phil-
 3 osophical perspective. Thus, for him, Walker-Rettberg’s use of the term *self-*
 4 *representation* might already go too far by implying that such tools, in princi-
 5 ple, potentially genuinely “represent” and thereby form a real “self” (*FS*, 63). If
 6 the narration of the self is produced by a machine, and if it relies on the data
 7 collected by it, then we are no longer dealing, in the strict sense, with the nar-
 8 ration *by* a self. Self-consciousness, to echo Hegel, is missing here. Therefore
 9 authorship and authenticity are handed to technology; they are given away as
 10 users give up (on) their own selves. Such instantly produced narratives not only
 11 do not allow the self to find itself but pose the risk that it may lose itself. Sima-
 12 nowski states: “The surplus value of ‘I narrate, therefore I am,’ in comparison
 13 to recently popular self-representation formulas like ‘I post, therefore I am’ or
 14 ‘I share, therefore I am,’ lies in the cognitive activity that is involved” (*FS*,
 15 63).¹² Without such cognitive activity, an instant, unconscious self is prone
 16 to emerge.

17 Given its lack of self-making or self-building (*Bildung*), the automatic
 18 portrayal of an instant self leaves us only flirting with glimpses of our past. A
 19 staged photo (like several people all jumping into the air at once), a status
 20 update, or a display of kilometers run is given, and often accepted, as sufficient
 21 to describe a vacation, a beach day, or your most miserable triathlon training
 22 day in months. Simanowski demands that more conscious work needs to be put
 23 into our narratives and, by extension, into the formation of our selves. For him,
 24 simply sharing one’s information as data points, status updates, or visual media
 25 is actually the “expression of an *antinarrative turn* dressed up as narrativity”
 26 (*FS*, 66).¹³ Simanowski worries: “When this happens, individuals no longer
 27 describe themselves more or less implicitly, through their actions, but instead
 28 it is the actions that describe the individuals. The subject’s ‘internal automa-
 29 tism’ is replaced by the external automatism of the system the subject has
 30 become a part of” (*FS*, 55). He then asks about the effect that “the context of
 31 this self-representation [has] on the subject’s own self-perception and self-
 32 knowledge” (*FS*, 55). The answer is that the self becomes inauthentic in the
 33 context of “the paradoxical phenomenon of a simultaneously actionist and pro-
 34 active, automatized autobiography, one [that is] more lived than narrated by its
 35 subject and ‘author’” (*FS*, 55). Given the subject’s own self-submission to the
 36

37 12. Zygmunt Bauman similarly writes, “I am seen (watched, noted, recorded) therefore I am”
 38 (*Liquid Surveillance*, 130).

39 13. Simanowski asks this as a rhetorical question.

1 “external automatism of the system,” it loses its subjectivity. Only if “the I
2 speaks about itself, it creates itself” (*FS*, 62). On Facebook, it seems, true
3 self-creation has become, paradoxically, impossible, since the creation process
4 has been externalized: “The technical *dispositif* creates a situation in which the
5 individual subject/object of the updates no longer creates the narrative order of
6 her life while writing but more or less unconsciously produces it while living it”
7 (*FS*, 69). It is abundantly clear that the loss of selfhood decried by Simanowski
8 is a loss of self-creativity or authenticity. Interestingly enough, the same can be
9 said for Walker-Rettberg’s complaints about social media and new technolo-
10 gies.¹⁴ Authenticity is actually the final recourse both for social media skeptics
11 such as Simanowski and for those more concerned with improving their
12 potentials.¹⁵ According to Walker-Rettberg, the problem with social media is
13 not that they are unfit to promote authenticity but that they are not yet fully up
14 to the task of allowing adequate self-representation.¹⁶

15 The fear that social media impede the creation of authenticity equally
16 informs another core concept introduced by Simanowski. He worries that just
17 as the internet invites the production of an instant self that is in danger of
18 becoming an inauthentic self, it also invites the formation of an episodic iden-
19 tity that is in danger of becoming an inauthentic identity.

21 *Episodic Identity*

22 Borrowing from Zygmunt Bauman, Simanowski uses the notion of episodic
23 identity (or sometimes episodic self) to broaden his analysis of the internet
24 and social media. While Bauman’s use of *episodic*—which is closely connected
25 to his more prominent concept of liquid modernity—mainly refers to offline
26 life, Simanowski applies it to the online world. His problem with online epi-
27 sodic identity is, once more, that it obstructs and subverts a consummate, and
28 thus authentic, self-narration.

29 In his essay “From Pilgrim to Tourist—or a Short History of Identity”
30 (1996) Bauman had employed the metaphor of the pilgrim to describe a
31 mode of identity construction through self-narration in premodern and mod-
32

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34 14. Simanowski references Walker-Rettberg in his book, but only in passing (*FS*, 82).

35 15. Clive Thompson, a more outspoken “technocrat,” similarly appeals to notions of authenticity in
36 his celebration of today’s technologies. He declares, for example, that “for video to really advance as a
37 medium for thinking, there’s one major shift that will have to occur: We’ll need to begin using it to
38 communicate with ourselves” (*Smarter Than You Think*, 119).

39 16. Again, Thompson holds a more optimistic view: “What’s happened with the Internet is not that
it has created any particularly new obsession with things we might consider silly or trivial, it simply
exposed what was already there” (Taylor, “Clive Thompson Interview”).

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ern times. The pilgrim is very much mirrored by the consummate self-narrator who figures in Simanowski's works, as the following quote from Bauman shows: "Pilgrims had a stake in the solidity of the world they walked; in a kind of world in which one can tell life as a continuous story, a 'sense-making' story. . . . The world of pilgrims—of identity *builders*—must be orderly, determined, predictable, ensured."¹⁷ Bauman refers to pilgrims and their world in the past tense for a reason. For him, the pilgrim was on his or her own way in a still solid world, one that has all but disappeared in our postmodern age now characterized by liquidity. In such a world, social structures no longer favor steady identity *builders*, or the *Bildung* project. "Time," Bauman writes, "is no longer a river, but a collection of ponds and pools." This metaphor is supposed to illustrate the claim that we are dealing with the "*fragmentation of time into episodes*" (FPT, 24). Given this disruption, "the hub of postmodern life strategy is not identity building, but avoidance of fixation" (FPT, 24). In the face of this fragmentation, Bauman offers the characters of the stroller, the vagabond, the tourist, and the player as "metaphor[s] for the postmodern strategy moved by the horror of being bound and fixed" (FPT, 26). Being a stroller, for instance, "means rehearsing human reality as a series of episodes, that is as events without past and with no consequences" (FPT, 26). Similarly, the tourist is afraid of being bound to a home and instead constantly moves from place to place, seeking new adventures and remaining immune to all but the bare minimum of (temporarily) stable connections. The world is simply there to "excite, please and amuse," and "there is no other purpose to justify the presence of [the] world and the tourist's presence in it" (FPT, 30).

Simanowski adopts Bauman's figure of the tourist and interlaces it with Hartmut Rosa's notion of "situational identity," that is, an identity subject to drastic shifts in accordance with varying roles adopted in different social situations. Just as the tourist's life is characterized by various episodic journeys, a situational identity varies from one episodic social framework to the next. Simanowski writes:

Postmodern man no longer experiences himself as part of a social project. He is not a pilgrim on the "path of progress" toward himself and the deeper meaning of life; he is a tourist who doesn't want to be determined by the past or constrained by the future, a "flexible" man with a "situational identity" who "lives at the vanishing point of individualization and acceleration" and has forfeited the "claim to (diachronic) continuity and (synchronous) coherence." He

17. Bauman, "From Pilgrim to Tourist" (hereafter cited as FPT), 23.

lives under the “impression of *racing stasis*: things change, but they do not develop.” (FS, 86)¹⁸

Like Bauman, Simanowski is critical of the tourist mode of life, and like Rosa, he considers situational identity somewhat problematic.¹⁹ A touristic life and situational identity both lack goal-directed orientation and, specifically, make it difficult to establish a proper self-narrative. For Simanowski, social media are, once more, the main culprit in this regard:

New media supply the self with diverse forms of presentation (websites, weblogs, and social networks). In social networks like Instagram, Facebook, or Weibo, self-presentation tends to unfold implicitly rather than explicitly, as one shows rather than tells. . . . Rather than retrospectively narrated, these moments are either spontaneously reported as they happen or simply documented (the photo as update), if not automatically registered within the technical framework (frictionless sharing). (IS, 208–9)

In this way Simanowski borrows Bauman’s and Rosa’s theoretical and metaphorical vocabulary to describe online life and thereby narrows the scope of his analysis from society as a whole to the social media. Liquid society, for Simanowski, in effect becomes liquid social media. Similarly, acceleration and situational identity become primarily internet phenomena. Both Rosa and Bauman did acknowledge that episodic and situational identities become very conspicuous on the web, but neither of them understood them as produced or reinvented by the social media. We tend to agree with Bauman and Rosa and take it that these forms of identity have a wide range of social and modern contributing factors.

Arguably more sharply than Bauman or Rosa, Simanowski finds fault with episodic identity not only because of its presumably inauthentic features but also because of ensuing effects on morality and politics. Facebook first fosters a “preference for episodic over narrative self-perception” (FS, 63). Such concern with the short-lived and momentary not only prevents the individual from achieving narrative identity but also leads to a mindless moral irresponsibility and to a narcissism that can have grave “political consequences” (FS, 92). In the end, Simanowski fears, Facebook, and the episodic identity that it cre-

18. The quotes in this section are from Rosa, *Weltbeziehungen*, 224, 218.

19. Rosa is not critical of situational identity per se, but he does acknowledge problems with social acceleration (e.g., “situational politics”), which situational identity is tied to (*Social Acceleration*, 224–76).

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1 ates, may bring about political intolerance and totalitarianism (*FS*, xvi). Ulti-
 2 mately, human identity as well as human politics may be thoroughly corrupted,
 3 and, in a perhaps not so distant dystopian future, we will be able to see our-
 4 selves and the world only through the Facebook eye.²⁰

6 *Facebook Eye*

7 As the embodiment of their instant selves and episodic identity, Facebook users
 8 grow, metaphorically speaking, a Facebook eye. With this eye, reality is seen,
 9 as Simanowski says, only “in terms of how lived experience could best be pre-
 10 sented to the ‘friends’ and how it generates the most ‘likes’” (*IS*, 214). The term
 11 was coined by Nathan Jurgenson, who had argued that social media change
 12 human perception in such a way that we orient our experience no longer toward
 13 the experience itself but toward sharing and presenting it online. Thus, Jurgenson
 14 diagnosed, “we forget to live our lives in the here-and-now” and turn “the
 15 unquantifiable beauty of human experience” into “something that fits into a
 16 database.”²¹ In other words, the Facebook eye deprives our perception, our
 17 experience, and thus ourselves and the world of authenticity.

18 The problem for Jurgenson, and by extension for Simanowski, is that the
 19 Facebook eye “structure[s] identity in more or less constraining ways.” This
 20 eye only sees “boxes to squeeze oneself into” and heeds “grid-patterned data-
 21 capture machine[s].” Jurgenson therefore calls for a new “social media profile,
 22 one that isn’t comprised of life hacked into frozen, quantifiable pieces but
 23 instead something more fluid, changing, and alive.”²² This is in essence a call
 24 for an authentic life, informed by creative agency. Jurgenson’s appeal in fact
 25 represents another version of what Simanowski, Walker-Rettberg, and others
 26 also argue: social media can endanger or falsify authenticity, and we need to
 27 make sure to preserve our authenticity when dealing with them.

29 *The Limits of Authenticity*

30 The subtitle of *Facebook Society, Losing Ourselves in Sharing Ourselves*, sug-
 31 gests, first, that we, as individuals, are, or at least should be, in possession of

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 34 20. As the role of “fake news” in influencing the 2016 US presidential election becomes clearer, the
 35 political power of Facebook and other social media is being unveiled. For many, including the US gov-
 36 ernment and the United Nations, the social media giants, especially Facebook, need to start taking more
 37 responsibility for how they influence political activities. For those who share Simanowski’s dystopian
 38 fears, this attention only confirms their worries (Foer, *World without Mind*, 92–93; Vaidhyanathan,
 39 *Antisocial Media*, 2–6; Taplin, *Move Fast and Break Things*, 5).

21. Jurgenson, “Facebook Eye.”

22. Jurgenson, “Liquid Self.”

1 ourselves and, second, that this possession is precious and essential; we ought
2 not to lose ourselves. These two suggestions constitute a simple definition of
3 what we understand as the “paradigm of authenticity” that manifests itself in
4 the “age” and “culture of authenticity” as described by Taylor and others.²³

5 The tenor of the present critiques of social media, internet usage, and the
6 “digital world” almost always warns of their detrimental effects on authen-
7 ticity, autonomy, and agency—to name three tightly related concepts. Authen-
8 ticity means to be able to “be,” “create,” “find,” “discover,” “own,” “develop,” or
9 “live out” ourselves freely, consciously, and originally, that is, without domina-
10 tion by external powers. To be sure, this does not mean that one can exist with-
11 out any external influences or resonances and specifically without recognition
12 by other subjects. In fact, as many authors have stated, following Hegel, recog-
13 nition by other authentic subjects can be an essential aspect of the *Bildung* of
14 authenticity. However, authenticity still means that our identity is grounded
15 within subjectivity. It is a form of identity in which the outer, social persona
16 is supposed to “authentically” reflect our internal, subjective, and unique
17 “selves.” Social media and the algorithms at work on the internet seem to
18 threaten the self-determining powers of the authentic individual and impose
19 on us external formats of self-presentation, self-representation, and, in the
20 case of algorithms, even some hidden processes of mechanized external self-
21 creation. Thereby, as Simanowski fears, we may become “mindless” automa-
22 tons, simply living and telling our lives in accordance with the structures,
23 expectations, or “boxes” that society, in the form of Facebook and other web-
24 sites, implants into us.

25 This feared loss of authenticity can remind us of the times before authen-
26 ticity. As Lionel Trilling most eruditely and eloquently points out in his classic
27 study *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972), we have not always been authentic.
28 According to Trilling, the concept of authenticity is a modern, Western concep-
29 t of individuality that replaced a model of what he calls “sincerity.” Sincerity
30 consists, for Trilling, in “the correct fulfillment of a public role.”²⁴ “Cor-
31 rect” here means not only that one acts in accordance with what the role
32 requires but, more important, that one backs up one’s public persona with
33 one’s inner feelings, thoughts, and intentions. In short, sincerity requires hon-
34 esty and commitment by the inner self that “fulfills” the role. In a sincerity
35 model, the inner self is in conformity with a social role, for example, the role
36 of mother, monk, or midfielder in a football team. Here identity is acquired by
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38 23. See also Anton, *Selfhood and Authenticity*, 3–14; and Ferrara, *Reflective Authenticity*, 9–13.

39 24. Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 9.

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1 an inner commitment to one's role. Under conditions of authenticity the vector
2 of identity formation is reversed. The social persona no longer informs and
3 shapes the inner self. To the contrary, in the age of authenticity the social per-
4 sona is supposed to express and be shaped by the inner self.

5 Trilling describes how in modernity sincerity became unconvincing.²⁵
6 Eventually, in a faster, more complex, and much less stable social world with
7 an emphasis on individual ownership, responsibility, agency, and freedom, the
8 inner self is no longer willing to accept being defined and confined by its social
9 roles. It forms and articulates "the idea that somewhere under all the roles there
10 is Me, that poor old ultimate actuality, who, when all the roles have been
11 played, would like to murmur 'Off, off, you lendings!' and settle down with
12 his own original actual self."²⁶

13 In late modernity, this "poor old ultimate actuality," the "original actual
14 self," seems threatened again. The discomfort that Simanowski and others
15 express toward Facebook society is rooted in the fear that it dissolves authen-
16 ticity. And this may well be true. However, we would like to propose here that
17 we have never been truly authentic to begin with. If Trilling and others are
18 right, we became authentic only in early modernity, and even then we did not
19 become "truly" or completely authentic. Rather, at the time of increasing indi-
20 vidualism a relatively convincing new semantics shaped the guiding narra-
21 tive of identity. Now, in late modernity, along with social and technological
22 changes, the semantics of authenticity seems to lose its general credibility,
23 just as a semantics of sincerity did in earlier times. In early modernity, contin-
24 gencies and contradictions inherent in the sincerity model became apparent,
25 and now it seems that the contingencies and contradictions inherent in the
26 authenticity model of identity are increasingly obvious.

27 We therefore believe that concepts such as instant self, episodic identity,
28 and Facebook eye indicate phenomena that are less about an imminent loss of
29 an essentially authentic self than about the rise of another identity paradigm
30 shift in the wake of social change. Thus we propose to develop a different ter-
31 minology and corresponding set of concepts to describe new aspects of identity
32 assemblage—namely, terms and concepts that are not so heavily grounded in a
33 certain bias or favor for authenticity as the one and only correct type of identity.

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36 25. Modernity here refers to the developments of the Enlightenment, the industrial revolution, cap-
37 italism, a Protestant work ethic, liquid modernity, acceleration, and functional differentiation—to refer
38 to just a few theoretical attempts to specify modernity other than with the hardly convincing geographic
39 notion "Western."

26. Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, 9–10.

1 But before we do this, it is appropriate to briefly outline some of the contingencies and internal contradictions of authenticity.

2 First, as Bauman notes, the concept of authenticity is inherently paradoxical. Bauman conceives of authenticity as the core of modern individuality: "I unpack the ideal of 'individuality' as *authenticity*, as 'being true to myself,' being the 'real me.'"²⁷ He then concludes that such a demand to be the real me "is self-contradictory and self-defeating; indeed, impossible to fulfil" (*LL*, 18). This impossibility is based on the following double bind outlined by Bauman:

3 Paradoxically, "individuality" is a matter of "crowd spirit" and a demand enforced by a crowd. To be an individual means to be *like* everyone else in the crowd—indeed *identical* with everyone else. Under such circumstances, when individuality is a "universal must" and everybody's predicament, the sole act that would make you different and so genuinely individual would be to try—bafflingly, stupefyingly—*not to be* an individual. If you can manage such a feat, that is; and if you can resign yourself to facing its (utterly unpleasant) consequences . . .

4 A mind-boggling quandary indeed if ever there was one! No wonder the awesome need for individuality keeps us busy through the day and awake at night . . . The quandary is not just *mind-boggling*: not only a logical contradiction. . . . The quandary under discussion is a thoroughly *practical* task, whose fulfilment fills our life, so to speak, from cradle to grave. In a society of individuals—our "individualized society"—we are all required, and indeed we truly crave and try hard, to be individuals. (*LL*, 16)²⁸

5 In a society where everybody is supposed to be an authentic individual, authentic individuality itself becomes inauthentic, since authenticity is externally imposed on the individual by society.

6 Prior to Bauman, Niklas Luhmann had traced the paradoxical nature of authenticity to the emergence of popular mass media, and in particular the printed novel, in the eighteenth century. People reading about authentic individuals in novels were "invited to make the connection back to themselves" and to internalize the distinction between authentic versus inauthentic and copy versus original.²⁹ One focus was to "advis[e] the reader by means of such reading matter that he or she should endeavor to be authentic" (*LL*, 81). Mass-copied books spread the news about and illustrated authenticity so that

27. Bauman, *Liquid Life* (hereafter cited as *LL*), 17.

28. The first two ellipses in this quotation are Bauman's; the third ellipsis is ours.

29. Luhmann, *Reality of the Mass Media*, 61.

14 *From Authenticity to Proflicity*

1 “the desire to experience things authentically for oneself is itself a desire sug-
2 gested by this distinction” (*LL*, 142n12). In other words, “without reproduc-
3 tions there would be no originals” (*LL*, 86). Ironically, a mass media-based
4 culture of copies “produces its counter-conceptuality of ‘authenticity,’ ‘actual-
5 ness,’ ‘spontaneity,’ etc.” (*LL*, 86). In a theoretical move reminiscent of Der-
6 rida, Luhmann suggests that the origin of the focus on the original is found in a
7 culture based on copies. By reading copies (of books), we are asked to copy
8 originals (such as the protagonists of these novels).

9 If Luhmann’s analysis is correct, then the challenges posed to authentic-
10 ity did by no means arise with social media of the twenty-first century, as Sima-
11 nowski and others imply, but in fact date back to the very beginning of mass
12 media in early modernity and were already present when the notion of authent-
13 icity started becoming popular. Authenticity was always paradoxical and
14 problematic, but its inherent difficulties have only now, with the recent prolifer-
15 ation of social media, become so obvious as to result in authenticity losing its
16 credibility.

17 Second, as Bauman has pointed out, authenticity (or an authenticity-
18 based individualism) is not only paradoxical but also impossible. The impossi-
19 bility of being authentic in society has been shown perhaps most prominently
20 and drastically by Goffman more than half a century ago. Humans did not have
21 to wait for social media in order to feel the need to present themselves in an
22 almost theatrical manner at any given moment of social interaction. Social
23 interaction is, for Goffman, in essence and effect, an interpersonal enactment
24 of roles. These roles vary from situation to situation and depend on context, but
25 there is never a time when in engagement with others we can simply, and
26 abstractly, be “truly” ourselves. There is no correspondence between an inner
27 core “self”—whatever this may be—and the social roles we need to perform.
28 The roles that we play when communicating with others are determined not by
29 what individuals are at their innermost core but by social interrelations and
30 social structures. One of these roles, particularly in modernity, may well be
31 that of the “authentic self;” but, at least from the viewpoint of Goffman’s the-
32 ory, this role, too, stems from a social demand and not from a core selfhood.

33 From a Luhmannian perspective as well, the operationally unbridgeable
34 systemic difference between society, mind, and body and their respective
35 forms of operation has to be acknowledged. While communication definitely
36 needs its participants to be bodily alive and mentally active, there is no specifi-
37 cally authentic correspondence between these three spheres. There is not one
38 specific thought or feeling that corresponds authentically to our physiological
39 state, and there is also not one specific word or one specific action that authen-
tically corresponds to or expresses what we think or feel. What we say in soci-

1 ety is as much informed and influenced by the social contexts and structures in
2 which we communicate as it is by our own thoughts, feelings, and bodily states.
3 A purely authentic form of social interaction, one that would emerge only from
4 the individual selves with their thoughts and feelings, rather than be at least to a
5 certain extent “imposed” on the individual by social context, is hardly possible.
6 The social, mental, and physiological systems do influence one another; they
7 are, in Luhmannian terms, structurally coupled and coevolve, but we cannot
8 identify any one of the three as the true core of the other two. None of the
9 three systemic realms is able to “authentically” determine the operations of the
10 other two. To abstract an authentic and original self-consciousness from the
11 social (and biological) structures in its environment and along which it
12 coevolves is impossible.

13 Third, as Henry Rosemont Jr. outlines in his Confucianism-inspired treatise
14 *Against Individualism* (2016), the notion of the “authentic individual” is
15 politically, culturally, and historically contingent. For Rosemont, individualism
16 and authentic identity became paradigmatic values only along with the logic of
17 capitalism. Arguing from a perspective rooted in early Chinese philosophy,
18 Rosemont categorically questions the assumptions that human identity can or
19 ought to be defined “in terms of isolateability, freedom, independence, ratio-
20 nality, and autonomy.” Instead, Rosemont suggests that “human beings can
21 only be properly understood relationally, never as isolates, and are thus best
22 accounted for as the sum of the roles they live with no remainder of conse-
23 quence.”³⁰ As a contemporary Confucian thinker, Rosemont thus disputes the
24 primacy of the authenticity imperative as “important to find and live out one’s
25 own,” to quote Taylor again.³¹ If we take non-Western philosophical resources
26 into account, it soon becomes obvious that authenticity cannot be regarded as a
27 universally accepted default standard for forming identity. In fact, following
28 Rosemont’s approach, it seems unlikely that the authenticity paradigm can
29 even be ascribed a dominant role in European precapitalist contexts. If we are
30 allowed to read Rosemont in this way, it is also possible to challenge the moral
31 and political supremacy of authenticity and to argue for a return of sincerity on
32 both the personal and sociopolitical level. Not only in academic philosophy is
33 sincerity still a viable and potentially preferable option for many, as David Fos-
34 ter Wallace and the “New Sincerity” movement show.³²

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37 30. Rosemont, *Against Individualism*, 9, 14.

38 31. Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, 66.

39 32. Importantly, New Sincerity seeks to respond to the incessant and impossible demand to be
“original” and “unique” by *returning* to sincerity—albeit a somewhat newly reinvigorated sincerity.

16 *From Authenticity to Proflicity*

1 We do not wish to advocate a return to sincerity as a normative guideline
 2 or to regard it as better or morally superior to authenticity. Rather, we simply
 3 want to point out that the ideal of authenticity that explicitly or implicitly
 4 informs many critiques of the new social media cannot simply be taken for
 5 granted. As several theorists have shown, authenticity is paradoxical, existen-
 6 tially impossible, and culturally or historically contingent. It can be challenged
 7 philosophically, as Rosemont has demonstrated. But a perhaps more radical
 8 challenge may come from social media. Simanowski and others have voiced
 9 an unease with the supposed inauthenticity the internet fosters, but we wonder
 10 whether it is really such a simple matter. Do social media simply promote inau-
 11 thenticity, or is something else (also) happening? Perhaps instead of fostering
 12 inauthenticity, they expose the paradoxes, impossibilities, and contingencies of
 13 authenticity in practice rather than in theory and thus allow people, or “users,”
 14 to move on beyond authenticity. Perhaps it is quite inappropriate to measure
 15 social media usage with the authenticity criterion and to approach it with the
 16 suspicion of inauthenticity. Something altogether different might be going on.

17
18 ***Proflicity***

19 When we look at someone else’s Facebook feed (no longer a “page”), we do not
 20 assume that we *really* know the person. The viewer is aware that vacation pho-
 21 tos, for instance, display only what the person who posted them wants others to
 22 see. No one believes that everyone actually lined up and jumped all at once on
 23 the beach for any reason other than to take a photograph. Status updates are
 24 similarly posted for a particular type of presentation; they are written only to
 25 be posted, just as the jumping photo is taken only to be shared—and *everyone*
 26 *knows it*. Only a naive person would take a Facebook profile to be a fully accu-
 27 rate representation of who someone is or how the details of that individual’s life
 28 play out.³³

29 The reverse is also true. Facebook profiles, or any other “presentations of
 30 the self,” are created by users who, as Simanowski admits, know full well that
 31 the “giant database . . . collects data sets” (*FS*, 70–71) and that it creates their
 32 “story.” The user certainly does not have full control; it is the “algorithms [that]
 33 analyze the data that has been collected” (*FS*, 70–71), but the users are aware of
 34 the presence of such mechanisms. They do not participate in their profile con-
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33. This is not to say that social media cannot cause jealousy, foster feelings of loneliness, or make
 people feel or fear that they are missing out. To the contrary, this is well documented. The point is simply
 that while we may be easily influenced by someone’s social media presentations, most people do not
 think that photos and status updates capture one’s entire life.

1 construction as passive data-punching automatons—though clearly they are not
2 the reflective narrators Simanowski wants them to be, either.

3 If we set aside assumptions about authenticity, it becomes clear that what
4 is happening with social media challenges the very core of authenticity. Peo-
5 ple's profiles on different platforms vary drastically not just because the respec-
6 tive algorithms function in unique ways but because people wish to present
7 themselves differently, depending on the audience. This is why, for example,
8 undergraduate students are often perfectly willing to share their Facebook pro-
9 files with their parents, but not always their Snapchat or Instagram accounts,
10 Vine posts, or Tinder profiles. This profile posturing, along with different
11 "presentations of the self," is subject to social structures and phenomena that
12 were less forceful just a couple of decades ago, but by no means absent.

13 When in early modernity the paradigm of authenticity replaced the para-
14 digm of sincerity, the inherent paradoxes of the latter were increasingly obvi-
15 ous. As the "Me," to quote Trilling again, experienced its social roles as mere
16 "lendings," it started to realize that the ideal of a complete internalization of
17 social roles, of a complete identification with them, had been impossible from
18 the start. It was eventually understood that social roles do not correspond to the
19 inner self of a person; that, for instance, "motherhood" was not a social exten-
20 sion of a woman's inner dispositions. Preexisting social roles were consequently
21 seen as a sort of external imposition or betrayal of the inner self. Today, with
22 the shift from authenticity to prolificity, a different paradox comes to the fore. It
23 is now increasingly obvious that the demand to truthfully and accurately pres-
24 ent one's inner self in society is equally problematic. Not only are preexisting
25 social roles mere "lendings" that we can never internalize with perfect sincer-
26 ity, but the opposite move is also flawed: we can also never create a social per-
27 sona that is a perfectly authentic outer representation of our inner self.

28 The shift from sincerity to authenticity dealt with the paradox of sincer-
29 ity and the impossibility of being completely sincere by abandoning the pre-
30 tense that anyone could ever perfectly correspond to a social role. Social roles
31 were no longer regarded as a given shape that a self was supposed to sincerely
32 fill. Instead, the focus was shifted inside—the self had to first discover or create
33 itself and then to develop a corresponding persona. The validity of the persona
34 had to come from within, from the self, rather than from society. Now another
35 reversal is taking place, and the vector of identity formation is again turning.
36 Rather than being preoccupied with identifying the authentic inner self, the
37 focus is once more turned outward, toward the persona and its presentation in
38 society. The validity of one's self-projection is no longer assumed to stem from
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18 *From Authenticity to Proflicity*

1 the inner “original self.” As Luhmann put it, “A person can . . . not really
2 know who he is, but has to find out whether his own projections find recogni-
3 tion.”³⁴ This (decidedly non-Hegelian) “recognition” consists in the social
4 acceptance and validation of a profile.

5 In proflicity, we are concerned no longer with creating an authentic self
6 but with “curating” a profilic persona or personas.³⁵ Identity is achieved not by
7 finally knowing who one really is at one’s innermost core but by profilic
8 achievements. As Sean Parker, the first president of Facebook, put it, Facebook
9 established a network for a mass performance of endless “social validation
10 feedback loops.”³⁶ This method of validation provides relief from relentless
11 authenticity pressure. We no longer have to ask ourselves the old authenticity
12 question (as posed by *The Chainsmokers*): “Why do I still have to mean every-
13 thing I ever said?”³⁷ Under conditions of proflicity, what counts is whether
14 what we say or post finds approval in society.

15 Crucially, profilic recognition is not “intersubjective” and does not hap-
16 pen on the “spiritual” level of “self-consciousness”; rather, it is a social phenom-
17 enon best explained with Luhmann’s concept of “second-order observation.”
18 The notion of the Facebook eye is a metaphorical illustration of second-order
19 observation in the realm of the social media. With the Facebook eye, one
20 observes something by observing how it is observed by others—this is the
21 very definition of second-order observation. According to Luhmann, however,
22 in modern society “all functional systems were adapted operationally to
23 second-order observation.”³⁸ This adaptation took place on a far wider scale
24 than the internet, and it happened long before its advent. The Facebook eye
25 merely represents the personalized practice, or the individual mass adaption,
26 of a second-order observation eye by billions of users.

27 At least two major twentieth-century theorists, Walter Benjamin and
28 John Maynard Keynes, described the emerging prevalence of second-order
29 observation. In his well-known essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechan-
30 ical Reproduction” (1936), Benjamin reflected on the increasing obsoles-
31 cence of the “original” artwork and on the vanishing of “authenticity” in the
32 context of modern photography and film and, beyond these technological con-
33

34. Luhmann, *Theory of Society*, 22.

35. Giovanni Formilan and David Stark are using this notion of curating in their unpublished paper
36 “Moments of Identity: Artists and Their Aliases in Electronic Music.”

37. Parker uses this phrase in an interview for the news and information website Axios (“Sean
38 Parker on Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook”).

39. *Chainsmokers*, “Everybody Hates Me.”

38. Luhmann, *Introduction to Systems Theory*, 100.

1 texts, in the modern social systems of the mass media and art. He stated: "The
2 whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical—and, of course, not only
3 technical—reproducibility."³⁹

4 For Benjamin, mechanical reproduction liberated art from elitist ritual
5 and religious frameworks and made it more democratic and generally accessi-
6 ble. Thus not only the mode of production but also the modes of the presenta-
7 tion and perception of art were thoroughly revolutionized. Most crucially,
8 "with the emancipation of the various art practices from ritual go increasing
9 opportunities for the exhibition of their products."⁴⁰ The secularization of art
10 transformed it into a public event, and eventually the "cult value" of the artwork
11 was replaced by its "exhibition value." Not only does the work of art, according
12 to Benjamin, thereby lose its "aura," which was tied to religious or aesthetic
13 qualities, but, as in film and photography, the exhibited work is detached
14 from any unique original. This turn brings about an "absolute emphasis" on
15 "the exhibition value of the work of art."⁴¹ Exhibition value is related to the
16 effects a work of art produces when widely exhibited and perceived. The
17 value of a movie is established by how it is observed when shown. We cannot
18 simply look at the movie "in itself," independently of its screening. We can see
19 it only as it is, quite literally, projected to its viewers. The shift from cult value
20 to exhibition value described by Benjamin is a shift from first-order observa-
21 tion to second-order observation. In the age of mechanical reproduction, the
22 mass media emerged in society as a system based on exhibition value and
23 second-order observation. In its wake the art system, too, as Benjamin so aptly
24 diagnosed, shifted toward the very same modes. Exhibition value is in essence
25 what we could call "profific value" and tied to second-order observation.

26 At more or less the same time Benjamin was writing about the exhibition
27 value of artistic and mass media products in the age of mechanical reproduc-
28 tion, Keynes used the "beauty contest" analogy to explain the generation of
29 economic value in modernity. The market value of a (financial) product is
30 determined neither by any "authentic" value it may possess "in itself" nor by
31 the value it has for any specific person. Instead, the market value of such a prod-
32 uct is based on a gauge of the general estimation of its value:

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34 Professional investment may be likened to those newspaper competitions in
35 which the competitors have to pick out the six prettiest faces from a hundred
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37 39. Benjamin, "Work of Art," 230.

38 40. Benjamin, "Work of Art," 234.

39 41. Benjamin, "Work of Art," 237.

20 *From Authenticity to Proflicity*

1 photographs, the prize being awarded to the competitor whose choice most
2 nearly corresponds to the average preferences of the competitors as a whole;
3 so that each competitor has to pick, not those faces which he himself finds
4 prettiest, but those which he thinks likeliest to catch the fancy of the other
5 competitors, all of whom are looking at the problem from the same point of
6 view. It is not a case of choosing those which, to the best of one's judgment, are
7 really the prettiest, nor even those which average opinion genuinely thinks the
8 prettiest. We have reached the third degree where we devote our intelligences
9 to anticipating what average opinion expects the average opinion to be. And
10 there are some, I believe, who practise the fourth, fifth and higher degrees.⁴²

11 From the perspective of proflicity, the most relevant point made by Keynes is
12 that the stock market is interested neither in any actual or "authentic" value
13 inherent in the stocks (which, arguably, does not exist in the first place) nor
14 even, and this is crucial, in what value any individual actually ascribes to the
15 stocks. On the financial market, stocks are observed and acquire their value
16 through "pure" second-order observation. Instead of considering "genuine"
17 average opinion—which would be an observation of what others directly
18 observe in the mode of first-order observation—participants in the market
19 focus their observations on determining "what average opinion expects the
20 average opinion to be." The market functions, and produces value, by estimat-
21 ing what others think—not about the stocks themselves but about "average
22 opinion." The point is to guess right not what others will personally value but
23 what these others will think is impersonally valued as the general "exhibition
24 value" of financial products. In other words, "recognition" of value is detached
25 not only from the inherent properties of the evaluated object but also from its
26 direct evaluation by individual subjects. Recognition, and value, is based not
27 on what anyone personally recognizes or finds "genuinely" valuable but on
28 what is generally considered popular.

29 Other social systems have followed suit. In the political system, cam-
30 paigns operate with the production of profiles. Election success depends on
31 the public appeal of a political party's "poster boy" or "poster girl." Opinion
32 polls on the popularity of a political "brand" are more important in elections
33 than ideological coherence or faithfulness to doctrines—as recent events
34 clearly demonstrate.

35 In the academic system, second-order observation has been institutional-
36 ized most aggressively in the form of the peer-review system and the rating and
37 ranking of academic institutions. On the basis of its superior authenticity alone,
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39 ⁴². Keynes, *General Theory of Employment*, 100.

1 no philosophical paper will be accepted for publication in a top journal. (We
2 could wonder with Walter Kaufmann whether the works of any great philoso-
3 pher, from Plato and Aristotle to Hume, Hegel, or Nietzsche, would ever be
4 published today.) Instead, papers have to be written in a certain style and for-
5 mat, they have to address the respective literature in a given field, and they have
6 to be sufficiently “anonymous,” that is, lacking an all-too-personal (original?
7 unique?) edge. Similarly, the reviewers in a “double-blind” review process
8 are also supposed to judge not from their unique or authentic perspectives but
9 from the perspective of the “state of the art” in the field. The official regulatory
10 instructions for most journals ask reviewers to judge if a submission “lives up to
11 the standards” of the journal—standards not otherwise defined. In other
12 words, they ask that a paper be judged like a pretty face, according to what
13 the reviewer thinks the average opinion would be. Similarly, to properly *recog-*
14 *nize* the systemic value of an academic paper, we do not have to read it, but we
15 have to understand the value of its publication venue and the impact it had on
16 the field—both of which are made accessible through second-order observa-
17 tion metrics (e.g., journal indexing, impact factors, and altmetrics). The value
18 of academic works and authors is established by observing how they are
19 observed by the system within which they are produced, *not by the content*
20 *itself*.

21 The generation of exhibition value in social systems such as art, politics,
22 or the academic system is tied to a profile, or, in marketing terms, a “brand.” No
23 one expects the product of a brand to express any “authentic” essence—but
24 everyone expects it to be prolific. It must provide an identity on the basis of
25 public recognition and validation. This is why, for instance, some would “rather
26 go and buy Balmain.”⁴³ A Gucci bag is neither more authentic nor more useful
27 for carrying things than a “no-name” bag, but it has a specific prolificity eval-
28 uation that allows it to be valued more, economically and often socially, than
29 the latter. The value of a Gucci bag is related to the value of the Gucci brand, or
30 the Gucci profile. The Gucci profile, in turn, is shaped not by individual shop-
31 pers who somehow authentically believe in Gucci but through the general rec-
32 ognition that Gucci is a luxury brand. This is to say, there is no authenticity in
33 the bag, and also no authenticity in the shopper or the market. The difference
34 between “authentic” and “fake” Gucci bags has to do not with the objective
35 quality of a specific bag or with the subjective appreciation by a specific
36 owner but with the accurateness of a profile. A Gucci bag becomes a real
37 Gucci bag simply by being legally marketed under the brand—and by no
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39 43. This is what Lil Pump suggests in his song “Gucci Gang.”

22 *From Authenticity to Proflicity*

1 other quality at all. In other words, an authentic Gucci bag is actually not
2 authentic but proflic.

3 This brings a peculiar quality of proflicity to bare—one that distin-
4 guishes it not only from “self-centered” authenticity but also from other-
5 focused sincerity. Proflicity is validated by an audience, but an audience that
6 is not personally committed. As Keynes put it, it does not matter what “average
7 opinion *genuinely* thinks.” No one needs to really *like* Gucci bags for the brand
8 to be successfully proflic. Under conditions of proflicity, we are dealing not
9 with actual peer groups but with a “double-blind” and anonymous general peer.
10 First-order observation is still important for sincerity to work—my identifica-
11 tion as mother, monk, or midfielder must be immediately validated by my
12 family members, my fellow monks, or my teammates. It cannot function on a
13 double-blind basis. The contrary is the case with proflicity. Here the social
14 feedback loop is valid only if it goes beyond individual and subjective recogni-
15 tion. In proflicity, recognition is not limited to the peers I interact with directly
16 and in person. Proflic recognition stems from the general peer, from the
17 respective wider systemic audience for which I “post” or “share.” What counts
18 for the academic recognition of an academic journal is less how many times its
19 articles are cited in this journal than how many times they are cited in articles
20 published in other journals. Of course, the higher the other journal is ranked,
21 the better this journal appears (is ranked). True proflic identity and actual pro-
22 flic value must come from the general peer and not from the specific peer.

23
24 ***Conclusion***

25 Proflicity is a mode of identity assemblage and a mode of value generation that
26 evolved along with the shift from first-order observation to second-order
27 observation. According to Luhmann, second-order observation is “just as
28 important” a criterion of modernity as functional differentiation.⁴⁴ If this is
29 the case, then proflicity can be regarded as a prominent late modern paradigm
30 of identity, although, like second-order observation, it surely had its premod-
31 ern predecessors. It seems to have pushed sincerity and authenticity into the
32 background, or taken them into its service, albeit without eliminating them.

33 Proflicity emerged in several social systems over decades. Social media
34 such as Facebook did not need to invent it. Rather, the mass media format, as
35 Benjamin showed with respect to the art system, has spilled over into other sys-
36 tems and effected wide social transformations. When the mass media system
37 coupled itself with the art system a century ago through new technologies such
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44. Luhmann, *Theory of Society*, 102.

1 as film and photography, it accelerated branding in the economy and in politics
2 by coupling itself with these systems through advertising and reporting.⁴⁵
3 Something similar has now happened with other systems, such as the academic
4 system and private life, or the “intimacy system,” as Luhmann calls it. In aca-
5 demic and social media, we produce ourselves nowadays as small-time (or
6 sometimes also big-time) celebrities, and we do so by developing profiles.⁴⁶
7 As Simanowski and others point out, this enables the emergence of such phe-
8 nomena as instant selves, episodic identity, and a Facebook eye. However, all
9 these phenomena are best understood, we suggest, under the umbrella of the
10 more general notion of proficlicity rather than simply as expressions of inau-
11 thenticity.

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14 **Paul J. D'Ambrosio** is fellow of the Institute of Modern Chinese Thought and Culture,
15 associate professor of Chinese philosophy, and dean of the Center for Intercultural
16 Research at East China Normal University in Shanghai.

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19 **Hans-Georg Moeller** is professor of philosophy at the University of Macau.
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35 45. The importance of branding is expanding at increasing rates for persons, companies, and even
36 countries (Aronczyk, *Branding the Nation*).

37 46. Bauman argues that social media are so popular largely because they enable people to act, and to
38 some extent feel, like celebrities: “You made an account on Facebook and people can now show them-
39 selves in so many photographs. ‘I am eating my breakfast.’ ‘I am playing with my cat’” (“Prof. Z. Bau-
mano ir prof. L. Donskio dialogai”).

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