

Identity factories (self-portrait rhetoric)

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“Paradoxically, the re-conceptualization of identity as an *effect*, in other words, as *produced* or engendered, opens up the possibilities of the “capacity to act”, which remain insidiously excluded from the positions considering that the categories of identity are foundational and fixed”.

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (1)

“The articulation between viewer and the viewed is thus conceptualized as an internal relation. Indeed, the two points in the circuit of articulation privileged here -the viewer and viewed- are seen as mutually constitutive. Each is implicated in the other; neither could exist without the other. The subject is, in part, formed subjectively through what and how its 'sees', how its 'field of vision' is constructed. In the same way, what is seen -the image and its meaning- is understood as not externally fixed, but relative to and implicated in the positions and schemas of interpretation which are brought to bear upon it.

Visual discourses already have possible positions of interpretation (from which they 'makes sense') embedded in them, and the subjects bring their own subjective desires and capacities to the 'text' which enable them to take up positions of identification in relation to its meaning. It is this 'little system' (composed, as it were, of two inter-dependent but relatively autonomous moments) which 'produces meaning'. It follows from this argument that 'the meaning' of the image cannot be seen as fixed, stable or univocal across time or cultures. Also, the subject itself is not a completed entity but something which is produced, through complex and unfinished processes which are both social and psychic -a subject-in-process”.

Stuart Hall, *Visual Culture: the reader* (2)

One of the most intelligent advertisements in recent times -by Iberia, why not say so?- explained what the airline's true job was: to put thousands of people, their customers, “into contact with *destiny*”. Not just to fly from one place to another or facilitate the movement of citizens between earthbound cities, but, moreover, to help individuals “discover themselves”. To phrase it differently: theirs are not geographical, territorial or spatialized trips but instead they are vital, psychic ones (the *psycho-geography* expropriated from situationism, benefiting its most hated/feared neighbor, the tourist industry (3)). Each one's trip toward oneself, toward the rediscovery of one's irresolute past, one's abysmal present or feasible future, (one's adolescence, one's mate, one's years at university or one's mother): inner trajectories pertaining to the process of construction of one's own biography (each individual *flying in, or toward, her or his “own” story*).

In reality, a not so ingenuous interpretation of the rhetoric in the new advertising would quickly recognize that -as in the aforementioned example- in virtually all of their *image games*, what is being sold are not the “products” they advertise, but the specific potential of biography construction, which is set into motion in the very same -*phantasmatic (T.N.), imaginary-* space. The aim then is not to make a third product-merchandise (let us say, the thing announced) desirable at a distance, but to infuse the very device-advertisement -the image/music/script system articulating it- with identification-desire potential capable of eliciting an effect of recognition in the perceiver. The need one feels to equip oneself with the effective materials in that evermore arduous task (inasmuch as it is basically innocuous and unproductive) of self-building will do the rest, and the purchase of the associated merchandise -as long as one can pay for the increasingly costly caprice of *self-making-* will come about as if by “collateral effect”. But what is seductive about the advertisement, what its persuasive effect is directed at, is not demonstrating the qualities of the third object itself, but instead, primarily, it is meant to indicate (without the advertiser actually realizing it, for on no account will he/she suspect the truth about contemporary advertising: that it advertises itself alone) the direct amount of identity -the *identity coefficient*, we shall say- issuing from its own space, in the symbolic device itself.

Indeed, the good ads allude only to themselves: they are ads of ads, an exercise in self-reference, meta-language and tautology (to a level that Kosuth himself would envy). They -and not any airline- are those who truly organize those small yet effective *psychic micro-trips* for which the destination/destiny is *one's own biography*. And this is because one's own biography is in fact the commodity most on the rise in the contemporary world, the best selling product - and by the way, the most scarce- in the age of globalized capitalism. As Ulrich Beck said, there is nothing so desirable in current societies as -de facto, what is most lacking- having “a life of one's own”. (4)

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The entire contemporary mega-industry of images -of imagery, if you will- works with this. Let us imagine a trans-stellar network of interconnected *airbioports*: if the objective of this expansive rhizome were the “worldwide organization of the psycho-geographical flights” alluded to above, then its tool of the trade *par excellence* would be no other than the image, the visual element. Along these lines, critical theory still has much to do: in the same way that an entire disciplinary tradition -that of linguistic criticism- has demonstrated how it is in the course of the *speaking acts* that the *placing* of the subject -in-process-comes about, it is necessary to begin to carry out the same critical task in the realm of images: to demonstrate how it is also in the *visual acts*, and in the course of their production -in the effective development of the rhetoric on what is visual-, that a similar effect of positioning takes place, here an effective constitution of the subject-in-process precisely in his/her *viewing acts* (in seeing and being seen).

In fact, we could affirm that that trifle we call the *subject* is nothing else than the effect *par excellence* (of course, with no intention of excluding any of the many practices that are also constitutive in this light) of the *acts of representation*, of viewing, of its participation in the exchange networks -production, consumption and circulation- of images, of *visuality*. Here, however, critical theory is branded by a deficit, that which, for decades, has kept its potential restricted to the recognition of such types of effects in the realm of the discursive, textual practices alone. It is therefore presently urgent to proceed toward an extension of that process of recognizing the productive rhetoricity (illocutionary or perlocutionary, we shall say with Austin/Searle) of the significant acts in the realm of the entirety of symbolic practices, of representation.

Not only the discursive practices possess an effectively powerful materializing efficacy - as Judith Butler has demonstrated- but so too do those of representation, those of production, consumption and distribution of imagery. Thus, it has become urgent in our day to decisively address the *rhetoricity of the visual*. Something which, to some extent, seems to have begun to be taken up by visual culture studies -notwithstanding the difficulty of introducing themselves into a “protected” field designated as “artistic”, in which the presuppositions of added value epistemologically or ideologically restrict or condition these possibilities of critical exercise.

We could say that in the realm of “quality” discursive production -formerly referred to as the *literary field*- the genre that most fittingly permitted the recognition of the *speaking acts’ efficacy at producing subjectivity* was -obviously- the autobiography (with epitaphic writing serving in all likelihood as its most diligent sub-genre (5)). Correlatively, we may suspect that in the realm of “quality” visual production -formerly referred to as the *artistic field*- the genre that would most fittingly permit the parallel recognition of the *visual acts’ efficacy at producing subjectivity* will consequently and logically be the *self-portrait* -of which, to my mind, and as I will try to demonstrate below, the portrait is but a sub-genre.

But let us take a moment to remember, before delving into the analytics of the rhetoric on self-portrait, the declarative strategy of the autobiographical tale, the resource orchestrating all the illocutionary force of its discourse precisely in order to *produce* -in the strong sense attributed to *performativity*, to the *materializing power* of discourse- an intense *subject effect* in its space. In autobiography -and more still in epitaph, since here it is even more obvious that the subject speaking is not present- the subject is “produced” in this sense: that the statement expressed in it speaks precisely of he/she who, supposedly, produces the statement itself. The self spoken of then is no longer the inner self of the fictional discourse, but rather the fitting and supposed condition of its efficient possibility. The declarative strategy thus consists of making those two entities coincide as if they were one and the same: that which the text addresses and that which it produces, its emitter (or as Barthes said, the self of the statement and that of the stated). The result is a true effect of reality added to that self “external to the discourse” and supposed producer -in reality it is “the product of”- of the text. Autobiography is, indeed, self-productive: it is the very paradigm of the performative text, as such a producer of “reality” -as long as its product is its own presumed producer. Actually, every text, as an operator of performative potential, is primarily the producer of the subject it presents: to be sure, the text is the subject’s most important industry, his/her principal and most effective factory.

For *in reality*, that is precisely every subject’s way of being (in truth, quite precarious): there is no other subjectivity than that induced as an effect of the language that, supposedly, he/she expresses. The only subject not merely fictional -extra-textual- is always subject to the statement, the agent of speech -this is why writers alone can achieve true (auto)biographies. As subject of the statement, one is tremendously poor with respect to one’s own reality -merely a

linguistic fiction. To the extent that it says, at the time it is saying, to whom it says it, its rhetoricity effect is reinforced in a loop around a principle of reality of the subject pronouncing it. "I write, therefore I exist" could be the *-prosopopeic-* principle of the autobiography (and by this means, the paradigm of all forms of discourse): within it, the subject is not spoken of as he/she who is spoken about, but as the speaker him/herself, the very agent of speech.

More of the same with regard to image.

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Considering what has been said thus far, we could establish -not without a certain amount of audacity the readers will know how to excuse- that the self-portrait is the genre that best inherits the qualities of conceptualism, insofar as it consists of pieces that are self-engendered by way of -dissolved in- their own analytic. A piece such as *Schema*, by Dan Graham, has its best replica in a figural, non-discursive space, precisely in his own self-portrait (that well-known one by Dan where he is in front of one of his famous mirror-spies). What is portrayed is neither an object of the world (only in self-portrait does photography/painting depart from the sad genre of the "still-life") nor some presumed "pre-existing subject" who has created it, but that subject-in-work that is precisely the performative product of the very *act of vision*, of representation (in fact, the work is not the photograph as such, but the very device that is reflexive-productive of vision). Every subject is in the space of the representation only as rhetorical (phantasmatic) effect of the very materializing power of the *visionary act*, visionant. The presence of the agent of vision in his own result (being as it is that he himself is of this) always has a phantasmagoric-institutive effect: Velásquez in *Las Meninas* or Jeff Wall in his revision of Manet's portrait. The "staging of the work" on the part of the gaze's contriver is also set apart from the constitutive character of the gazing acts -and at the same time from the non-constitutive character of the subject insofar as he precedes his own practices, the constellation of his own actions -whether these are discursive, contemplative, representative, ... *symbolic* if nothing else.

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The critical recovery of the self-portrait space in the technical image age (it would certainly be instrumental to specify something about this precision, and I hope to be able to do so further on) is actually fulfilled by means of this schematism: not so much that of the self-portrait proper (except inasmuch as it is *performative*, *illocutionary* machination) as the dismantler of the presuppositions of "essentiality", of the subject's pre-existing its *acts of presence* in the representational space. Cindy Sherman's *Film Stills* are enormously enlightening in this respect, so much so that it would be quite problematic to consider them "self-portraits". Why? Because they really are not -although it is always "her" in the picture. They are "portraits" but only of one's self inasmuch as they are *effects*, inasmuch as they are "produced". In other words, because what is shown in them is indeed the subject's non-constituted character, or more specifically, her "self-making" through representational acts. The image is revealed as an "identity factory", like the space in which the subject constitutes herself in the array of "her" representations, in the absorption of the succession of "her" phantasmagorias. To be sure, as she herself wrote, "in the representational space, *one is always another*".

But the proving potential of the illusoriness of the character constituted from identity is not actually exclusive patrimony of the new technical self-portrait: in reality, and if we look to Van Gogh's series of self-portraits as an example, we shall see that the self-portrait has always demonstrated the opposite of what is expounded: not the existence, but the total evanescence of the author. Indeed, and having contemplated the series, what can be seen in it is none other than the pursuit of his continuous disappearance (that of the subject), what is shown is his offering himself as a *withdrawal*, as a *fading away*. For if indeed we wanted to find him (the subject) in that representational space -where only phantoms live, this must not be forgotten- we would not recognize him in one face or in another, not even (with Derrida) in the dominion of the signature, yet perhaps we would in the very unrepeatable singularity of the mode of the *pictorial writing*, in the manufacture itself of the sticky mechanism (allow me to say this with a bit of disdain).

This is why it makes sense to emphasize the precision described above: to be sure, the technical image possesses a particularly dismantling effect regarding the presence of the subject in the space represented (inasmuch as its manufacture belongs to no one, it *consigns* no identity whatsoever). If the only trace that could still guarantee a consistency of the subject-as-author were precisely in that mannerist singularity of the manufacturing style, then we can see how the irruption of the technical imagery as anonymous qualification of the act of seeing

and offering for sight has an added potential of defrauding those ever lively expectations of essentiality, of the subject's consistence in the dominion of the representation. Springing forth from here, the self-portrait space opens up as a *territory of otherness*, of *enacted* construction, in a pure process of the self as fabricator and therefore a certified whoever, the self is "no one and everyone", a *myriad subject*. The artist is no longer the "investiturer" of identitary energy and his/her power is no longer reserved for him/herself, or for others by *emanation* alone, as if by *empathy*. But rather, in every *act of vision* (and increasingly, to the extent that a mechanical technical eye is protagonist) a subject-in-process appears, induced then and there -as a pure effect of the rhetoricity of vision. This is the jump that takes us from Van Gogh to Cindy Sherman, or even from the self-portrait to the portrait as its sub-genre. Or to be more exact: from Van Gogh, and through Cindy Sherman to Thomas Ruff or, perhaps, Nan Goldin.

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This transition, which is verified in the realm of artistic production by its own exercise of critical self-reflection, is reinforced, as I have pointed out, by the irruption and generalization of the use of the technical device of image making. The evanescent character of the "subject-author" and that produced from the "subject-object", of the subject represented, will find in the apparition of a mechanism belonging to the realm of everyday culture -the photo booth- a reinforcement that will definitely destabilize the history of self-portrait, to resituate the intensive nucleus of the inducing operation of subjectivity, not so much in the territory of the "declarative production" (which, usurped by the technical machine, is "nothingified", negated as handler of authorship and consequently of selfness, of *subjection*) as in that belonging to visuality, of offering oneself up for sight and being seen. That is indeed (to present a crucial case that, moreover, has been universalized for the last 20 years; I am referring to the anonymous "self-portrait" one makes in a photo-booth) the time when the portrait absorbs the constitutive powers (of subjectivity) previously claimed exclusively by the self-portrait rhetoric.

This is precisely where the whole series of photo-booth-portraits by Ruff works: indeed, they are portraits, but to the extent that they are charged with the potential of the subject's self-construction in the frontalness of his letting himself be seen (as if he were actually in front of the anonymous machine inserting his coin in the slot) they are revealed as what they really are, self-portraits. And as such, what they show is precisely the profound anonymity of a subject who produces himself in that act only and evanescently. In that act of letting himself be seen, of offering himself up for *contemplation*. Face to face, a gaze rendered aghast and disbelieving by the very inconsistency of the object it observes, neither entirely a still-life nor that symbolic mirror that (formerly, what times) constituted the promise of the artist as paradigm of a forceful, remarkable subject instilled with essential and eternal identity. Instead, the testimony of those innocuous, fading and mute faces is merely a statement of passengerness, contingency, anythingness, precarious constitution in the very praxis of the *letting oneself be seen* as a demonstration and exercise of *being there*. Hardly a *quasi-praxis* under whose regimen the thing expressed is, exactly and only, the "*particularity of whoever*" -with Agamben's expression. Or, let us say, the representation of the singular as carrier only of the (in)identity of an anyone. In this light, these (self)portraits by Ruff and those of Gursky's crowds are revealed as one and the same thing: portraits of *whoever*, representations of the *masses*.

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There is no territory of autobiography beyond the environs of the collective, of the *community*. The entire pregnancy of a life of one's own is gestated in effect in the crossing with *the other*. This is surely what is laid bare in Nan Goldin's series, particularly in the *Ballad of sexual dependency*. Even if we did not take into account the fact that the artist's own figure appears more than occasionally in it, we ought to consider the entire series as self-portraits, and not only in the sense we have been defending wherein a large proportion of current portraits are carried out by absorption of the self-portrait rhetoric, but rather in that they are portraits of that micro-collective environment the artist records as a unit of coexistence, of life definition, of experiential crossroads strongly conditioned by the thickened intrigue of affection and passion, by the shared intensity of sexual-amorous bonds. Perhaps this is indeed the main dominion in which an economy of subject production -as such "production economy"- can manage to singularize itself, to submit itself to a *punctum*, to constitute itself something other than a generic, universal and void structure promoting only that barren and blurred state of the *myriad subject*. The feverish framework of mutual affection -that putting oneself in relation that constantly increases and decreases operating powers; it may be necessary to get Spinozist so as not to forget what

affection is- is effectively the repository in which the way the subject becomes singular can be verified *par excellence* -if you will, as irrevocable innumerable of the possibilities for play that a generic and virtual structure -that of the *whateverness*, if you will- offers in the execution space of an effective scheme of real, specific and effective exchanges (therefore certainly innumerable). This is surely what endows the record of (the life of) the passions with constitutive quality *par excellence*, seemingly engendering the entire “epic history” of the life of a subjectivity mostly upon this stage of innumeral (*micro*)crossings which exemplifies the space of passionality -that which Moraza terms that of “interpassion”. All the Anti-Oedipal politics was applied here: not so much to confront one generic structure with another, as to assure that beneath the latter -which produced only a generic, an abstract virtuality- there spawned a proliferation of an unlimited infinity of possibilities lying in wait -like a multiplicity overflowing in all directions- in the uncontainable rhizome that, again Spinozistly, would express it. As opposed to the totalizing and uniforming machine then, this efficient proliferation of molecular machines of constellation and crossroads of the energies of fondness and passion provide an alternative stage -for the life of the ()subject, for the processes of (id)entary construction- furrowed with diagonal lines of drift and flight.

Let me conclude by recalling what I have occasionally described as the “arch-medical principle” of the new “capitalism of identities”, a theoretical equation that would define its floating mark in the contrast between what the “new phase” displaces -all the potential of the old generic identity producing machines, the old out-dated essentialist/foundationalist programs- and the volume of (*effect of*) identity, which, in its displacement, is induced by the new capitalism thus empowered. That the latter, vanquished at the hands of the new industries of subjectivity, does not produce enough critical mass seems obvious, and that this gives rise to the gigantimachians -the Identity Wars, which have already begun- that we have already begun to witness, should seem so also. Could it be that confronted with their painful absurdity, those other intensive little (*micro*)politics represent a ray of hope for us -small, yet hopeful, for those who, like us, have always refused to believe, as Lacan did, that “in the end, religion will triumph”.

Translated by Dena Ellen Cowan

NOTES

(1) Judith Butler, 1990, *El género en disputa. El feminismo y la suversión de la identidad*, Paidós, México DF, 2001. p. 177.

(2) Jessica Evans & Stuart May (pub.) *Visual Culture: the reader*, SAGE, London, 1999. p. 310.

(3) Regarding this abduction of psycho-geography by the adventure and cultural tourism industries in the societies of entertainment capitalism, see the devastating portrait Michel Houellbecq presents of the post-situationist generation in *Platform*.

(4) Ulrich Beck, “Vivir nuestra vida Propia: individuación, globalización y política” edited by Anthony Giddens and Will Hutton in *En el límite. La vida en el capitalismo global*, Tusquets, Barcelona, 2001.

(5) To read more on this topic see Paul de Man, “Autobiography as de-facement” in *The Rhetoric of romanticism*, Columbia UP, New York, 1984; Nora Catelli, *El espacio autobiográfico*, Lumen, Barcelona, 1991; José Luis Brea, “La escritura póstuma del nombre propio” en *Un ruido secreto*, Mestizo, Murcia, 1994.

Translator’s note: Since one of the distinctive characteristics of José Luis Brea’s style is his frequent use of new variations of standard Spanish terms, I have tried to capture this by using analogous variations of their English equivalents.