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Click on Me: Identity as Commodity in the Digital Age

When we create screen names, personal websites or weblogs, participate in online message boards or virtual communities, much of what we are doing is marketing ourselves, offering ourselves up as a commodity. Multiple online identities are in some ways akin to product lines held by a particular company. Each separate identity one creates may allow him or her to cash in on a different market, even though the medium of exchange may be social rather than monetary. It seems that we have assimilated the culture of commercialism so completely that we see our own identities as product.

The manner in which we trade in our identities on the Internet has evolved within a complex set of cultural developments. This paper will consider how the current cultural emphasis on flexibility and access, combined with the position of the Internet within the larger context of capitalistic modes of production, has brought us to a place where we have become increasingly comfortable with the commodification of our own identities.

In *The Corrosion of Character,* Richard Sennett writes of the cultural dislocation that is a byproduct of a prevailing emphasis on flexibility in the workplace. According to Sennett, our notion of flexibility has changed in recent years, losing its original connotation of stability in the face of external forces of change. Though the word ‘”flexibility” originally described the ability of a tree to withstand wind damage, its yielding to the wind while retaining its fundamental form (Sennett 46), flexibility has come to mean a capacity to adapt to perpetual change in our work and personal lives, one that we are all expected to embrace, or be left by the economic wayside.

For Sennett, a key problem with negotiating one's life under the terms of limitless flexibility is the challenge it poses to one’s ability to create coherent personal narratives. One is always in the position of recreating oneself, and achievements are no longer "cumulative" (16) in a way that would tend to foster stability, community and personal character. The emphasis now is

on constant permutation to meet the changing demands of our environment. Sennett claims that the "most strongly flavored ingredient in this new productive process is the willingness to let the shifting demands of the outside world determine the inside structure of institutions" (52). Though he is speaking here of the business practice wherein external market pressures are allowed to determine internal corporate structures, Sennett's idea also extends to the behavior of individuals. He sees members of the new economy as being adrift in change, unsure of who we really are or what defines us.

Jeremy Rifkin echoes Sennett's concern that our cultural experiences are increasingly ephemeral. In *The Age of Access,* Rifkin traces the historical shift from an economy of material production to an economy of access, highlighting a "shift in economic priorities from making things to making experiences" (161). We have undergone an evolution from an industrial capitalism that "captured and exploited natural resources" and human labor for the production of material goods and services to a new "cultural capitalism" which "expropriates cultural resources for the purposes of cultural production" (151). The consequence, Rifkin writes, is a society full of people whose identity is defined less by tangible work product and material possessions and more by "how many vivid experiences and relationships they have access to" (198). In Rifkin's view, not much escapes the vacuum of the access economy, as "more and more of the global cultural sphere," including its rituals and festivals, is absorbed into the marketplace for transformation into cultural product (151).

Rifkin identifies the creation of the first travel agency as a turning point in the shift toward an access economy. When Thomas Cook began leading pleasure tours in the mid-nineteenth century, he began a trend of "commodifying cultural experiences" (148) that has carried over into many of today's most lucrative business enterprises, both inside and outside of tourism-related industries. Health Maintenance Organizations and Internet Service Providers, among other industries, are based on Cook's premise of "paid access" for service (148). Since Cook's time,

travel itself has taken on a different quality. Increasingly frequently, consumers are paying not for an "authentic" travel experience, but for an experience that mimics what is presumed to be an authentic travel experience. Theme parks, tropical resorts, and tourist enclaves designed to recreate colonial village life have grown in popularity over the past several decades (149-150), as has the grand dame of simulated access environments, the shopping mall.

The development of the shopping mall represents to Rifkin another crucial shift toward an access economy. Whereas much of our cultural experiences once took place in the public sphere, the shopping mall has enclosed public space in a private simulacrum of the town square, where commerce and social experiences have become increasingly indistinguishable. Originally a site of traditional, product-oriented commercial transactions, malls have evolved into entertainment complexes and social hubs. "The shopping mall," Rifkin writes, "has created a new architecture for human assembly, one immersed in a world of commerce in which culture exists in the form of commodified experiences" (154). Today's malls are highly cultivated "communication mediums" (155), designed in theatrical style "to provide 'a sugar-coated dream world where we can shop, play, and experience danger and delight without once stepping outside; where we can change experiences like flipping TV channels'" (158), or perhaps like surfing the Internet. At the mall, Rifkin, suggests, we can all be players in the “retail drama," moving from set to set and vicariously accessing cultural experiences.

Much like the mall, the Internet has evolved as a location for the convergence of commerce and theater within a context of controlled access, though there has been no shortage of proponents of the Internet as a site of social redemption. The history of the Internet is a romantic history, replete with utopian rhetoric of cultural salvation. Cyberculture has always been "haunted by the disappointed hopes of the Sixties" (Barbrook). A prevalent theme in the mythology of the Internet is its self-conscious ambivalence about the position cyberculture holds within the framework of contemporary capitalism. The Internet, diehard netizens seem to often lament, was a

much nicer neighborhood before capitalism moved in, appropriating its technologies and social paradigms to exploit for commercial purposes. Internet culture is invested in the ideal of the gift economy that helped construct it, which has been said to be based upon the idea of reciprocity:

> Reciprocity is a key element of any market-based culture, but the arrangement I'm describing feels to me more like a kind of gift economy in which people do things for one another out of a spirit of building something between them, rather than a spreadsheet-calculated quid pro quo. When that spirit exists, everybody gets a little extra something, a little sparkle, from their more practical transactions; different kinds of things become possible when this mind-set pervades. (Rheingold Ch. 2).

Rheingold offers further insight into the online gift economy, in which, as he explains it, the way one uses language plays a large part in determining one's value online:

> elegantly presented knowledge is a valuable currency. Wit and use of language are rewarded in this medium, which is biased toward those who learn how to manipulate attention and emotion with the written word. Sometimes you give one person more information than you would give another person in response to the same query, simply because you recognize one of them to be more generous or funny or to-the-point or agreeable.

The more information one offers to others, the more "social capital" one can accrue in the online environment:

> I give useful information freely, and I believe my requests for information are met more swiftly, in greater detail, than they would have been otherwise....I can increase your knowledge capital and my social capital at the same time by telling you something that you need to know, and I could diminish the amount of my capital in the estimation of others by transgressing the group's social norms (Rheingold Ch. 2).

Richard Barbrook would appear to position himself as a moderate voice in the debate about capitalism online, claiming that a pure gift economy can not exist in a culture, such as cyberculture, which is dependent upon the technological imperatives of capitalism. According to Barbrook, the "anarcho-communistic" gift economy derived from sixties countercultural motifs can function only in distilled form online. Though he praises the subversive potential of an economy based on collaborative effort and freely shared information, he notes that "the gift economy and the commercial sector can only expand through mutual collaboration within cyberspace." Barbrook appears to view capitalism as a necessary evil without which the bounty of informational wealth could not be spread around. Nevertheless, this argument feels like the intellectual equivalent of one calling herself "a little bit pregnant." Barbrook accepts capitalism for what it can bring to the gift economy, at the same time that he holds the gift economy apart from the capitalism that he seems to disdain. Tiziana Terranova criticizes Barbrook's perception that the gift economy is somehow discrete from capitalism, offering a more tenable explanation for the current commercial landscape online, suggesting that:

> it seems more reasonable to think of cultural flows as originating within a field which is always and already capitalism. Incorporation is not about capital descending on authentic culture, but a more immanent process of channeling of collective labor (even as cultural labor) into monetary flows and its structuration within capitalist business practices.

In other words, capitalism is not imposing itself from without upon digital technologies. Digital technologies have evolved within a context of capitalism, and have therefore inherited not just its technologies, but also its language and paradigms of production.

The rhetoric of the Internet is almost obsessive in its language of inclusion, speaking of "breaking down barriers and building bridges, of bringing people together and abolishing hierarchy. Positioning the Internet as "a tool of liberation.'" (Freck). A mode of communication

that is premised on "access" to its technologies, however, is on precarious footing making an argument for its own heroism in the fight against centralized power. "Power, in the coming era," writes Rifkin, "belongs to the gatekeepers who control both access to the popular culture and the geographic and cyberspace networks that expropriate, repackage, and commodify the culture in the form of paid-for personal entertainment experiences" (177). It will also, to a lesser extent, belong to those with the economic means to acquire the technology necessary for online cultural production, those who are skilled in the use of that technology and the use of language. Furthermore, though in theory Internet access is decentralized, increasingly the reality is that access is controlled by megacorporations heavily invested in the industries of cultural production. Like the shopping mall that has privatized public space, the Internet is composed of "private domains with rules and regulations governing access" (Rifkin, *Age* 155).

Sut Jhally proffers a theory of television viewing as an "extension of factory labor, " (Jhally 83) in which program content is the wage we are paid for the work of watching commercials. In an extension of these ideas, Terranova notes a continuity between the pre-digital media of print and television and newer media epitomized by the Internet in their dependence upon their users as "productive subjects." Though television structures the watching experience for viewers, providing content and commercials, on the Internet the users provide the bulk of programming with web content and participation in online discussions, for instance, largely structuring their own online experience. Terranova defines this cultural labor as free labor, in that it is "not financially rewarded and willingly given." This sense of free labor is not, for Terranova, contraindicative of capitalism, however, because "free labor is a desire of labor immanent to late capitalism... the field which both sustains free labor *and* exhausts it." On the Internet, because the user is encouraged to provide content, the illusion is reinforced that he is in control of the productive process.

Terranova cites the example of reality-based television programming, which works on the

premise that the audience provides cultural labor as content "which goes under the label of 'real life stories.'" With television the viewer maintains an awareness that program content is essentially out of his control, a somewhat unsavory "spectacle." Much more theatricality and boundary transgression is accepted by Internet users, in part, Terranova suggests, because the sheer volume of web content overwhelms our ability to extract meaning. "It is as if the centralised organisation of the traditional media does not let them turn people's productions into pure monetary value....What [the digital economy] cares about is an abundance of production...." This is reminiscent of Marx's "fetishism of commodity" (Marx 444-461), in which commodities become self-serving and self-perpetuating, "absolute ends in themselves" (Kamenka 567). Internet culture is so hungry for content that it invites, nearly demands, personal disclosure.

One of the more inviting aspects of cyberculture is that one can, in many respects, determine one's own online reality. With no physical cues to draw from, identity is fluid in cyberspace. One can project what she wants to project, and believe what she wishes about the projections of others. Sherry Turkle examines the psychology of this phenomenon in *Life on the Screen*. She notes how the evolution of modern psychological theories about the self, together with computer science, have contributed to our growing sense of "identity as multiplicity" (178). Though Sigmund Freud's division of the self into the id, ego and superego and his ideas about consciousness had great impact upon the postmodern view of the self, Turkle cites poststructuralists such as Jacques Lacan with a "more radical decentering" of the self and the "portray[al] of the self as a realm of discourse rather than as a real thing or a permanent structure of the mind" (178). The Internet, Turkle suggests, represents a convergence of this mode of thinking about the self and the decentralized models of computer networks. On the Internet, "people are able to build a self by cycling through many selves" (178).

The idea of self-determination is prominent in Internet discourse. Users often describe the perception of transcending the experience of their offline personalities. Participants in Multiple

User Domains (MUD's) routinely play with their identities in the context of elaborately described virtual worlds. Effuses one MUD participant:

> You can be whoever you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself if you want. You can be the opposite sex. You can be more talkative. You can be less talkative. Whatever. You can just be whoever you want, really, whoever you have the capacity to be...It's easier to change the way people perceive you, because all they've got is what you show them. (Turkle 184).

Netizens struggle with how to represent themselves in an environment where the possibilities are limited only by their ability to manipulate language and reimagine their realities. A woman worries aloud about the upcoming meeting with her online beau, one who she has never seen or spoken to offline, and whose gender is still a matter of speculation:

> I didn't exactly lie to him about anything specific, but I feel very different online. I am a lot more outgoing, less inhibited. I would say I feel more like myself. But that's contradiction. I feel more like who I wish I was. I'm just hoping that face-to-face I can find a way to spend some time being the online me (179).

Allucquere Rosanne Stone recounts the story of a male psychiatrist named Sanford Lewin who signed onto an online service using the gender-neutral screen name "Shrink Inc." Soon after Lewin began using his new name, he found himself in a private online conversation with a woman who, it became apparent to him, believed that he was a female psychiatrist. Lewin quickly noticed that the tone and content of the conversation was different than any he had previously had with a woman. He describes it as having been "deeper and more open than anything he'd experienced," claiming he "hadn't known women talked among themselves that way. There was so much more vulnerability, so much more depth and complexity." Lewin claims to have realized that this represented a unique chance to help women who might not otherwise confide in a male psychiatrist (Stone).

Stone goes onto describe how the subsequent tale unfolded. Lewin created a new online identity for himself, that of a young female neuropsychologist named Joan. He put quite a bit of thought into creating the character of Joan. She needed to be an accessible and complex persona online, but inaccessible offline, so that her real identity could be preserved. Lewin therefore created a narrative "history" for Joan that included a tragic car accident which had left her a mute paraplegic with facial disfigurement, largely cut off from the external world until her discovery of the Internet. Her apparent functional limitations and discomfort with her appearance provided the rationale Lewin needed to restrict any relationship Joan might develop to the online environment.

From here the story begins to take on the character of a B-movie plot. Joan began to make friends online. Because she claimed to be a neuropsychologist, women began to confide their problems to her, and she in turn offered them counsel. Joan, too, found her online interactions transformative. Though she had started off posting under the screen name "Quiet Lady," she began eventually to use the name "Talkin' Lady, " to symbolize her evolution from the depressed, emotionally fragile recluse to the chatty vivacious person she was becoming online. The character of Joan was taking on greater and greater dimensions. She told her online friends of a new romance and marriage, of exciting new career opportunities she was pursuing. Yet, as persuasive as the Joan character was, some people were beginning to question the veracity of some of the things Joan was telling them. She seemed a little too good to be true. Lewin began to feel that Joan's' online world was closing in on him. He found himself entangled in a complex deception he claims had not been intended. According to Stone:

> Apparently he'd never expected the impersonation to succeed so dramatically. He thought he'd make a few contacts online, and maybe offer some helpful advice. What had happened instead was that he'd found himself deeply engaged in developing a whole new part of himself that he'd never known existed. His responses had long since ceased to be a masquerade....online he had *become* Joan.

Lewin tried to extricate himself from the situation first by killing off Joan. Her fictitious husband notified Joan's online friends that she was gravely ill with a virus picked up on one of their exotic vacations, and that she was not expected to live. The outpouring of grief and panic was so intense that Lewin lost the nerve to end Joan's life. He later tried having Joan "introduce" her friend Sanford Lewin to the online community, but Lewin found that he was unable to form friendships with most of Joan's friends, because his personality was very different from Joan's personality. Stone quips that "Sanford's Sanford persona was being defeated by his Joan persona. What do you do when your imaginary playmate makes friends better than you do?" Eventually, Lewin confided his secret to a few online friends, and the Joan narrative ultimately disintegrated after much online discussion and ill will.

Lewin's story is both fascinating and disturbing from a number of perspectives, but it serves especially well to underscore Sennett's concern that too much flexibility may undermine our ability to create cohesive personal narratives and maintain a core sense of self. Lewin became enmeshed in the Joan narrative, one that had been created to allow him access to a particular social demographic from which he otherwise would likely have been excluded. He had, essentially, created and marketed the "Joan" product. Though his initial stated motive in beginning the deception was to "help people," clearly the ruse continued beyond its ability to function in the service of others, and Lewin was himself getting something very real, if intangible and nonmonetary, out of the process.

Furthermore, the manner in which Lewin was engaging in this social production relates very closely to the idea of "just-in-time inventory" that has become prevalent in Post-Fordist manufacturing processes. Like the Japanese "stockless production" model, (Rifkin, *End* 99), Lewin was staying just ahead of the demand in maintaining Joan's identity. The male Lewin perceived that the female Joan was required in order to engage in the sorts of social transactions that Lewin was seeking, so he created Joan to fit the perceived demand, and adjusted her

according to need. In Sennett's terms, Lewin allowed "the shifting demands of the outside world determine the inside structure" of his identity. He was functioning in the mode of "flexible specialization" that Sennett claims is well suited to computer technology, but perhaps less well suited to human relationships. Lewin was willing to "reprogram" or "reconfigure" himself to meet the market demand (52).

In the age of Martha Stewart, few of us can reject wholesale the idea that a little self-promotion is a good thing. If Martha Stewart did not invent the notion of self-branding, she has certainly taken it to new levels, creating a lucrative cottage industry based upon her own personal mythology and aesthetic sensibilities. Success of Stewart's *Living* Magazine has spawned not only direct knockoffs, but can also be implicated in the recent explosion of vanity publications trading on the identities of various celebrities, including the unfortunately titled *marykateandashley magazine*, a vehicle for the now teenaged child stars, Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen. Merely sixteen years old, the twins have parlayed their chubby-cheeked spunk into a multi-media empire, lending their names and personae to films, cartoons, video games, a clothing line, and their own "dot.com," to which adolescent girls from around the world can log on for advice on everything from fashion to snowboarding, and of course, ample opportunity to purchase merchandise. Rifkin would argue that what Mary-Kate and Ashley's fans are after is not the physical product, or the specific piece of advice, but vicarious access to the Mary-Kate and Ashley lifestyle.

Yet even if the Olsen girls did not have the fan following and financial backing to launch many of these media ventures, it is not unlikely that they would have websites, screen names, and AOL profiles to share with friends and strangers alike that might in many ways serve the same function as marketing brochures. The Olsens might be said to epitomize a generation that has been marketed to so extensively and is so accustomed to social flux that they are supremely comfortable operating in a mode of self-promotion and personal flexibility. They are willing to

add their names, pictures, and innermost thoughts to the collective brain of the Internet, in exchange for social capital. They are adept at reconfiguring themselves to meet the demands of a given market. They are comfortable with the idea of access, accessing the lives of others, allowing others access to their own identities. In Rifkin's words, they are "beginning to think of themselves more as 'creative performers' moving comfortably between scripts and sets as they act out the many dramas that make up the cultural marketplace" (*Age* 201).

There is an inherent temporal element in the idea of access. One "accesses" that which one does not own; when we access something, we are able to benefit from it only temporarily, and only through an intermediary. A culture of access, then, is very much a culture steeped in flexibility and flux, a culture that values elasticity. The written word once carried with it a connotation of permanence and authority that didn't exist with face-face communication. In the Digital Age, this context has evaporated. In cyberspace, everything and everyone is fluid, and merely a click away.

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