

Fragmentation and Expansion of the Self

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Our modes of interaction with each other and the world are changing and expanding in a myriad new ways. While the process of expressing oneself through the newly available platforms and conceptual constructs is exhilarating to some, it overwhelms others. We have the opportunity to expand and intensify ourselves in unprecedented ways yet the process is complicated and filled with uncertainty. The investment that we make into our new representations is often frustrated by the fragmentation of our psyche resulting from splitting of our image among many platforms and conceptual readings.

Today, more than ever, we are finding ourselves in need of producing a unifying meaning. Our sense of expansion, which is facilitated by electronic media, global connectivity and exotic scientific concepts, is haunted by the inability to own oneself. The traditional ways, in which we are used to structure our subjectivity are subverted and rendered ineffective. Narratives, which usually produce meaning through contextualization of our experiences presently, communicate primarily the intensity of the experience. Simultaneously, our ability to make meaning by acting within a narrative is suspended in unlimited choices. Yet precisely reclaiming our stories and agency within the kaleidoscopic world holds the promise of meaningful experience across multiple platforms, be they biological or electronic.

I. Structuring Narratives and Intensities

Humans tend to make sense of their lives through stories. We insist on the continuity of our existence through devices such as photo albums, genealogical trees, biographies and curriculum vitae. This connectivity through time, social groups, belief systems and geographical locations, to mention just a few fields, gives rise to a sense of self as an individual. The unmistakable feeling of being in oneself serves as a base for all of one's experiences and actions. The story we tell about ourselves brings a sense of coherence and trust that the world around is there to support us in living out this narrative.

Through this process we acquire a sense of grounding in the world and reach out to connect with others. The relations with other human beings at its base have stories, which dictate the nature of the relationships. In turn, we can make sense of who we are based on the feedback provided from our interactions in thus established contexts. These structures are so powerful in fact, that reinventing them conceptually often leads to altering the course of one's life.

In today's world, we have the opportunity to re-imagine ourselves over and over again in a course of ever shortening time periods. Thanks to the technological platforms we are able to amplify and distribute our stories easily and instantly. The breath and speed of our reach is exhilarating and inspires ever more extreme expressions of the self. In fact, conscious of our audience, the contemporary stories we tell via electronic media are used to impress one another. Additionally, the limited time required to catch the

viewer's attention dictates the story's graphic impact and the short bursts, in which the narrative is presented. In most instances, instead of the uncomfortably elongated and subjective narration, we communicate sheer intensity.

II. Agency and Subject

While the narratives provide a framework for the self as it exists in the world, the agency of an individual is the content of this framework. The agency, defined as the ability to influence one's environment, creates an acting subject, which internalizes the experience. This process gives a rise to a sense of self that is fulfilled through the action. In another words, the action becomes the content of one's subjective experience enabling the discovery of oneself through this action. For instance, if I make a mark on the wall, the ability to make marks will become part of my subjective vocabulary and will be integrated as a part of a self-image.

Being able to act on one's environment empowers the person in their perception of self as a distinct entity and forges a link between the internal experience and the external world. This connection, in fact, establishes one's range of experience by describing what's available and what's outside of one's influence. Similarly to a small baby, who by using its arms learns to perceive them as part of their entity, as adults, we reach out towards abstract concepts or hardware, which once available for our use become incorporated as part of our self-image. The action-feedback loop signals one's presence.

The area of our influence is growing with every scientific discovery and every software update we download to our computer. With the expansion of the field, in which we can potentially act, comes the expansion of our sense of self. We can aim to understand ourselves through numerous conceptual lenses. Yet with the increasing sense of freedom comes an uneasy sense that acting within all of the available contexts seizes to produce a unifying meaning. The vastness of choices suspends the subject in an undecidable space, where the plurality of actions does not contribute to the strengthening of the subject. Instead, too often we experience the feeling that our reflections in the world escape our control and cannot fully represent us.

III. Fragmentation

This tendency to overwhelm and fragment our self-perception is well exemplified in the culture of online personas, profiles and avatars. In order to communicate our single existence, we translate our lives into numerous platforms. It is no longer viable to express oneself through one medium and instead we busy ourselves populating Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+ and Foursquare just to mention a few. Signing up for one of those profiles resembles filling out a job application. The fields are designed to grab generic information in a predesigned manner leaving no space for an individual expression. Additionally, the profiles parse the information into discrete data chunks representing one as a number of statistics. In this process, we become assigned to a particular group of consumers.

The pervasive culture at the moment oscillates between entertainment, consumption, and marketing. These fields dictate a notion of objective reality, which undermines the subjective experience. As a result, we are instructed how to act in every aspect of our lives. Even the smallest personal matters are culturally predigested and presented as a finite number of options. Our every need and dream is commodified and turned into a quantifiable problem with an objective solution. In this sort of structure, since there is no space for a subjective experience, we are forced into pre-described cannons. Even the efforts to personalize the online experience realized in the web 2.0 fall short of being true freedom. At best, the new web presents a finite number of pre-described fields to fill out or boxes to check. The individual subjective experience is undesirable precisely because it cannot be commodified.

Increasingly, the body is placed under a similar pressure of calcification. In addition to the usual consumerist objectification, the body is enduring a new kind of a scrutiny. Fueled by the fear of terrorism, a set of technologically advanced means of classifications rules over our bodies. We are scanned, searched, finger printed and measured in any possible way. The information pertaining to our bodies is parsed and recorded into massive databases that are distributed throughout the world. Our subjective self with our personal story and sense of wholeness has no place in that world. We get split into a million pieces of data, where each of them can be turned against the original self.

Even the scientific understanding of ourselves and the world around us is of no help to our subjectivity. The scientific models digging deeper and deeper into the reality present theories fracturing the perceivable world into increasingly smaller pieces. Once we start to worry about our health on nano-level, our sense of wholeness falls apart. We are forced to be preoccupied with an unmanageable number of details and as a result we miss the bigger picture of our life.

Faced with such a complex world we place our lives in the hands of specialists and thus give up our agency. The decisions about our finances, psychology, tastes, and needs are outsourced to external entities. We give up the control and deny ourselves a unique subjective experience. We become convinced that our identity can be reduced to a formula understood only by a specialist.

IV. The Contemporary Narcissus

In thus constructed world, both the personal narratives and individual agency are sabotaged and unable to produce a coherent subject. Increasingly we are spending more of our lives in public despite being hidden behind the computer screen. It is the electronic world that now provides the exposure and the arena for our fifteen minutes of fame. We are living in an objectively conceived world, in which person's subjective experience is denied and replaced with a standardized formula. All of one's characteristics need to fit into the categories of a standardized profile, falling short of facilitating an accurate and full self-expression. Meta-expressions dictated by the platforms are our most available and immediate choices.

It comes as no surprise that many have a difficulty recognizing themselves in their representations. The social and electronic suits we wear seem exaggerated and often inconsistent with each other. Considering the scientific perspective, we are asked to reconcile the view of ourselves as a cloud of subatomic particles popping in and out of existence simultaneously with being a coherent biological unit. Similarly to our online experience, we exist in the physical world as a number of scattered representations emphasizing one facet or another but somehow failing to grasp the whole.

The challenge of association of one's original self with the representation is invoked in the myth of Narcissus. The youth staring into the surface of water falls in love with the image presented to him unaware of his relationship to it. Marshall McLuhan brings an interesting perspective to the hero's plight. According to him, Narcissus's tragedy lays not in the fact that he fell in love with himself but in his inability to recognize himself in the reflection and therefore perceiving himself as a stranger.¹ This decoupling of identity from one's representations be they conceptual, electronic or biological structures takes place in every-day life.

The perceptions of ourselves that we are having in the world are often intense and discontinuous across fields and platforms. This disparity of the experiences makes it difficult to integrate the phenomena as one subjective experience. Similarly to our hero, Narcissus, we are unable to recognize our reflections in the world as the self. This disassociation originates in the ego's efforts to preserve the familiar and reject the shocking, which is outside of and discontinuous with the self-image. Following Narcissus's logic in the three-dimensional space, that which is here cannot be also there.

IV. Expansion and Assimilation

Yet the possibilities for the expansion of the self, which present themselves via innovative concepts and devices, are exciting and constitute our new identity. We can think, connect, move and perceive more effectively. The breadth of our reach and the capability to process information are vaster. Additionally, because of the recently acquired capacity to tinker with our evolution within molecular and electronic paradigms, the ability to design ourselves is within our reach. Since we are already moving through the new territories, it is worthwhile to look at ways to experience our individual self as a unit integrated with the heightened and multifaceted reality.

Production of an overarching meaning is the human faculty facilitating the integration of newly acquired extensions and concepts. As discussed previously, one of the tools used towards that end is the human tendency to pull events and concepts together into narratives. These structures organize our sense of meaning by allowing us to come into contact with other entities. Often, these narratives collapse into sheer intensity communicating volume devoid of a message as exemplified by the culture of online exposure. However, the potential to use narratives to produce meaning as opposed to noise is available to us.

Being in touch forces us to negotiate meaning. While using our newly acquired extensions we can reach towards one another, the ends of the galaxy and inside of the

sub-molecular void. We can engage in a dialogue with conceptually and physically remote parts of the environment, our minds and bodies. Jean-Luc Nancy explains that “to come into contact” produces meaning by making sense of one another.² I believe that additionally, by reaching into the depths of oneself using the new tools, a person comes in touch with their own singularity and thus makes sense of oneself. This notion empowers the subject and paves the way to another tool used to produce meaning – one’s agency.

Our power to act upon the environment is one of the most immediate ways to confirm one’s self-identity and establish continuity of meaning. Making a change is an undeniable proof of one’s existence. In exercising our agency we become subjects with a unique impact. The impression, which we make into the reality acts as a feedback device communicating to us our presence. In becoming an active subject, we are reaching out into the reality and disturbing the reflective surface of water. The illusion of separation from oneself is shattered and we are returned to our subjectivity within.

I believe that this paradoxical simultaneous existence as a separate subject and as an entity coming in touch with other subjects is the meaning-producing human condition. Jean-Luc Nancy illuminates the point further in the following passage. “All of being is in touch with all of being, but the law of touching is separation.”³ We need to be separate entities in order to come in contact with one another. He further states that “The ‘between’ is the stretching out and distance opened by the singular as such, as its spacing of meaning.”⁴ While the being together through touching produces meaning, the singularity of the entity provides “spacing of meaning.” Precisely this spacing makes narratives possible.

The increasingly complex world places the individual subjectivity, which manifests as a sense of self in crises. There is a need to re-examine the mind’s ability to produce a sovereign self while embracing the new connectivity. Maintaining a coherent subject in situations where one is split into a multitude of data and squeezed into pre-defined categories requires critical evaluation and resistance. Exercising one’s power to act within the narrative of one’s choosing may be the first step in reclaiming the sovereignty of the self and in unifying one’s self perception across different platforms.

Notes:

1. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, The MIT Press, 1994, p. 42
2. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 5
3. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 5
4. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 5