

THE EMPTY MASK

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Be yourself.” These words are found either literally or thematically in countless pop songs. They are a staple of elementary classroom posters across the nation and are emblazoned upon an endless series of ‘inspirational’ Facebook posts—usually accompanied by a generic stock photo of mountains or smiling actors. This platitude has been repeated so many times that it has become almost entirely devoid of meaning. But it is still commonly accepted that at its core, the statement contains some notion of selfhood—the undeniable and inescapable feeling every person has that we are each a distinct being, that we each have identities shaped by both our experiences and our inherent nature. This concept of selfhood has followed humans since became able to communicate our most remote and obscured feelings. Because the self, since its genesis, has been linked with language, as humanity’s forms of communication change, a change in identities can be expected as well. Nowhere has this been better exemplified than on the Internet—and particularly Facebook—which has enabled the greatest tectonic shift in human communication since the popularization of the telegraph.

In “Generation Why,” Zadie Smith analyzes the David Fincher film *The Social Network* to discuss the philosophical and sociological effects Facebook has on the generation raised with it. Smith laments the inherent inability of software to capture a real human personality, with all of its intricacies and contradictions, because “information underrepresents reality” (653). She posits that rather than resulting in a rejection of such software—the appropriate response, according to her—this built-in deficiency has caused people to “‘reduce themselves’ in order to make a computer’s description of them appear more accurate” (652). Facebook has, in other words, the potential to transform its users into shells, nothing more than the images they choose to project, and Smith believes that this has been borne out in the “denuded selfhood” of her students (656). Despite her frustration with the popularity of Facebook, Smith never offers a more direct explanation for its obscene popularity than that it is “the greatest dis-

traction from work" (652). It is certainly true that millions use Facebook as a "distraction from work," and many would agree that the easy, mindless entertainment it offers forms a substantial part of its appeal. But this ease cannot begin to explain why, among the infinitude of diversions available today, it is Facebook alone that has, with 2.1 billion active users—over a quarter of the human race—conquered the known world ("Company Info"). How could a platform restricting identity become such a popular tool for doing exactly that?

Perhaps the only effective way to gain insight into the heroin-like spell Facebook holds over its users is to examine other, older forms of distraction. In his essay "The World of Wrestling," Roland Barthes makes a semiotic analysis of amateur wrestling to argue that its exaggerated gestures and characterizations communicate clear and easily recognizable themes of Good and "Evil, and . . . a Justice which is at last intelligible" (210). The appeal of wrestling, Barthes concludes, comes from the contrasting lack of clarity and comprehensibility in the real world. Smith likewise discusses a type of incomprehensibility. However, rather than focusing on the lack of an easily understandable justice in the world, she turns her attention to the opacity of identity: both of others and of the self. She believes that the rise of Facebook comes at the cost of the "private person, a person who is a mystery, to the world and . . . to herself" (656). Facebook removes any type of mystery from the "2.0 Person," as Smith calls this person, not by elucidating the hidden, but by truncating those parts of an identity which cannot be understood. Barthes's discussion of wrestling as a symbolic clarification of indecipherable realities, then, helps explain why Facebook is so addicting: it satisfies our unquenchable desire to categorize and polish online personas that mask the "[p]erson as mystery" (Smith 656). In the same way that wrestling offers viewers a reprieve from the incoherence of the universe by presenting at least the illusion of justice and destiny, Facebook allows 2.0 People to enter a space where their 'friends,' rather than being messy, complex creatures, are easily comprehensible and have been reduced to neat, categorized questions and answers: "What is your relationship status? (Choose one. There can be only one answer)" (Smith 656). Facebook furthermore provides the opportunity to curate precisely who these friends are, allowing a user to create a private world where everything from

people to politics conforms to their understanding of the world. When viewed in this light, it becomes clear that the profiles portrayed on Facebook are as much a spectacle as any play or wrestling match. While wrestling provides a simulated relief from the “constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations,” Facebook offers a simplification of the world itself, in which the indecipherable complexities of both the user’s and everyone else’s identities are swept away (Barthes 210). The website addresses a yearning to understand others with an illusory image that seems, if nothing else, to make sense.

If the appeal of Facebook results from a desire to fully understand other people, then the question naturally follows: *Why* are humans so compelled to seek clarity in the identities of those around them? This is one of the questions *Persona*, a 1966 film by Ingmar Bergman, attempts to answer. In the film, the protagonist, a nurse named Alma, is tasked with caring for Lisabet Vogler, a famous stage actress who has inexplicably gone mute despite being in perfect mental and physical health. A large part of the film consists of Alma attempting to, sometimes desperately, decode who Lisabet is and why she would choose to cling so stubbornly to silence. Despite her early theories, which range from the silence being a demonstration of great mental strength to simply being a result of complete and utter apathy for the outside world, Alma is thwarted at every attempt to unravel Lisabet’s mystery. As the film nears its end, rather than becoming more certain about Lisabet’s nature, Alma begins questioning her own identity. At the very end of the film, Alma can be seen desperately screaming to herself, “I’m not Elisabet Vogler!” as if she were scared that, in fact, they *were* the same person (*Persona*). Here, Bergman draws a chilling conclusion. By delving deeper into the mystery of another person, rather than unearthing a comprehensible truth, Alma becomes more aware of the terrifying and utterly unresolvable mystery within herself. Bergman thus posits that our desire to understand others ultimately derives from the desperate need to understand ourselves. This insight clarifies, at the most fundamental level, why we are so attracted to simplified online profiles: seeing others’ identities reduced to comprehensible versions of themselves alleviates our own fear of the mysteries within. Facebook is a spectacle that offers relief from our own indecipherable identities. This explains why we are drawn not only to read-

ing others' reduced profiles, but also to chopping away at our own identities until they fit within the parameters of Facebook's software.

Smith argues that unlike Person 1.0—a member of the pre-Facebook generations—Person 2.0 is in danger of having “no interiority” (656). 1.0 People embrace the confusion within themselves, like the characters in a novel Smith teaches, who seem to say: “*What’s inside of me is none your business*” (656). Smith worries that 2.0 People instead cater their identities to others' expectations because, for them, “not being liked is as bad as it gets” (656, 654). However, if the rise of Facebook is truly caused by a flight from uncertainty about one's identity, the fear of this uncertainty must be proportional to Facebook's popularity. In other words, it must be utterly gigantic. So it seems odd to suggest, as Smith does, that mystery must have been the natural and accepted bedrock of identity before Facebook. If identity anxiety has always been at the core of the human conception of selfhood, and spectacle, such as that manifested on Facebook, the remedy for this anxiety, then it naturally follows that spectacle, rather than emerging with Facebook, has accompanied the self *ab initio*. Performance *is*, and always has been, the most accessible form of identity.

Furthermore, although Smith argues that Facebook has reduced selfhood to a spectacle, there are countless examples of identity as performance predating the Facebook era, one of which is the aforementioned film *Persona*. Early in the movie, Alma's boss theorizes that Lisabet refuses to speak because of “the chasm between what you are to others and to yourself . . . [e]very tone of voice a lie, every gesture a falsehood” (*Persona*). She finally concludes that only by falling silent can Lisabet avoid lying. Later in the scene, when discussing people's exterior actions, she states that “No one asks if it's real or unreal, if you're true or false. It's only in the theatre the question carries weight. Hardly even there” (*Persona*). In other words, the question of truth in identity, much like in theater, wrestling, or any other spectacle, is a pointless one because identity, by its nature, is performance. As Barthes puts it, in spectacle, it doesn't matter “whether the passion is genuine or not. What the public wants is the image of passion . . . what is expected is the . . . emptying out of interiority to the benefit of its exterior signs” (205). Later in the film, Alma again reinforces

this point: “Is it really important not to lie . . . maybe you become a little better if you just let yourself be what you are” (*Persona*). Alma, by equating the idea of ‘being yourself’ with lies, is pointing out that performance is the natural, and possibly only, state of the self.

When the characters’ false identities finally begin to break down, the audience gets a momentary glimpse at what is underneath. After discovering that Lisabet has been divulging some of Alma’s most intimate secrets through letters to the head nurse, Alma becomes physically violent, cutting Lisabet with a glass shard, slapping her, and threatening to douse her with boiling water. While Alma’s performance of stoic kindness breaks down, Lisabet finally breaks her silence when she begs for her life with the words “Please, no” (*Persona*). Both women have momentarily let go of an obsession with how they are perceived and, rather than reveal a complex character underneath, they reveal two simple, animalistic passions: wrath and fear. Lisabet’s husband also expresses the idea that identities simply mask animalistic impulses. He describes humans as “filled with good will and the best intentions . . . but governed by forces we only partially control” (*Persona*). Bergman suggests that beneath the performances humans inhabit, rather than a complex, mysterious core beyond our understanding, as Smith would believe, there exists nothing more than a collection of basic impulses. *Persona* had already depicted the film reel itself burning up, long before the women physically attack each other. Behind the image, there is nothing.

It has crossed my mind more than once that *I* may be one of Smith’s 2.0 People, projecting my ‘interiorlessness’ onto the rest of the world. If I were, I certainly would have no way of knowing. Even if I am, however, when prompted by “Be yourself” to look within, I think most people would find an amalgam of personal facts, raw emotions, and a vast amount of uncertainty, inciting the fear that all this mystery shrouds a great nothingness. Perhaps this is what drives spectators to wrestling rings. They want reassurance that there really is justice and morality in the world. And perhaps it is this fear that compels us to find an alternative to the mystery and to create an identity that is clear—even if merely a charade. In this sense, Facebook is not new, but merely the most recent iteration of a tradition as old as language itself.

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