Instant Selves: Algorithmic Autobiographies on Social Network Sites

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Broadcast Yourself

When YouTube switched its welcoming slogan in 2006 from a self-description ("Your Digital Video Repository") to a summons ("Broadcast Yourself"), at least rhetorically it linked the 1980s dictum of self-fulfillment—"Experience your Life"—with the maxim for self-exploration of the 1990s: "Recount Yourself."[1] Facebook does this in a similar way, inviting its members to share their lives extensively with others via a continual posting of developing personal circumstances. Since this request, or rather expectation, implicitly preaches hedonism, social networks are both biotopes and stress tests for *Generation Me*.[2] Those who are unable to present attractive experiences become socially disqualified—especially in the Facebook environment. Manipulating one's narratives is an inevitable consequence of this constellation, accompanied by depression (when one's own life pales in comparison with the glamour of the others), self-delusion (when recalling one's fictional past as one's genuine past),[3] and banality (when trivia is treated as information).

No term is ever innocent. It is no surprise that the social network industry operates with positively connoted terms such as "transparency," which

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1. Schulze, *Erlebnisgesellschaft*, 58–59; Thomä, *Erzähle dich selbst*.
2. Twenge, *Generation Me*.
3. The aspect of depression is observed in several studies. Relevant is Chou and Edge, "'They Are Happier.'"

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implies that the obsessive publicizing of one's own life benefits the social. Mark Zuckerberg's equation of greater transparency with a better world is notorious. The not always ironical rhyme "sharing is caring" denounces reserved detachment as asocial behavior: "Privacy is theft," as in the maxim of tech giant *The Circle* in Dave Eggers's eponymous dystopia.[4] The flip side to this terminological embellishment is a terminological depreciation, as in when "transparency" becomes "exhibitionism" and "narcissism."[5] The problem with such blanket verdicts is that they do not take into account that the idea of transparency has historical roots in the arts and in social utopias. Already in the early twentieth century the transparent man was invoked both by communist ideology and by avant-garde art as an alternative to bourgeois identity. Similarly, the public exposure of private life in digital media was initially intended to subvert mainstream culture.[6]

The phenomenon of the public self that we observe online today cannot be understood without a reflection on the twentieth century, or the *Century of the Self*—the title of a 2002 documentary film by Adam Curtis. Since the late 1940s (psychoanalytic) theory defined the narcissist no longer as an "Id" that wants to assert itself against the "Ego" but as an "Ego" that rebels against an alienating and conformist world. *The Search for the Self*, the title of a 1978 book by Heinz Kohut, had become a positive element of the identity formation since the 1970s and the basis for different movements of emancipation against the old order: for youth, for women, for homosexuals, and for the new Left.

It would be a mistake to dismiss the end of modesty (symbolized by excessive self-presentation in social networks) with Andy Warhol's maxim of "15 minutes of fame." While this search for the self begins as a nonconformist alternative to the unsuccessful group activism of the 1960s and 1970s, it is eventually co-opted by capitalism, which sells it as a lifestyle. Emancipation of the self—this is the cultural tragedy of this historic process—is finally reduced to consumption as its basic mode of expression. Nowadays, within the framework of social networks, self-expression enlists consumer culture in three additional ways: it demonstrates consumer competence, it provides a basis for customized advertisement, and it undermines resistance to this social constel-

4. Eggers, *Circle*, 305.

5. Deresiewicz speaks on behalf of many when he defines the compulsion to share as a "kind of exhibitionism" and as "faintly obscene"("Faux Friendship").

6. The protagonists of this "artistic self-monitoring" are Jennifer Ringley (who publicized the events in her apartment on the website JenniCam from 1996 to 2003 by using a camera) and Josh Harris (who—apart from other projects—publicized his life with his partner in the same way); see Ondi Timoner's documentary film *We Live Public* (2010).

lation. The thesis I propose here is that intensified self-presentation does not necessarily lead to or coincide with increased self-reflection; on the contrary—in the course of its taking account of itself, the self simultaneously loses itself.

Episodic Self-Experience

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:[7] images, contexts (one's list of friends, the events one attends, the groups to which one subscribes, one's favorite books, etc.) and spontaneous activities (visits, likes, shares, and short comments) prevail over written personal accounts.

Even less intentional or conscious is self-presentation by way of activity on external sites that automatically link up to one's own Facebook feed. The cue for this was announced in 2011 at the Facebook Developer Conference F8, with the term *frictionless sharing*. Two examples of its technical implementation were "Beacon," which failed in 2007 because of user protest, and "Ticker," an automated message generator for "lighter-weight" information (i.e., songs listened to on Spotify or films watched on Netflix). Frictionless sharing exemplifies the change from a deliberate action to a more or less subconscious automatism through which the message loses its value as something that—from the perspective of the sender—is worth sharing. People no longer describe themselves implicitly through their actions: rather, actions "present" themselves without an intermediary. With a nod to Siegfried Kracauer's famous distinction between the paradigms of painting as a materialization of *how* something is perceived and that of photography as a mere recording of the material, we could say that descriptions in social networks become photographic: "For in the artwork [i.e., the painting] the meaning of the object takes on spatial appearance, whereas in photography the spatial appearance of an object is its meaning."[8]

Moving beyond the instances of automated recording, one needs to examine the extent to which writing on Facebook as a deliberate mode of self-presentation displays self-awareness. Contrary to classic forms of self-description, self-profiling in query language does not require narrative competence. As Ramón Reichert has registered in his analysis of network cultures: "To be locatable in the grid of the e-form, linear and narrative knowledge must be

7. Zhao, Grassmuck, and Martin, "Identity Construction on Facebook."
8. Kracauer, "Photography," 427.

broken up into informational units. These form-immanent rules underlie the authority of the e-form."[9] Inevitably the authority of the form is cultural, since the data queries enforce certain preestablished criteria for how we look at ourselves. Less formalized, less compulsory are status reports, commentaries, and life events that, like the ephemeral narratives of everyday life, can be understood as "small stories."[10]

These small stories, as Ruth Page argues, may present the plotline of a grander narrative that is then generated outside Facebook by the "narrator's" "friends," who also know quite a bit about him or her offline and who can then imaginatively fill in the blanks within the "self-contained units" of the updates and "infer narrative-like connections not explicitly articulated in the updates themselves."[11] Page refers to Paul Ricoeur in her analysis of individual status updates, classifying them as an "attempt to 'make time human' by selecting particular events as worthy of narration."[12] While it remains to be seen how probable the "'fill[ing] in the gaps' between status updates, online and offline experience" is, the actual problem does not lie in the outsourcing of such narrative acts—or in the switch from "linear connections between individual entries" to a "pointillist technique" of the entries—but in the ambiguous authorship of such "self-portrait[s]."[13]

One can hardly assume that status updates are organized and reflected on, or in other words, that they would fit into Ricoeur's framework. In the end the small stories do not establish a pointillist self-portrait (which despite the discrete technique of the brush is created intentionally and "retrospectively"), but—if one wants to remain with the analogy—they correspond to the episodic "moments into which the pointillist time of liquid modernity is sliced,"[14] as Zygmunt Bauman would have it. 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). Bauman's term *pointillist time* corresponds both to his description of postmodern identity as liberation from compulsory life scripts and as loss of a coherent life story in which the individual stages can be recounted as the necessary elements of a whole. Human beings, he maintains, are no longer pilgrims on the way to themselves but tourists who want
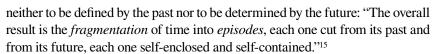
9. Reichert, "Back-End Science."
10. Page, "Re-examining Narrativity."
11. Ibid., 437.
12. Ibid., 428.
13. Ibid., 440.

neither to be defined by the past nor to be determined by the future: "The overall result is the *fragmentation* of time into *episodes*, each one cut from its past and from its future, each one self-enclosed and self-contained."[15]

The identity concept of an "arbitrary sequence of present moments" described by Bauman as "a *continuous present*"[16] is buttressed by the British philosopher Galen Strawson, whose article programmatically titled "Against Narrativity" (2004) differentiates between *diachronic* and *episodic* self-experience: "The basic form of Diachronic self-experience is that . . . one naturally figures oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future. . . . If one is Episodic, by contrast, one does not figure oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future."[17] Strawson's perspective is expressly directed against the "dominant view in the academy today" that argues both psychologically and ethically that one becomes a person only by way of the autobiographical narrative.[18] Strawson contradicts the imperative of "*Bildung* or 'quest'"—which in a way transfers the modern concept of progress to the individual—with a proof of his own ("My own conviction is that the best lives almost never involve this kind of self-telling"). His argument is that because of its coherence bias, narrative activity inevitably leads to fiction and falsification, and ultimately blocks the attempt to understand oneself.[19]

By focusing on a "life in the present moment," Strawson answers all those wanting to describe a present with the traditional criteria of identity, authenticity, and coherence while other values like hybridity, change, and instantaneousness have long since been characterizing the activities and the self-conception of the self. Apart from his praise of episodic self-conception, his criticism of narrative self-reflection as a potential distortion is interesting for the present discussion. His perspective is much closer to the practices on Facebook than Page's attempt to reconcile the communicative processes in

14. Bauman, "Privacy, Secrecy, Intimacy, Human Bonds, Utopia," 21.
15. Bauman, "From Pilgrim to Tourist," 25.
16. Ibid., 24.
17. Strawson, "Against Narrativity," 430.
18. Ibid., 429. Strawson quotes, among others, Jerry Bruner, Marya Schechtmann, and Paul Ricoeur: "How, indeed, could a subject of action give an ethical character to his or her own life taken as a whole if this life were not gathered together in some way, and how could this occur if not, precisely, in the form of a narrative?" He also quotes Charles Taylor: "Basic condition of making sense of ourselves . . . is that we grasp our lives in a narrative . . . as an unfolding story" (436).
19. Ibid., 441, 437.

social networks with Ricoeur's thesis of narrativity and narrative psychology. For it is Facebook's social and technical dispositif that, on the one hand, fosters episodic self-presentation and self-experience—"recency is prized over retrospection" (also in Page's findings)[20]—and, on the other, only horizontally permits linkage within the network and beyond, but not vertically between the updates of one's own existence. At the same time, Facebook replaces the unreliable first-person narrator at the front end of the interface with an incorruptible (re)counter at the back end.

Raw Data

It is general knowledge that Facebook is a gigantic database that creates data sets with about sixty categories for every user.[21] At the back end of the interface, the data, previously dissected via queries, are recombined in a double way: into individual user profiles and into user networks. Thus the chronological, vertical structure of an individual's life is amended by a topological, horizontal grid of interpersonal relations. The best working basis for such profiling is not the subjective construction of one's own history but the objective, automated recording and collection of data. Even though *raw data* is an oxymoron[22]—and provided that one accepts an ontological differentiation between the terms *data*, *information*, *knowledge*, and *Bildung*—from the perspective of the interface's back end all narrative work at the front end, that is, the selective and strategic account by the individual, is a distortion of data.

The algorithmic re/counting on Facebook is the equivalent to the "numerical narration" of the quantified-self movement that favors "self knowledge through numbers"[23] over the subjectivity of narrative self-observation. But the shift to numbers only avoids the distortion by the subject if it occurs simultaneously as a shift from its consciousness to its body, that is, when the data are automatically created by the body "itself." This is what the concept of frictionless sharing, that is in no way limited to Facebook, aims at. Examples

20. Page, "Re-examining Narrativity," 440.

21. For details, see europe-v-facebook.org/DE/Datenbestand/datenbestand.html.

22. Gitelman, *"Raw Data" Is an Oxymoron*; see the Semantic Web rhetoric of "raw data," for example, in the promotional video on the European Linked Open Data project (player.vimeo.com/video/36752317).

23. See quantifiedself.com. The term *numerical narratives* originally described bureaucratically organized information of health care; see Coutinho, Bisht, and Raje, "Numerical Narratives." One Facebook collaborator, Nicholas Felton, uses it for the statistical representation of his life routine ("Numerical Narratives").

are the GPS data that one volitionally but subconsciously creates, or the Four-square app Swarm, introduced in 2014, which rendered automatic the manu-ally and selectively created check-ins.[24]

To a certain extent, this "shift from human-generated to machine-gener-ated self-representations"[25] is also carried out on Facebook. The externaliza-tion of authorship ranges from the standardization of queries (e-forms) to the automated reports on activities in the net; from the unsolicited montage of one's posts with commentaries and updates of friends to the "shadow biogra-phers," that is, the algorithms, "telling users about themselves while telling the site and its advertisers about the users."[26] As to the latter, according to Laurie McNeill, the "algorithmic auto/biography" on Facebook is "collaboratively, if not consensually, coproduced in ways that suggest that the subject of Facebook is the product of a posthuman process."[27]

McNeill's comment is not meant as a criticism. Referring to N. Kath-erine Hayles's *How We Became Posthuman* and her notion that "conscious agency has never been 'in control,'" McNeill concludes: "Perhaps personal narrative, then, to borrow Katherine Hayles's description of humans, 'has always been posthuman' (291), a prospect that makes the apparently paradoxi-cal a productive frame for rethinking how we craft and consume selves."[28] Does the taking over of autobiographical writing by networks and algorithms neutralize the usual strategies of self-deception that humans employ when tak-ing account of themselves? Does the machinic auto/narration, in its objectivity, force a confrontation with one's other? Does the change from words to num-bers lead to the withering of self-narrative and thus to the loss of reflexive practice that is at the heart of subjectivation?[29]

These questions need to be explored on the basis of comprehensive empirical studies that cannot be undertaken here. In this article the aim has

24. The reason for this readjustment illustrates once again to what extent the technical dispositif of self-presentation in social networks is characterized by economy. See Walker-Rettberg, *Seeing Ourselves*, 77–78: "Foursquare and Swarm are moving away from being shared diaries to being com-mercial marketing platforms that represent us to our friends in order to convince our friends to buy certain services rather than others."

25. Ibid.

26. McNeill, "There Is No 'I' in Network," 73.

27. Ibid., 74. McNeill also notes that "agency, seen as so key to the humanist subject, has been transferred to the software that reads and produces users. Where, indeed, do we end and Facebook begins?" (79).

28. Ibid., 80. The internal quote to be found in Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 288, as is the quote for "conscious agency."

29. Polkinghorne, "Narrative and Self-Concept," 136: "Narrative is the cognitive process that gives meaning to temporal events by identifying them as parts of a plot."

been to register the shift toward the posthuman narration of the self in three steps: (1) from the word to the number when description is replaced by statistic reports (i.e., the quantification of feedback broken down into units of "likes" and "shares," or the quantified-self movement); (2) from mechanics to automatics when subjects cease to submit reports consciously (i.e., checking in manually on Foursquare) and authorize the automatic transfer of data; (3) from option to compulsion when the retrieval and analysis of data are no longer initiated by the producers (and "owners") of the data but are enforced by employers, insurance companies, and governing authorities, or are covertly gathered.

That the shift from the narrative to the numeric does not lead to a biographical account as demanded by the ethical narrativity thesis is clear. The surprising twist is that such biographical account is not the actual aim of self-expression on Facebook and other social networks. In fact, the furor around the oversharing culture masks a much bleaker reality: the need to escape from oneself.
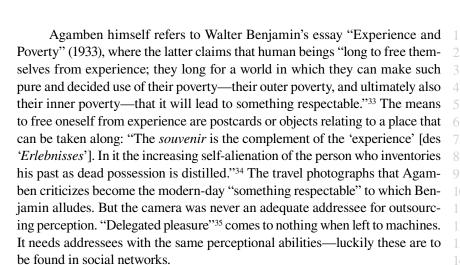
Present Shock

The typical explanation for the obsessive sharing on social networks is our addiction to positive feedback, there represented by "likes" and "shares." As Bauman notes, we document our "being-in-the-world" according to the motto: "I am seen (watched, noted, recorded) therefore I am."[30] The philosopher Wendy Brown aims at less obvious reasons when she explains the readiness to publicly reveal the private with the decline in modern man's ability to experience. "If we are subjects increasingly incapable of experience in the Benjaminian and Agambenian sense, might this incapacity be a key to understand our own complicity in an order increasingly indifferent to distinctions between public and private space, and hence private and public experience?"[31]

The reference to Giorgio Agamben alludes to his 1978 statement that experience is delegated to the camera: "Standing face to face with one of the great wonders of the world (let us say the *patio de los leones* in the Alhambra) the overwhelming majority of people have no wish to experience it, preferring instead that the camera should."[32] Unfortunately, Brown does not expand on this statement. If one does, one will immediately confirm the relevance of Agamben's observation, which now is true even of rock concerts.

30. Bauman, *Liquid Surveillance*, 130.
31. Brown, "'Subject of Privacy,'" 140.
32. Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 17.

Agamben himself refers to Walter Benjamin's essay "Experience and Poverty" (1933), where the latter claims that human beings "long to free themselves from experience; they long for a world in which they can make such pure and decided use of their poverty—their outer poverty, and ultimately also their inner poverty—that it will lead to something respectable."[33] The means to free oneself from experience are postcards or objects relating to a place that can be taken along: "The *souvenir* is the complement of the 'experience' [des *'Erlebnisses'*]. In it the increasing self-alienation of the person who inventories his past as dead possession is distilled."[34] The travel photographs that Agamben criticizes become the modern-day "something respectable" to which Benjamin alludes. But the camera was never an adequate addressee for outsourcing perception. "Delegated pleasure"[35] comes to nothing when left to machines. It needs addressees with the same perceptional abilities—luckily these are to be found in social networks.

In the second of their *10 Web 2.0 Theses* in 2009, Ippolita, Geert Lovink, and Ned Rossiter comment on the function of social networks: "We initially love them for their distraction from the torture of now-time. Networking sites are social drugs for those in need of the Human that is located elsewhere in time or space."[36] "Torture of now-time" sounds questionably vague—but with Agamben and Blaise Pascal we can hone it into flight from the present. Social networks are the salvation from inner emptiness while, as Agamben put it, "standing face to face" with the wonders of the world. Even in everyday life they rescue us from the empty room in which—according to Pascal in the seventeenth century—without god's solace, human beings realize their mortal condition.[37] The "torture of now-time" is the translation of the *horror vacui* into contemporary parlance. Today, not only have the theological groundings of individual life lost their persuasive value (i.e., God is dead), but the teleological secular certainties fail to guide us (i.e., end of grand narratives). The end of emotional security within narration as announced by Bauman and as defended by Strawson has existential consequences to which the social networks are the answer. They enable a way to escape from the *Present Shock*—the title of a book by Douglas Rushkoff from 2014—into the time of the social network.

33. Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 734.
34. Benjamin, "Central Park," 49.
35. Pfaller, *Interpassivität*.
36. Ippolita, Lovink, and Rossiter, "Digital Given."
37. Pascal, *Thoughts*, nos. 136–39.

In the era of social networks, sharing transforms the lived moment in a threefold way: (1) by shooting a photo on-site, (2) by uploading it into the network, (3) by occupying oneself with the feedbacks starting directly after the upload and including the catching up with the updates of others. The report of the here and now to others catapults from the lived present into the parallel world of the social network. The camera is not the medium for the booty; it is the protective shield that allows one to flee from the lingering moment—the "Torture of the Now"—into the hustle and bustle of communication. One sees reality only through the "Facebook Eye," that is, in terms of how lived experience could best be presented to the "friends" and how it generates the most "likes."[38] Those who overlook the *horror vacui* behind the need for recognition twist the causal relation and mistake the social network for the source of the oversharing when it is in fact the perfect solution to an old problem. Not that the social network prevents real life; it is the loss of a real life that makes the social network so attractive as a decent—or respectable—way out.

In pursuing this thesis, Generation Me is "exhibitionist" not because it is narcissistic (or because it has been defenselessly persuaded into the permanent production of personal data) but because it cannot bear the present or itself—and it cannot bear the present because it has lost the past as a source of meaning and the future as an orientation to a goal. The other persons somewhere in space and time are "therapeutic partners." Publicizing the self is a flight from oneself and toward the "homeland" of the network. The network is therefore not (only) to be understood as a theater stage and a form of self-branding or as a place of monitoring and exploitation: It (also) is a support group in times of need, allowing its members to delegate their experiences to each other in the "group cuddling" of the likes.[39]

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38. Jurgendson, "Facebook Eye."

39. The thesis of self-presentation as flight from the self can only be sketched here. I have developed it extensively in my study *Facebook-Gesellschaft*, forthcoming in English in 2017.

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