

**THE NETWORK AND THE VOID:
MYTH AND SPECTACLE OF THE MEDIATIZED SELF
IN PERSONAL BLOGS**

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SUMMARY

This thesis presents an analysis of the myths and spectacle that form part of the discourse of personal blogging. Using Roland Barthes's mythological framework, this thesis interprets blogging discourse as a two-tiered structure. On one hand, the discourse of blogging presents a comparatively denotative level in which it asserts itself as a sum of self-evident motivations such as self-documentation, the love of writing, sharing, and virtual community. On the other hand, the discourse of blogging also reveals a connotative level in which it represents a deeper level of meaning that includes the desire for the technologized articulation, manifestation, and validation of an enhanced yet authentic mode of selfhood. This technologized mode of selfhood can be interpreted as a form of 'mediatization' of the self, which is simultaneously spectacular and mythical. On one hand, the mediatization of the self in blogs can be interpreted as spectacular in its ability to enhance bloggers' self-presentations through the use of technical affordances such as asynchronous communication, pliability of presentation, and assigned channels for validation. On the other hand, the mediatization of the self in blogs can be interpreted as mythical in its ability to inspire a sense of transcendence of bloggers' unmediated existence, a sense of unbridled possibility in bloggers' technologized presentation of self, as well as a sense of infinite connectivity of that self to communicative others. Despite its conferral of meaning, pleasure and promise, the myths and spectacle of blogging's mediatized self seems to be rooted in a consumerist mode of selfhood that is narcissistic, asocial, and unrealizable. Despite its comparatively denotative assertions of altruism and community, blogging's desire for validation appears to designate the communicative other as a mirror for the vanities of the self, in a process that seems to devalue and mechanize the texture, meaning and integrity of the communicative act. Also,

blogging's desire for the technologized transcendence of the unmediated self is reliant on the technical and material conditions of its mediatization, conditions that seem to project an ultimately superficial and unsustainable spectacle of self.

Hello universe,

If I write this, does it really matter? In one hundred years I will be long forgotten, no one will know my name. My life is only just a speck in the history of time. Not only that, I am one of the billion specks on this planet. So do I really matter? Do I have a purpose – or am I just wasting my time?

- I Blog, Therefore I am, Book of Blogs, Inc¹.

Introduction:

The Manifest and Ineffable

There are over seventy million blogs adrift in the blogosphere. Every second, a new blog is created.² Every second, someone somewhere stamps her pseudonym on an electronic document and sends it off into the electronic ether, with a message for the universe, with a query, a request, a plea: this is me, is anyone out there? For some, blogging starts out with this vague ontological longing. This thesis begins with the simple question of why people blog. Why are so many people writing about their personal lives, thoughts and feelings, with their associated banalities and secrecies, for potentially anyone to read? At first the answer seems rather commonsensical. Several social scientific studies have attempted to answer this question with comparable results.

¹ This passage is extracted from the opening quotation from the book, *I Blog, Therefore I Am*, a collection of emotive blog posts compiled by Peter Wojtowicz.

² These statistics are obtained from the latest 'State of the Blogosphere' report compiled by Dave Sifry for the leading blog tracker Technorati.com. Based on their April 2007 report, Technorati is now tracking over 70 million weblogs, with 120,000 new weblogs being created worldwide each day. That amounts to about 1.4 blogs created every second of every day.

These studies cite diverse reasons for blogging that range from the love of writing to the wish to document one's lives. In their quantitative work for the Pew Internet and American Life Project, Amanda Lenhart and Susannah Fox (2006) found that of the bloggers surveyed, a majority cited creative expression and the sharing of personal experiences as the primary motivations for blogging. Notably, this study also found that while blogs cover a wide variety of topics that ranged from politics and sport to hobbies and religion, the most popular topic among bloggers was in fact, their life and experiences. In other words, the personal blog, which is the focus of this thesis, was the most common type among bloggers.³ Other motivations for blogging cited by this study included staying in touch with family and friends, entertaining people, sharing of practical knowledge or skills with others, and meeting new people. Likewise, in their qualitative interviews with American bloggers, Bonnie Nardi and her colleagues (2004) found that bloggers were prompted by the motivation to document their lives, to express themselves through writing, to comment on issues important to them, and to form and maintain community forums.

Interestingly, Lenhart and Fox (2006) also found that despite the public nature of creating a blog, most bloggers viewed it as a personal pursuit. This resonates with Kaye Trammell et al's (2006) content analysis of Polish blogs, which suggest that bloggers are motivated more by self-expression than by social interactions. In another content analysis, Zizi Papacharissi (2007) concurs that even though bloggers invited their potential readers to participate, bloggers did not seem overly concerned about the incidence or content of reader feedback. This seems contradictory because the defining characteristic of a blog, as compared to

³ In their nationally representative telephone survey, Lenhart and Fox found that fifty-two percent of bloggers cited creative expression as their primary motivation for blogging, while thirty-seven percent of bloggers reported that their life and experiences was a primary topic of their blogs.

a personal homepage, or a written diary is its affordance of communication between the blogger and their community of readers. Addressing this affordance, other scholars from the field of literary and biographical studies insist that blogging is primarily a communicative instead of an introspective practice. Interpreting personal blogs as a form of 'life writing', these studies compare blogs to the practices of autobiography and diary writing. For example, in a special issue on blogging for the journal *Biography*, Madeline Sorapure (2003) offers that in contrast to the solitary and private reflection of traditional diary writing, blogging is concerned primarily with communication and community. She elaborates that bloggers actively pursue a wide readership and are highly reflexive about their readers' feedback. In the same issue, John Zuern (2003) adds that blogging is motivated primarily by the desire for positive reinforcement gained through online popularity and feedback.

After this very brief survey of the related literature, it seems that the initial obviousness of the reasons for blogging dissolves into a diversity that resounds with its own insignificance – different people simply have blogs for different reasons. This diversity however, splinters off into a dichotomy of blogging for intrinsic reasons such as self-expression or documentation, and blogging for extrinsic reasons such as sharing or communicating with others. However, I will suggest that this dichotomy can be interpreted as a false opposition. It is possible that blogging is not primarily intrinsic or extrinsic, personal or public, but both. However, both social scientific and literary approaches seem to be unable to grasp this crucial point because of their respective heuristic limitations. On one hand, quantitative studies seem to be unable to account for biases of social desirability that respondents may yield to when confronted by the topic of the public display

of personal life, which may hold pejorative connotations of vanity and narcissism. This does not mean that these researchers are erroneous or that their respondents are insincere. It is just that motivations or desires for blogging may not be categorical or self-transparent.

On the other hand, Andreas Kitzmann (2003) offers that the comparative strategy used by literary studies is limited in its assumptions of linearity, hierarchy, and categorical relation. This might be because personal blogs are *not* written diaries that have *simply* migrated online. In response to this sort of heuristic limitation, Susan Herring and her colleagues (2005) suggest that the genre of blogs exists in relation to both electronic genres such as homepages and newsgroups and non-electronic genres such as diaries and letters, which form part of a larger communicative ecology. Therefore, the relationship between the supposed privacy of the diary and publicity of the web is not simply one of opposition and merger, but can be interpreted in terms of its purpose within the larger discursive scheme of blogging. In sum, both these approaches might lack the flexibility needed to understand the ambiguity and complexity of blogging, and to confront the false opposition between its intrinsic and the extrinsic motivations.

Blogging seems at once self-evident and ineffable, straightforward and tortuous. On one hand, some bloggers state that they blog for unambiguous reasons such as the love of writing or to communicate with others, reasons which are identified in the aforementioned social scientific literature. On the other hand, these same bloggers admit that “if I thought about it at length, there’s no doubt some deep psychological aspect to it.”⁴ Reiterating this paradoxical sentiment,

⁴ This quotation is from the post ‘Meme: Why Do I Do This?’ in the blog *Michael-in-Norfolk*.

another blogger notes that, “hundreds of pages could be filled or just a sentence might capture some of the depth behind blogging.”⁵ It is the contradiction between this seemingly self-evident truth and its imperceptible depth that gestures towards the mythical quality of blogging. Myth has two well documented meanings: the first refers to myth as an untruth or a fiction, while the second refers to myth as a story which serves to explain the collective worldview, values and desires of a people. Vincent Mosco (2004) elaborates in addition to seeing myths as a distortion of truth or reality, myths can be interpreted as forms of reality because of the ways in which they give meaning to life, by helping people make sense of the seemingly incomprehensible, and by lifting them out of the banality of everyday life.

Therefore, to understand the myths that inform the practice of blogging, one needs to penetrate its ineffability, decipher its contradictions, and work out the ways in which it confers meaning onto everyday life. However, in addition to analyzing the ways in which myth creates meaning, I will also suggest how myth distorts meaning. The mythical enchantment of everyday life imposes a *certain* worldview over others, and in doing so, enacts a concealment of some meanings and the interested promotion of others. To understand blogging in relation to the mythic discourses that surround and support it, I will employ Roland Barthes’s framework of mythology. In his celebrated essay ‘Myth Today’, Barthes provides an invaluable framework to define and decipher contemporary myth in a methodical fashion. For Barthes (1972, 11), the defining quality of mythical discourse is its naturalization of history, and the purpose of demystification is to “track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the

⁵ This quotation is by the author of the blog *Media Dragon*, and was sourced from the compilation of ‘Why I blog’ posts on <http://deepblog.com/whyiblog.0.html>

ideological abuse which, in my view is hidden there.” Myth performs this ideological abuse through a two-tiered structure, and therein advances two messages – one seemingly denotative and literal, and the other more connotative and functional. This duplicity seems to parallel the aforementioned manifest and ineffable qualities of the blogging myth and will be the starting point of my analysis.

Before proceeding to outline my analysis, I shall make some brief points on the mythological ‘raw material’ from which I base my arguments. According to Barthes’s framework, the easiest way to access myth is by first examining its ostensibly denotative and seemingly literal meanings. In the case of blogging, these denotative meanings may be found in the reasons people gave for why they blog, which was sourced from blog posts entitled ‘why I blog’. Using these search terms, I collected a body of texts in which bloggers reflected on how they started blogging, why they continue to blog and what it means to them. This thesis is predominantly interested in personal blogs, in which ordinary bloggers write about their everyday experiences, thoughts and interests. Therefore, blog posts were chosen based on this general criterion.

Notably, my intention is not generalize the present reading to any population of bloggers, nor is it to provide a comprehensive or universal theory of personal blogging. In his preface to *Mythologies*, Barthes (1972) offers that the task of demystification is not an Olympian operation and should not be measured against the conventional polarities of objectivity and subjectivity. Rather, Barthes believes that the reading of myth is necessarily led by the mythologist’s own intellectual judgment and political agenda. Just as Barthes’s used his mythological framework to critique a French bourgeois culture that was becoming increasingly

consumerist, I will generate a reading of blogging culture by engaging with the mythic discourses of consumerism that inform it. In line with this position, these posts were read as a cultural text, as an ongoing product of exchanges between the blogger, their audience, and the cultural and subcultural context that they inhabit. Using the framework of textual analysis outlined by Alan Mckee (2003), this reading was contextualized through the use of texts such as blogging handbooks, as well as popular commentaries on the blogging phenomenon. Accordingly, these texts were used to construct an interpretation of bloggers' sense-making practices and the consumerist structures that underlie it.

Using the analysis of these texts to flesh out my arguments, I will illustrate the mythic and spectacular qualities of blogging, and assess them in relation to contemporary selfhood and sociality. The first chapter will outline the seemingly denotative level of myth, as encapsulated by the spectrum of self-evident reasons for blogging such as self-documentation, the love of writing, the sharing of useful information, and the formation of virtual connections. These reasons appear to be understood by bloggers as belonging to two opposed categories – reasons which are intrinsic or for the self, where bloggers blogged for self-reflection and self-discovery, and reasons which are extrinsic or for others, where bloggers blogged as a means of communication with others. However instead of being fundamentally opposed, intrinsic and extrinsic reasons seem to be mutually implicated in a mythical system which requires the validation from the *other* for the actualization of the *self*. Using their antagonism as a ruse, these different reasons appear to enact a repetition of forms with a similar valence – they seem to be an excuse and an alibi for another level of meaning, that of the connotative.

The second chapter will examine the meanings of blogging's comparatively connotative level, by elaborating on the conspiratorial relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for blogging. I will suggest that the actualization of the self through the validation from others is a process shrouded by ambivalence because its purpose of narcissistic gratification must be obscured through a reversion to its comparatively denotative level. The consequent effect of this nexus of actualization, validation and gratification is a technologically-mediated mode of self-presentation and self-experience that can be usefully interpreted using the concept of 'mediatization'.

Subsequently, the third chapter will suggest that this mode of mediatization is not just mythical, it is also spectacular. As myth, the mediatized self seems to be *naturalized* through its insistence of authenticity. As spectacle, the mediatized self seems to be *enhanced* through the technologies of self-presentation. This can be interpreted as creating an arresting mode of selfhood which is indefinite yet essential, limitless yet pure. In other words, the tools of technologized mediatization might enable bloggers to enact a more glamorous, exciting and perpetually validated version of their ultimately *true* selves. Importantly, this strategic duality of mediatized selfhood appears to model itself on its progenitor, the consumerist self, and in doing so, seems to inherit the latter's obsessions, insecurities and exploitative tendencies.

The fourth chapter will explore the mythical meanings conjured by this connotative level to bestow onto blogging a certain enchantment. This enchantment can be observed in the myth of the 'network' and its fantasies of universal connectivity and limitless potentiality. The myth of the network, however, seems to entail a specific mode of social relation between bloggers and

their audience, a mode that appears to be predicated on mutual validation and gratification. I will suggest that some bloggers, separated from each other by the perceived immediacy and inconsequentiality of the screen, engage in a machinic form of communication, where their communicative other seems to be reduced to a machine-like resonance existing predominately for the purpose of automatic gratification. However, it might be possible that as the singularity of the communicative other degenerates into a wasteland of structural equivalence, so too does its power to validate dissipate into a sea of insignificance. It might be suggested that with the symbolic devaluation of this machine-like gratification, the mythical concept has to contend with its own perpetual betrayal; the sublime promise of infinite connectivity seems to dissipate into an ambivalent sense of futility, a futility that at the same time holds the seeds for the re-enchantment and perpetuation of its own mythic discourse.

Chapter 1: The Perpetual Alibi

The reasons for blogging can be compared to a stereogram, an image that is designed to produce a three dimensional optical illusion, which was popularized by the *Magic Eye* series in the nineties.⁶ At first the image seems like any other, made of abstract shapes and forms. But as one focuses intently at the image, or rather at the space beyond the image, the original pattern reveals a second layer of solidity and depth. Embedded within the original pattern is a three dimensional object that magically appears and disappears, depending on how it is viewed. The motivations for blogging present themselves in a similar way. On one hand, these motivations appear in a manifest manner, stated plainly and self-evidently. On the other hand, there seems to be a deeper more ineffable meaning to blogging. However, the seemingly obvious reasons for blogging are not simply a mask or excuse for its ‘true’ meaning; they can be interpreted as a *perpetual* alibi – the manifest and ineffable layers work dynamically together to legitimate and fortify each other and condense to form the composite myth of blogging.

This chapter will use Barthes’s mythological framework to account for the manifest or denotative level of myth and explicate its place and purpose in the multidimensional scheme of blogging. In his essay ‘Myth Today’, Barthes’s (1972) framework adapts Ferdinand de Saussure’s model of semiology, which is based on the tripartite scheme of the linguistic *sign* and its division into its *signifier* (the vocal or visual marker) and *signified* (the mental concept). Annette Lavers (1982) emphasizes that Barthes is less interested in the semiological

⁶ The first Magic Eye book, *Magic Eye: the 3D Guide* was released in 1993. It was soon followed by other extremely popular sequels and product spin-offs. (Source: <http://www.magiceye.com>)

structure per se than in the ideological use of signs. To explicate the ideological workings of myth, Barthes's offers the famed example of the *Paris-Match* cover: when one sees the magazine cover of a Black soldier, the visual marker of lines and colors of the photographic image conveys the mental concept that this is a man, a Black soldier in French uniform, saluting the tricolor. This forms what Barthes refers to as a *first-order signifying system*, and constitutes a more literal or denotative level of myth. Notably, what Barthes refers to as the *global sign* of the first semiological chain is already self-sufficient, and relates to multiple associations and histories. Barthes (1972, 117) elaborates that "the meaning [of the first-order signifying system] is already complete, it postulates a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, decisions." For example, this particular Black man in the *Paris-Match* has a certain biography and must have joined the army because of particular set of personal and historical circumstances – possibly including, but not limited to that of French imperialism and colonialism.

Myth incorporates and cannibalizes the sign of this pre-existing system and transforms it into a mere signifier in a *second-order signifying system*. The global sign becomes a *mythical signifier* in the second system and is attached to a second signified, which Barthes refers to as the *mythical concept*. In viewing the cover of *Paris-Match*, one does not just see an image of a Black soldier saluting, one understands that it signifies something else – that France is a great empire faithfully served by Black and White alike. In other words, the global sign of the Black soldier saluting is emptied of its substance, memory and history, and attached to the ideological signifier of 'French imperialism'. Through this process, the second-order system constitutes a comparatively more connotative level of

myth, and flourishes beyond the apparent innocence of the first-order signifying system.

Importantly, it is the *seeming* naturalness of the first system that anchors the authenticity of its subsequent myth. Barthes understood that even on the denotative level, the relationship between the signifier and its signified is arbitrary and hence ideological. However, the dichotomy of denotation and connotation remains useful because it is the *apparent* artlessness of the former that legitimates and naturalizes the latter. Therefore, Barthes (1974, 9) decided to “keep denotation, the old deity, watchful, cunning, theatrical, [and] foreordained to *represent* the collective innocence of language” (cited in Lavers 1982, 111). In this sense, the literal quality of denotation is merely the naturalized final manifestation in its signifying chain of connotations. In other words, denotation and connotation are both trapped in an ideological system, in which my analysis of their distinction is qualified only in terms of their mutual relativity.

The naturalization of the mythical concept is established through the duplicity of its mythical signifier, which exists simultaneously on its more denotative and more connotative levels. As the sign in the first system, the mythical signifier embodies *meaning* and evokes the richness and fullness of its history and memory. As a signifier in the second system, the mythical signifier embodies mere *form* and presents only a seemingly shallow and empty figure of the first system waiting to be filled by the ideological meaning of the mythical concept. This duplicity enables the consumer of myth to forget about the historical, cultural and biographical meaning of the global sign and attach its comparatively vacant form (of the Black soldier saluting) to the ideological message of the French Empire. In this sense, the seeming naturalness of the form

legitimizes its mythical concept as fact. The ideological motivations behind the presentation of *Paris-Match* are thus purified and negated by the apparent literalness of its form – the manifest quality of the Black soldier saluting at once signifies and naturalizes the mythical concept of French imperialism.

However, myth does not simply replace its denotative meanings with ideological ones, myth in fact uproots the meanings of the first semiological chain, selecting from its diverse meanings by promoting some while silencing others. For example, the Black soldier must retain some of his individual history to suggest that ‘French imperialism’ is more than an idea – that it is a veritable destiny that is unfolding in the individual’s life. Barthes (1972, 123) adds that the duplicity of the mythic signifier’s form and meaning operate as a sort of moving turnstile – “the meaning is always there to *present* the form; the form is always there to *outdistance* the meaning. And there is never any contradiction, conflict, or split between the meaning and the form; they are never at the same place.” In this sense, the denotative and connotative levels are each other’s perpetual alibi; the final mythical signification is at once literal and figurative, manifest and ineffable. Within the duplicity of the mythical signifier, the seemingly literal is always there to naturalize the figurative while the ineffable is always there to enrich the manifest.

A Study of Motivations

The myth of blogging can be interpreted as having a similar structure to the one just described. Bloggers cite a spectrum of motivations such as self-documentation, the love of writing, the sharing of useful information, and the formation of virtual connections. In the first semiological chain, these reasons

seem literal and self-explanatory. The global sign of this first system on its own already embodies a textured history, knowledge and morality. However, as we have seen in the Barthes's example, when the global sign is appropriated as the mythical signifier of the second semiological chain, this rich meaning is drained out, and presented as its comparatively empty and shallow form. Consequently, both form and meaning are caught up in a dance of alternation, in a vampiric attempt to nourish the mythical concept and cloak its ideological intentions. This chapter will outline these self-evident reasons for blogging, which make up the comparatively denotative level of myth, and explore the ways in which it might operate as a perpetual alibi for its mythical concept.

The first reason for blogging that is often cited is the documentation of one's life. For example, the author of the blog *Julie Zickerfoose* expresses:

I use blogging as an illustrated, archived record of my life
that, as it grows, is becoming, if I may say so, flippin'
[awesome] to look back on.

At first glance, this statement appears literal and as simple as ticking a box in a survey such as Lenhart and Fox's (2006, iii), where fifty percent of respondents cited "to document your personal experiences or share them with others," as a major reason for blogging. However, this self-documentation is also described by bloggers as "a *memoir*, or perhaps more accurately, a *chronicle* of life as it exists for me today."⁷ The acknowledgment of self-documentation as a memoir or chronicle, can be related to the rich history and meanings of the global sign. This

⁷ My emphasis is added to this quotation is from the post 'Are You What You Blog? What is the Purpose For You?' in the blog *Women on the verge of thinking..*

fertile matrix of associations can be related to the history of ‘life writing’ or journal keeping which has been a cultural practice in Western life since the seventeenth century (McNeil 2004).⁸ In her bestselling manual on how to write one’s life story, Patti Miller (2001, 4) urges that writing about one’s life “is a journey towards self-knowledge ... a journey exploring, revealing and constructing the inner self, a journey of that strange flux of longing we call the soul.” In a strikingly similar vein, in her authoritative handbook on blogging, Rebecca Blood (2002, 30) asserts that blogs build self-awareness and that “random observations, selected links, extended diatribes ... resolve into a mosaic revealing a personality, a self.” In this sense, self-documentation can be interpreted as signifying more than its literal meaning, it serves as an articulation of *identity*, of writing oneself into being. Returning to the quotation from the blog *Julie Zickerfoose*, it becomes clearer that the articulation of one’s life and identity is not an end in itself. Instead, its purpose is to produce a tangible manifestation, an ‘illustrated, archived record’ of one’s life, for the self and others to peruse:

The blog has become somewhat of a story of my life... it’s a rather cool thing to have available to give to new friends to accelerate the ‘getting to know each other’ process.⁹

The second reason for blogging that is often cited is the love of writing. Bloggers explain that they blog to “practice writing, writing is a skill just like

⁸ Notably, it is not within the scope of this thesis to comment on the extensive matrix of associations that are related to the idea of documentation or to the other stated motivations for blogging. In this section, I will purposefully outline only the meanings that are selectively utilized to fortify the mythical concept of blogging.

⁹ This quotation is from the post ‘Why Blog?’ in the blog *Excelcior the Journey*.

anything else; the more you do [it] the better you get.”¹⁰ Another blogger offers that “for a long while, I’ve been trying to write ... [and] the blog is one of my tools that I’m using to ‘practice’ the art of writing.”¹¹ At this comparatively denotative level, blogging serves the utilitarian function of writing and is comparable to the motivation of creative expression in a content analysis such as Zizi Papacharissi’s (2007)¹². However just like the motivation of documentation, there is an added dimension to this apparent literalness. For example, the author of *Women on the verge of thinking* writes that:

Writing has helped me grow, and sort through some of the difficult issues of life... [Each day] is a new day, and by writing, that message is cast in stone as is the conclusion that everything changes each day too. These words are my tools, just like notes or paintbrushes are for those who compose music or paint.

This quotation suggests that writing is a form of expression. And since the content or message of that expression in personal blogs is one’s life and experiences, it follows that the motivation of ‘writing’ is not just a tool, but also an articulation of identity. Just as in the previous motivation of self-documentation, the way bloggers describe writing offers a trace of the textured history evoked by the global sign. For example, bloggers confess that they have “always wanted to be a

¹⁰ This quotation is from the post ‘Why Blog?’ in the blog *The Way into the Far Country*.

¹¹ This quotation is from the post ‘Why Blog?’ in the blog *Acknowledge, Move on*.

¹² In her content analysis, Papacharissi offers that 60.4 percent of blogs sampled specified ‘creative expression’ as the primary motivation for authoring their blog.

scribe,”¹³ and refer to blogging as “my *poetry*, my [newspaper] *column*, my stage.”¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, these references relate to the bloggers’ aspiration towards the authorial craft. In an essay entitled *Why I Write*, the famed author Joan Didion (2006, 12-13) offers that:

I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see and what it means... In many ways writing is the act of saying *I*, of imposing oneself upon people, of saying *listen to me, see it my way, change your mind*. [Original Emphasis]

This sentiment resonates with the quotation from *Women on the verge of thinking*, in that writing is a way to sort through one’s life and thoughts, and form what the life-writing expert Patti Miller (2001, 4) would call a ‘journey towards self-knowledge’. In addition, as Didion affirms, writing is an expression of the *self*, which is meant for the imposition of one’s views upon others. Therefore, although seemingly self-evident and unrelated, the motivations of self-documentation and writing both relate to the performative articulation of identity and its implicated communication to others.

The third reason for blogging often cited is the sharing of experiences and information with others. Unlike the aforementioned motivations of self-documentation and writing, the reason of ‘sharing’ is openly for the purpose of

¹³ My emphasis is added to this quotation from a comment made to the post ‘Why I Blog’ on 11 February 2008, in the blog *Thinking Out Loud*.

¹⁴ My emphasis is added to this quotation is from the post ‘Why I Blog’ in the blog *Thinking Out Loud*.

communication with others. For example, the author of *Jeremy Dempsey Talks* enthuses that:

I love the sharing of knowledge and favorites that [occurs] from blog to blog. I love posting tips in the hopes that they're useful to someone. Oh! Here's one, by the way! Did you know that Target is now carrying Philosophy and Kiehl's products?

Just like the first two reasons, 'sharing' initially seems innocent and self-explanatory. Interestingly, the motivation of sharing reverses the relationship between the self and other previously described. On one hand, self-documentation and writing emphasized the articulation of the self and deemphasized its communication to others as a mere afterthought. On the other hand, the motivation of sharing stresses the communication of *useful* content to others, while deemphasizing the place of the self within this process. For example a reader of *Thinking Out Loud* comments that:

I like that blogging gives you a chance to tell your story, it gives you the chance to express yourself to hopefully *entertain* and *enlighten* some along the way. Blogging can also be informative; it can be a way to share your skills with the world. [*Emphasis added*]

Taken in this context, the intentions of bloggers seem almost altruistic – bloggers are not just telling stories about their lives, they are performing a public service:

I hope [my blog] *helps* someone smile; it is fun that I get to share some of my ways of thinking and living with other folks... If we can communicate these experiences to others it may help them avoid some of the pitfalls of their own lives. I know it helps me to continue to create and *serve*.¹⁵

Although it seems rather egoistic and pompous, perhaps this belief that sharing one's life story as a form of entertainment or enlightenment, relates back to the genre and meanings of the autobiography, or even to the age old practice of storytelling itself. In his study of narrative, Jerome Bruner (1990) suggests that the telling of a life story does not just recount, it justifies why it is exceptional and hence necessary.¹⁶ Therefore the very act of narrating one's life conceivably asserts its value, while the instance of response to it validates the significance of the story, and hence the self. In this way, despite attempts to highlight its own altruism and *other-centeredness*, the motivation to 'share' inevitably implicates the validation of the *self*.

The fourth reason for blogging that is often cited is the virtual connection with others. Like the previous three motivations, virtual connection initially seems like an end in itself – bloggers simply like making friends:

¹⁵ My emphasis is added to this quotation is from the post 'Why I Blog...' in the blog *The Flabbergasted Philosopher*.

¹⁶ This concept of self-narration and its relation to blogging will be elaborated on in chapter two of this thesis.

I blog because I can express myself freely to this community of friends. And the reason I ... keep blogging is in part to stay connected to this network of friends.¹⁷

Virtual connection or community is perhaps the most mythic of this set of four motivations. Although its ostensibly denotative and literal meaning is always intact, its mythical or connotative presence is on the verge of brimming over. This may be because the idea of virtual community is almost as old as the conception of cyberspace itself. In the early nineties, Howard Rheingold (1993) pioneered the concept of virtual community and enchanted the electronic sphere with stories of people finding genuine friendships, support and romance online, across geographical boundaries. In these stories, the intensity and significance of online connections often surpassed those of their offline counterparts, and sometimes translated into offline meetings, lasting associations and even marriage. More than a decade later, this enchantment of virtual community spills over into blogging:

In a world where it is so easy to feel alone, it is so comforting to know that there still exists these small gatherings, connections, communities where people come together. It is so comforting to have this space to *share*. We have become something more than two strangers making their way through life. We have become changed by one another's existence.¹⁸

¹⁷ This quotation is from the post 'Three Reasons Why I Blog' in the blog *my life, or something like it*.

¹⁸ My emphasis is added to this quotation is from the post 'Why I Blog' in the blog *Soul of a Dreamer*.

While poetic and even poignant, this quotation can be seen as pointing not to community, but more accurately to *connection*. It might be suggested that the personal blog is not an open forum for the ‘meeting of minds’ – it is more accurately a dictatorship. It is created, authored and moderated by a single person, who writes not about generalities, but specifically about his or her life and experiences. In this sense, bloggers *share* their life and personality, while readers respond depending on their degrees of affinity and interest, in what seems to be a solipsistic exchange of assurances. The blog however does not seem to be a community of interest; it can be more accurately interpreted as a cult of personality – membership in a ‘community’ based upon one’s life story is a direct *endorsement* of that life. For example, in an almost blatant expression of self-love, the blogging guru Rebecca Blood (2002, 70) justifies that:

On this page you are the king, and what is interesting to you is what is interesting to everyone. Here, your opinions are important and everyone clamors to know what you think.

It is the connections made between different articulations of identities in an ocean of disparate voices that confers onto those identities a sense of validation. And it is through this mutual exchange of validation that two strangers are apparently changed by one another’s existence. In fact, this trope of connection/community seems to form the vital link between the chains of the self and its other, identity and its validation, which gives form to the mythic discourses of blogging. These themes of connection and community are central to the myth of blogging will be further explored in chapter four of this thesis.

An Arsenal of Rhetorical Forms

As is evident from this analysis of its motivations, blogging is at once its relatively denotative form and its comparably connotative meaning. As form, blogging is ostensibly literal and self-evident, yet as meaning, it is more layered and elusive. Like the surface of the stereogram, people blog simply to write about their life, share it with others, and make friends. But look deeper, past its surface and the optical illusion effuses through the original pattern to reveal a secret depth, a richer meaning – the myth of blogging now seems to be a journey towards self-discovery, an articulation of that discovery, and its subsequent justification and validation. In this way, form and meaning may be interpreted as what Barthes referred to as a moving turnstile – the form is always there to sublimate the meaning, while the meaning is always there to rarify the form. This perpetual alibi fortifies the mythical signifier and defends it against critique and contradiction at every turn – form and meaning are never in the same place, yet are tactically conflated in the mythical signifier. Barthes (1972) proposes that to bolster its function as a perpetual alibi for its connotative meanings, mythic discourse employs a set of recurrent rhetorical forms. This section will highlight some of the rhetorical forms identified by Barthes, which are used by some bloggers in the discourse of blogging. These rhetorical forms include what Barthes refers to as neither-norisms, inoculations, justifications in excess, and the privation of history.

To reiterate, the connotative meanings of self-documentation and writing ideologically emphasize the centrality of the self while deemphasizing the utility of the other. Conversely, the motivations of sharing and connection strategically emphasize the importance of the other while deemphasizing its service to the self.

This strategy of selective accentuation however, does not really hide the fact that these motivations involve the performative articulation of the blogger's identity and its entailed validation by readers. These motivations seem to obscure yet evince the mythic discourses of a performative self, and its diffident yet desperate desire for validation from the other. In spite of the indispensable duality of blogging's intrinsic and extrinsic features, some bloggers still insist that blogging for oneself is fundamentally opposed to blogging for others. For example, the author of *Brandi's Blog* declares that:

I don't blog for glory – I don't blog for other people! I blog for myself! To express myself and my inner writhing is more important than to have anyone comment on what they think about what I thought... [however] if someone reads my blog and gets an encouraging word, or a great new recipe, I'm a better person.

This blogger insists that she blogs exclusively for herself and does not care about readers. Yet she remarks that she would 'be a better person' if her readers liked what she had written. In other words, their readership would contribute towards some form of validation. Although this seems contradictory, it is far more subtle. It is an antinomy, a contradiction between statements that seem equally true. This antinomy seems to permeate the mythic discourse of blogging and is expressed by some bloggers who insist that they "didn't start writing a blog because they wanted the world to read it", yet proclaim that their "blog is [their]

foothold into the hearts and minds of the populace.”¹⁹ This contradiction is also evident in blogging handbooks. For example, in her *Weblog Handbook*, Rebecca Blood (2002, 95-98) asserts that “if you are going to keep a weblog, it must be for the joy of writing alone.” Yet only a few pages prior to this statement, she proclaims that “I feel it is natural for any writer to want readers. None of us would put it on the web if all we wanted to do was write.” These antimonies are observable and in fact, necessary because as I will suggest, the final signification requires both intrinsic and extrinsic meanings to function mythically. However, the reason why intrinsic aspects of blogging are persistently esteemed over extrinsic ones is because personal blogging seems to be haunted by accusations of narcissism.

Even though the myth of blogging requires the integration of both the articulation of the self and its subsequent validation by others, writing about oneself and expecting people to read and respond, even to be entertained and enlightened, makes one out to be rather egotistic. The myth of blogging however, cannot and need not discard its requisite extrinsic aspects or its associated accusation of narcissism. Barthes (1972, 129) offers that “myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie or confession: it is an inflexion.” Therefore, the myth of blogging does not need to obliterate or conceal narcissism, it simply naturalizes it. On one hand, the strategy of selective emphasis that we have witnessed in the previous section formulates a kind of perpetual alibi for the mythic fortification of blogging. This is because once blogging’s intention of self-validation becomes too obvious, and provokes reflexive or external accusations of narcissism, its mythic function can revert back to its seemingly commonsensical

¹⁹ This quotation is from the post ‘Why Blog?’ in the blog *Acknowledge, Move on*.

motivations. In this way, allegations of narcissism are dodged at every turn. On the other hand, myth also possesses an arsenal of rhetorical forms (such as neither-orism, inoculation, justification in excess, and the privation of history) that it uses to perform this mythic function, by dissimulating its contradictions, and naturalizing its meanings.

The strategy of selective emphasis operates on the aforementioned meanings that flow out of the global sign of the first semiological chain and into the mythical concept of the second semiological chain. However, the meanings evoked by self-documentation, writing, sharing and connection that I have discussed hardly represent the texture and plentitude of the global sign. Instead these meanings seem to have been carefully selected and paired with their corresponding form to perform in the mythic dance of alternation. As aforementioned, the meaning that drains out of the global sign and into the mythical concept is selective; it is not quite the knowledge of reality, but *certain* knowledge of reality. However, the meaning of the global sign that is *not* selected is not negated. Instead, this meaning seems to be naturalized by an arsenal of rhetorical forms – tamed, subdued and processed to make it suitable for re-signification in the mythical concept.

Returning to the motivation of self-documentation, bloggers offer that their blog stands as a chronicle of their lives, which I have inferred to be related to the rich meanings evoked by the practice of journal keeping or ‘life writing’. Even though bloggers stress that they do this primarily for themselves, their insistence betrays a certain self-consciousness. For example, a blogger muses that:

Part of it for me is just chronicling my life – *I love looking back at what has happened. But really, I could do that all privately and it would have the same effect.*²⁰

This blogger asserts that self-documentation is for personal reflection, yet admits that it could be done privately and does not need to be on the internet at all. In fact, this is a question that scholars of biography have been asking since the advent of personal blogging. For example, McNeil (2003) suggests that the public online journal seems like a contradiction in terms and requires the re-conceptualization of the diary genre. She further suggests that the assumption of privacy in the diary genre is an ideology upholding the modern Western model of selfhood, and reflects the mid-nineteen century shift in Romantic ideals about the autonomy and privacy of self. McNeil adds that the diary's shift online signals a shift in popular ideals about privacy. However, this blogger's deliberation comes to no conclusion, and is left equivocal *yet* unproblematic. This resembles what Barthes (1994, 153) refers to as a *neither-norism*, a statement of two opposites that balances out one with the other, in an effort to reject both. This rhetorical tactic seems to render the contradiction unproblematic because its presence has been tamed and neutralized in the act of its naming. In this way, the contradiction no longer poses a threat to the integrity of myth and can be subsumed into the final signification.

The motivation of writing naturalizes meaning in a different way, but to the same effect. To reiterate, bloggers' love of writing evokes the historical meanings of the authorial craft. In my analysis, I suggested that bloggers'

²⁰ This quotation is from the post 'why I do what I do' in the blog *Jaysel*.

novelistic aspirations resonated with Joan Didion's (2006) assertion that she wrote to process her thoughts, explore her identity and impress it upon her readers. However, another famous writer also declared that in writing, the impression of one's identity upon others necessitates a certain degree of egoism. In his essay *Why I Write*, George Orwell (2006, 6) candidly admits that one of the reasons he writes is:

Sheer egoism. [The] desire to seem clever, to be talked about, to be remembered after death, to get your own back on the grown-ups who snubbed you in childhood, etc., etc. It is humbug to pretend this is not a motive, and a strong one.

Even though the belief in one's own exceptionalism is not in itself reproachable, the discourse of blogging is already haunted by accusations of narcissism. Perhaps because of this, many of the blogs I analyzed seemed to deemphasize the narcissistic tendencies of blogging. So to avoid associating writing with narcissism, some bloggers attach their passion for writing to *nature*. For example, one blogger asserts that he blogs because he "love[s] to write, it is in [his] blood"²¹. In addition, another blogger expresses that she has "always liked to write, its how [she is] wired."²² Using this tactic, the motivation of writing is associated not to egoism but to these bloggers' natural character. This constitutes what Barthes (1994, 151) calls the *privation of history*, where myth transforms history into nature and motive into reason. From these quotes, it can be suggested

²¹ This quotation is by the author of the blog *Brandi's Blog*, and was sourced from the compilation of 'Why I blog' posts on <http://deepblog.com/whyiblog.0.html>

²² This quotation is from the post 'Why I Blog?' in the blog *Peachy Perspective*.

that writing and by association, blogging is turned into something seemingly natural, eternal and beyond reproach.

The motivation of sharing can be interpreted as using another tactic to pervert meaning to its own ends. As aforementioned, bloggers stress that telling stories about their lives and experiences, provides informative or entertaining content that serve their readers. In other words, bloggers believe that their ‘life lessons’ will enlighten and entertain others. To a person uninitiated to the blogging myth, this motivation and its ambition would seem laughably haughty. From their ethnographic study, Nardi et al (2004) concur that in sharing their stories, many bloggers were sensitive about being characterized as self-involved and petty, and emphasized that they blogged about topics of pertinence and import. To counter this baleful accusation of narcissism, some bloggers simply preempt it, in a strategy that Barthes (1972, 150) refers to as *inoculation*. Instead of denying it, some bloggers neutralize the judgement of narcissism by admitting cursorily to it. For example, the author of *Michael-In-Norfolk* concedes that “while it may sounds egotistical, I hope that some of what I talk about may help others.” Similarly, the author of *Acknowledge, Move on!* admits grudging that “ok, deep down inside, I’ve got enough ego to believe that I have the ‘answers’ to some of life’s problems.” Barthes explains that this preemptive admittance of an acknowledged evil defuses its threat of general subversion. This process becomes can also be observed in the following example:

Blogging often can and does feed pride. Do I frequent my hit counter too often? Sadly, the answer is ‘yes’. The blog can be a meter of fluctuating self-worth... This can be a serious

form of addictive self-idolatry and must be fought at all costs.²³

In order to protect the extrinsic reasons for blogging and its vital function of validation, the obvious evil of narcissism is named and denounced by some bloggers. This small denunciation however, seems to be a meaningless gesture which in fact allows blogging's self-conscious narcissism to flourish unabated.

Finally, the motivation of virtual connection seems to use what Barthes (1972, 130) refers to as *justification*, to mollify any unfavorable meanings that attempt to undermine its integrity. As previously discussed, in 1993 Howard Rheingold wrote his renowned book *The Virtual Community*, which became a bible for technophiles looking for the warmth and fuzziness promised by the global online village. However, almost a decade later, Rheingold republishes this book with a revised chapter entitled *Rethinking Virtual Communities*. In it, Rheingold (2000) laments that since he popularized the term, the founding myths and norms of online communities have shifted, warped and disappeared. Since the initial publication of Rheingold's book, his critics such as Fernback and Thompson (1995) have railed against the proposition of virtual community, denouncing it as an ersatz collective that lacks the democracy, diversity, commitment and accountability of offline social ties. These criticisms of virtual community seem to have infiltrated public and popular culture. And as a response to these familiar criticisms, bloggers perhaps feel the need to bolster the legitimacy of their virtual connections, in an act of justification that is marked by its excessiveness. In defense of their reason for blogging, one blogger asserts that:

²³ This quotation is from the post 'Why Blog?' in the blog *The Way into the Far Country*.

Certainly this kind of ‘community’ is limited and superficial, but it is community [nonetheless]. Many of my friends from college who I would not keep in touch with otherwise, have blogs that I read and comment on and vice versa. I have also met many people through blogs that I would not have otherwise met and benefited from.²⁴

This blogger is seems to be justifying the significance of his virtual connections. Other bloggers express a similar need to vindicate their online friendships, and insist that through blogging, they have made “more than a handful of connections [that they] now consider true and legitimate friends.”²⁵ Barthes adds that this kind of justificatory tendency is a feature of mythical speech, which in itself stands as a justification *in excess*. The purpose of this justification is, in fact, the naturalization of the mythical concept, its final signification and ultimately the myth of blogging itself. By justifying the genuineness and verity of online connections, some bloggers are able to naturalize its ambiguities and contradictions to make it conform to the seeming literalness of its form. It is in this way that the complex meanings of virtual community seem to be made once again natural and commonsensical.

As I have stressed, according to Barthes (1972) myth does not hide anything – this arsenal of rhetorical forms (neither-norism, inoculation, justification in excess, and the privation of history) does not obliterate the rich meanings of its signifier, nor does it eradicate the intentions of its signification. On one hand, I have proposed that the mythical meanings of self-documentation,

²⁴ This quotation is from the post ‘Why Blog?’ in the blog *The Way into the Far Country*.

²⁵ This quotation is from the post ‘Five Reasons Why I Blog’ in the blog *Jeremy Dempsey Talks*.

writing, sharing and connection are all available to anchor its relatively literal form and to nourish its mythical concept. I have also suggested how its favorable meanings are selectively emphasized, while its unfavorable meanings are neutralized and fed back into the semiological system. On the other hand, the connotative intentions of blogging are also present in the mythical system, accessible for the myth reader to decipher and for the myth consumer to actualize. These intentions have been briefly discussed in this chapter, and relate to the integration of both the articulation of the blogger's identity and its subsequent validation by readers. However, as I have suggested, the roles of articulation and validation are alternatively emphasized and deemphasized, inoculated, justified and ultimately naturalized. The myth of blogging seemed first a seemingly self-evident amalgamation of its motivations, and then at the same time, a more meaningful journey towards self-discovery which encapsulated both its articulation and validation. Now, the myth of blogging seems to envelop both these layers in an enigmatic mass of comparative surface and depth, in which its contradictions, inconsistencies and narcissisms are dissimulated, justified and naturalized. Barthes (1972, 131) elaborates that "this is why myth is experienced as innocent speech: not because its intentions are hidden – if they were hidden, they could not be efficacious – but because they are naturalized."

I Blog, Therefore I am

So far this chapter has explored the myth of blogging and its workings, through an examination of the relative form and meaning of its motivations, which collectively constitute its mythical signifier. Now the stage is set for the revelation of the mythical concept, which is animated by the single statement – I blog,

therefore I am. Unlike the form of the mythical signifier, which has an immediate presence, the concept has a memorial presence and is constituted of formless and shapeless associations. Barthes (1972, 122) elaborates that the mythical concept “appears in a global fashion, it is a kind of nebula, the condensation, more or less hazy of a certain knowledge.” To have this effect, the concept must utilize vague and incomplete images, where the meaning is already relieved of its substance, and ready for signification. Interpreted within Barthes’s framework, the statement ‘I blog, therefore I am’ can be interpreted as an aphorism that suits this description and is received as a tenuous mass of associations that gains unity and coherence only through its ideological intentions.

The opening quotation of this thesis was taken from the book *I Blog, Therefore I Am*, a compilation of random blog posts about an endless variety of topics from rants about quitting smoking to the contemplation of suicide. These posts are humorous, mundane and emotive, and seem to be united only by their classification as personal blogs. These posts are all about their blogger’s life and experiences and are amalgamated by the editor under the banner ‘I blog, therefore I am’. My opening quotation, which was taken from this book, guilelessly expresses the ontological longing that is expressed by this mythical concept:

Hello universe, if I write this, does it really matter? In one hundred years I will be long forgotten, no one will know my name. My life is only just a speck in the history of time. Not only that, I am one of the billion specks on this planet. So do I really matter? Do I have a purpose – or am I just wasting my time?

This passage seems to be a message for the universe, a grievance against the pain of anonymity and the anguish of insignificance. But more than that, it is a kind of query, a plea, a request for validation. At this point, the myth of blogging does not seem to be just the utilitarian articulation of identity, or its naturalized narcissistic gratification – it is romanticized and exalted to evoke the gravity and necessity of existence itself. This exaltation of blogging can be interpreted as taking shape in the concept of ‘I blog, therefore I am’, and seems to be composed of three parts that work together dynamically – the statement or *articulation* of self, the virtual *manifestation* of that self, and its subsequent confirmation or *validation*.

In their musings about why they blog, some bloggers go beyond a description of motivations and cut straight to the core of what blogging means to them:

[I blog] as a bulwark against mortality. I blog for the same reasons that I speak at all – to remind myself and others that I’m still here. That I think, that I have something to say if there is anyone who cares to hear.²⁶

This quotation seems to imply that some people blog to express and articulate who they are – their identities, and that this expression of self is a communicative act that is meant for others. In his critical study of blogging, Geert Lovink (2008, 13) maintains that exhibitionism is experienced as a form of empowerment, and that the expression of self is not an option, “but an obligation, an immediate impulse to respond in order to be out there, to exist with everybody else.” In this sense, the

²⁶ This quotation is from the post ‘Why do I blog (when I do)?’ from the blog *Diary of a Rat*.

mythical concept of blogging seems to go far beyond its seemingly literal motivations – self-documenting, writing, sharing and connecting are no longer just an option but signify the absolute necessity of existence itself. Taking this sentiment to another level, another blogger asserts that, “blogging is part of who I am ... blogs not only help to reveal who we are, they help us to *transcend* who we are.”²⁷ This mention of transcendence gestures towards something that goes beyond articulation – it suggests that in the act of articulating oneself online, that self is somehow transformed, surpassed, ameliorated.

It could be that this amelioration of the self is simply an effect of writing about the self. As Jerome Bruner (1990) proposes, telling stories about our lives and selves, whether on paper or in our everyday conversations, constantly shape our own perceptions of who we are. While I agree with this contention, I believe that there may be an added layer of complexity when one tells their stories online. This possible layer of complexity could be interpreted as relating to the electronic medium of the internet. There are two aspects or affordances of writing online that allows bloggers to ‘transcend’ who they are. The first aspect might related to the *perceived* tangibility of the medium – unlike in conversations or mental conceptualizations, the self that is articulated online seems to be less evanescent or changeable. Rather, the self articulated online is perceived by some bloggers as a palpable and permanent *manifestation*. For example, the author of *Little Things in Life* states that:

Blogging makes me feel like I’m actually accomplishing
something that will last, unlike the dishes, the cleaning, the

²⁷ My emphasis is added to this quotation, by the author of the blog *Media Dragon*, and was sourced from the compilation of ‘Why I blog’ posts on <http://deepblog.com/whyiblog.0.html>

laundry, and the other tasks that take up my day. I can actually look at the side of my blog and see the archives of my writing – wow, I can see something I did from yesterday – fantastic!

Similarly, other bloggers enthuse that blogging lets them “leave an imprint of [themselves] in the medium”²⁸, and gives them their “own patch of cyberspace to call their own”²⁹. In this way, the blog can be interpreted as an illuminated artifact of identity that the blogger creates, possesses and admires. Together, the concepts of articulation and manifestation relate back to the motivations of self-documentation and writing, where the story of the self as a process and record is emphasized over its communication to others. However, this “imprint of [themselves] in the medium” also refers to something more significant. It might refer to what Andreas Kitzmann (2004) rather sentimentally describes as an ‘escape from oblivion’ – the desire to stave off mortality and the fragility of human memory by leaving a trace of oneself in the electronic medium. It is in this way that the illuminated artifact of identity functions as a “bulwark against mortality”.

The second affordance of writing online that might ameliorate the self is that of validation, which might be enabled through the feedback mechanisms adopted by blogging software. As I have suggested in this chapter, the blogging myth seems to be preoccupied by the self-conscious quest for validation. Even though it appears to be integral part of all four motivations for blogging, validation and its accusation of narcissism is deemphasized, inoculated against,

²⁸ This quotation is from a comment to the post ‘Are You What You Blog? What is the Purpose For You?’ from the blog *Women on the verge of thinking*.

²⁹ This quotation is from a comment to the post ‘Why I blog’ in the blog *Let Your Freak Flag Fly*.

neutralized and naturalized by some bloggers. The degree to which this idea of validation requires fortification suggests its centrality to the mythical concept of blogging. For some bloggers, more than articulation and manifestation, validation is synonymous with being:

I am desperate to feel that I have made some impact on the world, that it is different because I was here. That it matters whether I live or die. That it matters whether I ever existed. At the heart of it all I am crying out to an indifferent universe, trying to force some imprint on it... I need other people to feed back to me that I exist, and that it matters. [Blogging] ultimately contributes to a sense of validation. It helps show me I'm alive.³⁰

This quotation suggests that for some bloggers, it is not enough to articulate one's identity, nor is it enough to imprint that identity upon a digital medium. One exists purposefully *only* when the imprint of identity impacts the 'world', and when its owner receives confirmation of that impact and validation of that identity. This concept of validation seems to stem from the motivations of sharing and connection, where the story of the self is perceived as a public service to others. As I have suggested, in its service to others and its participation in a community, the story of the self implicates its desires for validation. This preoccupation and vindication of validation seems to permeate the discourse of blogging. For

³⁰ This quotation is from the post 'What to expect from blogging' in the blog *Ramblings of the Bearded One*.

example, in his article which incidentally is also titled *I Blog, Therefore I Am*, the renowned blogger David Kline (2005, 247-248) offers that:

Blogs help [people] break through the anonymity and isolation of modern life... [and] pluck from the indifference of daily life a bit of validation for themselves, their ideas, and their creative abilities.

In this way, the articulation, manifestation and validation of the self appear to be collectively drawn up into the mythical concept of blogging. By declaring that 'I blog, therefore I am', the myth of blogging is able to sublimate its desire for validatory gratification by equating its technologized articulation and manifestation, with the essentiality of existence, being and nature. Even though this aphorism appears to be adapted from Descartes' philosophy, in my opinion, there is little point in revisiting the original concept. This is because Descartes' philosophical ideas have been filtered through popular culture so extensively that it might retain only a vague sense of its original meaning. When it is used in the mythical concept, 'I blog, therefore I am' seems to gesture towards the trinity of mediatized articulation, manifestation and validation of the self, and the assertion that one needs gratuitous validation to exist *purposefully*. Even though its effect is compelling, this aphorism, relates to its original philosophical dictum only in a superficial way. Through this possibly superficial relation, the mythical concept parasitically anchors itself in the profundity and legacy of Descartes. In addition, by equating the gratuitous validation of the self with the transparency and

necessity of *existence*, the accusation of narcissism is exorcized, while its mythical concept of blogging is purified, naturalized and eternalized.

This existential crisis that blogging addresses and supposedly placates can be interpreted as emerging from the desires and deficiencies of the culture that purports it. Kitzmann (2004) suggests that this desire for recognition and acknowledgement is universal. However, De Zengotita (2005) indicates that this supposedly universal desire is compounded by a culture that constantly places the individual and its commodious individuality at the center of a consumerist fantasy, in which one has to *demonstrate* one's uniqueness in order to exist meaningfully. However, a blogger offers that he blogs because "I choose 'To feel listened to', because too large a percentage of our lives are spent not being heard. We go to work, and spend an awful lot of our time doing something that may not be something we are absolutely passionate about."³¹ It is possible that the lived reality of workaday labor, pointless struggle and indifferent sociability, pales in comparison to a flattering and seductive consumerist fantasy that permeates culture through its tantalizing array of screens, billboards, malls and amusement parks.

Keren (2006) offers that in comparison to other mass mediated channels, blogging now offers a way for ordinary people to publish and make themselves heard. This manic desire to publish and publicize oneself resonates with what Kitzmann (2004) refers to as 'expressive agency', a form of market driven empowerment that is underscored by an economic sensibility that promotes the technologically mediated production and consumption of identity. Kitzmann (2004, 45) cites the examples of *Sony's* advertising campaign that urges

³¹ This quotation is from a comment made on 12 February 2008 to the post 'Why I blog' in the blog *Thinking Out Loud*.

consumers to ‘go create’, and *Apple*’s campaign that inspires people to ‘think different’, as being part of a media-technology-consumer complex in which an array of digital tools and platforms are offered to encourage consumers to express their identities. This media-technology-consumer complex will be further explored in chapter three of this thesis.

For me, these quotations that evince the mythical concept of ‘I blog, therefore I am’ are poignant and disconcerting for several reasons. They seem to point to the psychic and intellectual penury that some bloggers are faced with in their everyday lives. They gesture towards the inflated degree of investment bloggers have in their storied identities, an inflation that is fed daily by *Oprah*, the *Biography Channel*, reality television, the self-help industry, the consumerist ethos, the persistent culture of individualism and narcissism, and the myth of blogging. They also point to the perfidious desires and fantasies that are endowed in our current technologies of mediation, and its empty promises of transcendence, amelioration and empowerment.

In sum, for some bloggers, the myth of blogging is encapsulated by the truism – I blog, therefore I am. This truism and its nexus of articulation, manifestation and validation can be interpreted as operating through the duplicity of its signifier, which is both meaning and form. As meaning, blogging seems to be enriched and enchanted by an instant reserve of history evoked by the narrative of the self, the craft of writing, the grace of altruism and the warmth of community. These meanings however appear to be selectively filtered, tamed and neutralized for their ideological use in the mythical concept. This neutralization of meaning is accomplished by some bloggers through an arsenal of rhetorical devices that includes but is not limited to those of neither-norism, naturalization,

inoculation, justification and selective emphasis. Subsequently, these colonized meanings flow into the mythical concept 'I blog, therefore I am', which seems to equate its ideological intentions of narcissistic articulation, mediated manifestation and gratuitous validation with the weight of existence. In the same stroke, these neutralized meanings may be mapped onto the literalness of its signifying form to confer onto the mythical concept a sheen of naturalness and infallibility. At the end of its two semiological chains, the final signification of blogging appears manifest and commonsensical, yet at the same time ineffable and profound; it seems to have been transformed from parts of surface and depth, simplicity and contradiction, into an essence that is somehow frozen, purified, eternalized and above all, naturalized. Barthes (1972, 143) encapsulates: "myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of explanation but that of statement of fact." The statement of the fact that, I blog, therefore I am.

Chapter 2:

The Negation of Intention

In the opening line of his book *Zero Comments*, Geert Lovink (2008, 1) denounces blogging as “a form of vanity publishing.” Some journalists have been equally critical of blogging, and disparage bloggers’ inflated sense of self-importance (Shulevitz 2002). As I suggested in the previous chapter, the discursive myth of blogging seems to be preoccupied with the validation of the self. However, some bloggers rhetorically deemphasize, justify, and naturalize the perceived narcissistic impulse of blogging. This can be interpreted as a process through which myth works its magic. Barthes (1972, 143) reiterates that:

[Myth] abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences... it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.

I have suggested that this blissful clarity might be attained through the statement ‘I blog, therefore I am’, a statement that encapsulates the discursive myth of blogging in a single stroke, by naturalizing its ideological intentions with the essentiality of existence. In addition, this statement can be interpreted as enacting an ideological abuse on blogging by eradicating its complexity, neutralizing its contradictions and finally by negating its ideological underpinnings. This chapter

will attempt to reconstruct the negated intentions of blogging by elaborating on the concepts of articulation, manifestation and validation. To do this, I will suggest how these three concepts operate in an integrative way to produce a mode of self-presentation and self-experience that I will refer to as ‘mediatization’. Firstly, I will investigate the *content* of the ideological abuse – the aspects of the self that are selectively presented and mediatized. Secondly, I will examine the *scene* of the ideological abuse – the aesthetics or affordances of the online medium of blogging that facilitate the mediatization of the self. Thirdly, I will explore the *process* of the ideological abuse – the effect that mediatization may have on the everyday lives and self-conceptions of some bloggers. By analyzing the content, scene and process of mediatization, I will suggest how the statement ‘I blog, therefore I am’ attains its mythical fruition – how the self that is blogged, that is mediatized through blogging, is seemingly enhanced, surpassed and transcended.

I Love my Boring Life

There are diverse arrays of blogs that exist in different orbits of the blogosphere. Political blogs put forward passionate and often adversarial opinions about public life. Celebrity gossip blogs serve up interesting tidbits of entertainment news filtered from tabloids and enhanced by snarky comments. Tech blogs provide information and reviews of the latest electronic gadgets and gizmos. All these types of blogs often attempt to offer their readers a unique angle on their topic – the most cogent analysis of current affairs, the cattiest commentary on celebrity life, or the most insightful product review. Most personal blogs on the other hand appear to offer no such distinction – they are

advertised by their authors as meditations on the mundane. For example, my collection of personal blogs revealed titles such as *The Fat Lazy Guy*, *I Blog About Nothing* and *Sonya's Boring Life*. Admittedly, unlike their controversial political opinions, their humorous bashing of celebrities, and their shrewd consumer savvy, some bloggers' lives are admittedly dull, drab and repetitive. However, as aforementioned, the act of telling one's life story is in itself an assertion of its exceptionality, value and necessity (Bruner 1990). In other words, if bloggers truly felt that their lives were unexceptional, they would not tell their story at all.

The author of the blog *Real Euphoria* illustrates how despite its banality, one's life is nevertheless individual and authentic, and somehow exceptional: "My ramblings may not be very exciting, but they are my life and in saying that, it is very special to me ... I love my ordinary life." In a similar vein, the author of *Seanblanc* reassures fellow bloggers that:

Everyone should blog and everyone that blogs should be honest, sincere and passionate. You may not be witty or savvy or funny or cute. You are you. And you have something to give. Somewhere there is something that you find interesting, wonderful and beautiful.

The logic of this assertion seems to be that although one's life is banal, it is authentic and individual, and hence intrinsically exceptional. This seemingly paradoxical logic resonates with the dominant blog ideology touted by blogging gurus such as Rebecca Blood (2002, 74), who offers that:

Though you may think you are boring and commonplace, you are unlike anyone who has lived or ever will. Don't try to be different from who you are or different from anyone else; use your weblog to be more yourself every day.

A look at life writing handbooks offers possible insight into this paradox. The life writing expert Patti Miller (2001) proposes that writing is a journey towards self-discovery, and that seemingly ordinary events may not be so ordinary after all – it all depends on how one finds significance in the story of one's life. In other words, “your story will be worth writing, not for the variety or novelty of your life, but for the quality of your observation of it” (Miller 2001, 9). Taking this idea a step further, another life writing expert, Steve Zousmer (2007, 91) advises that writing one's life story requires developing a persona for oneself, a “more distinctive version of yourself.” Zousmer (2007, 91) emphasizes however, that this version of the self is wholly authentic and must not be a fabrication: “You don't fake or consciously design this voice ... you find your voice. It's in you already; you just have to develop it.” In this sense, it is not the actual events in one's life that matter in Zousmer's brand of life writing; it seems to be the *angle* one takes in articulating them that creates meaning and exceptionality. In other words, the banalities of one's life can be ameliorated, surpassed and transformed into exceptionalities – it just depends on the quality and direction of one's articulation. As aforementioned, theorists such as Jerome Bruner (1990) have suggested that the desire for exceptionality is a precondition of self-narration. However, I will suggest in the next chapter, that this desire for exceptionality may

be exacerbated by a culture of consumerism that equates individuality with the commodious pursuit of personality.

Notably, the caveat in this process is crucial – according to these life writing experts, the enhanced articulation of one’s life must be rooted in a sense of authenticity because any fabrication would invalidate the meaning created. In this sense, any enhancive angle taken on the story of one’s life must be rooted in some kind of truth. For example, Rebecca Blood (2002, 72) stresses that “I believe that a weblog is judged superior based the authenticity of its voice.” Reiterating this sentiment, the author of *Misanthropy Abroad* emphasizes that “this blog is a reflection of me; I don’t have the discipline or the time to consciously craft an image. I’ve never been able to lie or produce falsehoods very well.” In this sense, the authenticity of this blogger’s life account is of utmost importance and must be verified at all costs. Therefore, in order to negate any pretense or artificiality associated with enhancement, some bloggers declare that their articulated life story and the self within it are not created or fabricated, they are *rediscovered*.

The myth of blogging can be interpreted as an enhancive articulation and validation of self that is experienced not as an orchestrated transformation, but as a revelation of some kind of truth. It is for this reason that the mythical statement ‘I blog, therefore I am’ is so compelling – while the technologized articulation and validation of self seems to be equated with the essentiality of being, its technologized manifestation appears to be equated with truth. In a sense, to engage in the mythical practice of blogging is to wave a digital magic wand over the banalities and familiarities of one’s life to bring out the beauty, significance and extraordinariness that were seemingly there in the first place.

At this point, it seems like the resolution of one paradox is met with another. On one hand, the life that is banal can be seen as transformed into something exceptional through the act of its enhancive articulation. On the other hand however, this enhancive articulation does not seem to take some bloggers away from their authentic selves; it leads them *back* to their supposedly true selves. This encapsulates what Miller referred to as a “journey of self-discovery”, and what Blood described as the use of “your weblog to be more yourself everyday”. In his compelling critique of self-help culture, Stewart Justman (2005, 8) offers that the premise of self-help is based on the “widely held belief that within us, at our core, there exists a potential of another life and another self – our true self.” According to Justman, pop psychology advocates the idea that the true self of immense potential has been beat down by convention, stunted by circumstance and stifled by insecurity, to its current state of inadequacy. Consequently, it is the task of self-therapy to find one’s way back to this superior true self, to fulfill one’s innate potential, rediscover one’s inner beauty and actualize one’s inherent exceptionality.

Justman laments that instead of rediscovering one’s true self, self-help enacts the *engineering* of a desired self. Led by this fantasy of self-authorship, “the quest for the true self is [ultimately] a quest without an object” (2005, 14). Justman adds that the influence of pop psychology and its fallacy of selfhood pervade all aspects of life, from the pre-school to the university, from the clinic to the church. As I will suggest in this chapter, this mode of selfhood, which can be interpreted as authentic yet enhanced, essential yet pliant, provides the perfect host for the myth of blogging, its precursor of consumerism, and its function of technologized mediatization to graft itself on.

The Technology of Blogging

Returning to the life story, I suggested that the banalities of one's life appear to be ameliorated and transformed into exceptionalities through the enhancive articulation of self. Pertinently, this 'more distinctive version of yourself'³² that is articulated through the act of writing might be *further* enhanced through the articulation of the self on a computer, and presenting that articulation of self online for others to interact with. In the previous chapter, I proposed that the apparent transcendence and amelioration of one's self in the mythical statement 'I blog, therefore I am', might be facilitated by two affordances of the electronic medium. The first affordance was that of the perceived tangibility and permanence of blogs, which allow some bloggers to *manifest* and admire their illuminated artifact of identity. The second affordance was that of the possibility for reader feedback, which allows some bloggers to perpetually *validate* their lives and selves. To these two affordances I suggest a third, that of asynchronous communication, which allows bloggers to selectively present and discretionally *articulate* their identities.

This section will elaborate on this trinity of articulation, manifestation and validation of the self that was introduced in the mythical statement 'I blog, therefore I am', and suggest how their affordances set the stage for mediatization and its paradoxical mode of selfhood. Before proceeding to analyze the technological aesthetics of blogging, it is important to note that the simultaneous authenticity and enhancement suggested by the aforementioned quotations is not exclusive to blogging. For example, in her study of Multi User Domains (MUDs) in the early nineties, Sherry Turkle (1995) proposed that because online

³² This phrase is extracted from Zousmer (2007, 91), and was originally quoted in the previous section.

environments facilitated the pliant and discretionary presentation of identity, it can be interpreted as a space for the experimentation with and virtual enactment of a desired self. For example, a MUD user in Turkle's (1995, 179) study expresses a sense of ambivalence towards the customizability and authenticity of her persona: "I am a lot more outgoing, less inhibited. I would say I feel more like myself. But that's a contradiction. I feel more like who I wish I was."

This combination of authenticity and enhancement can also be observed in Tom Boellstorff's (2008) study of the virtual world of *Second Life*. Boellstorff's study suggests how the customizability of one's online avatar allows users to craft a graphical representation that is closer to their 'real' selves. For example, referring to their online avatar, an informant in Boellstorff's (2008, 134) study expresses that "this is how I see myself on the inside." This leads Boellstorff (2008, 148) to assert that "this theme of *Second Life* permitting access to an interior self that in the actual world is masked by an unchosen [*sic*] embodiment and social obligations was common." In this sense, blogging can be interpreted as another permutation in a continuum of online communications that encourage the enhancive articulation and technologized manifestation of one's supposedly authentic self.

Just as blogging can be seen as a continuance of the technological aesthetics and sensibilities of online communication forms that preceded it, online communication itself can be seen as a continuance of the aesthetics and sensibilities of older communicative technologies – writing and print. Jill Rettberg (2008) proposes that blogging can be contextualized along a continuum of aesthetics and sensibilities of older communicative technologies such as writing and print. To contextualize this suggestion, it might be useful to relate blogging to

Walter Ong's concept of the "technology of writing." In his classic work *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong (1982) charts a continuum of communicative sensibilities and practices that emerge from speech and are increasingly abstracted and technologized by writing, print and the computer. Ong describes writing as the most momentous of all human inventions because it moves speech from the oral-aural realm to the sensory world of vision in which the immediacy and evanescence of utterances are transformed into more tangible 'things' that are fixed in events in time, written signs and objects in space . This conversion of oral-aural utterances into more tangible words facilitates the conceptual processes of analysis, classification, and abstraction that we are so familiar with today. According to Ong, these analytical processes would be impossible without the technology of writing.

In fact, it is the psychological 'interiorization' of writing that obscures this conversion and makes the technology of writing seem natural and taken for granted. Ong (1982, 78) proposes that without the interiorization of writing, "the literate mind would not and could not think as it does, not only while engaged in writing but normally even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form." Because of its recursive interiorization into speech and thought, the technology of writing can be interpreted as restructuring consciousness (Ong 1982). In many ways, the technology of writing "initiated what print and computers only continue, the reduction of dynamic sound to quiescent space, the separation of the word from the living present, where alone spoken words exist" (Ong 1982, 82). This leads Ong to conclude that writing and print and the computer are all ways of technologizing the word. In this sense, blogging can be interpreted as merely another way of technologizing the word through the interiorization of writing.

In a gesture that relates back to the motivations of documentation and writing, some bloggers explain that writing in their blog helps them to organize and process their thoughts. For example, one blogger states that blogging allows her to “articulate [her thoughts] in a way that someone else could read and understand.”³³ In another example, the author of *A Trillion Kisses* expresses:

I favor written communication; it allows me to cogitate on things a little longer. I'd hate for people to overhear my internal dialogue – blogging affords me the challenge of trying to take a little of the load of nonsensical dribble that is my inner voice and sorting it out into a neat succinct little paragraph that is easier to understand.

This function of organization of thought seems to resonate with the purpose of written diaries. In their qualitative study of written diaries, Wiener and Rosenwald (1993) offer that writing in a diary helped people to organize their emotions and thoughts into a presentable shape so that they could better understand what they were feeling. In addition, the self articulated by writing in a blog may seem tangible and concrete, when compared to the mental ideations and memories of the self. Amos Funkenstein (1993) maintains that what we come to understand as our identity is woven together from our memories and the narrative associations made between them. These memories however constitute what Funkenstein refers to as an ‘incomprehensible catastrophe’. This is because the act of recalling an

³³ This quotation is from the post ‘Why Blog?’ from the blog *The Way into the Far Country*.

event takes the recollection further away from the initial experience of the actual event.

Adapting these observations to Ong's theorizations, it might be suggested that the clarity and organization achieved by articulating one's thoughts in a tangible medium (whether on paper, in a word processor, or in a blog), is first and foremost an affordance of the technology of writing. This facilitation of organization and analysis relates to what Ong (1982, 103-104) refers to as the distancing effect of writing: "the distancing which writing effects develops a new kind of precision in verbalization by removing it from the rich but chaotic existential context of much oral utterance." In this sense, what Funkenstein refers to as the "incomprehensible catastrophe" of memory and what the aforementioned blogger refers to as the "nonsensical dribble that is my inner voice" can both be interpreted as part of the chaotic existential context of oral utterances that is ameliorated by the technology of writing. Ong (1982, 105) adds that because of the distance created between the self and its articulation, diary writing in particular "makes possible increasingly articulate introspectivity, opening the psyche as never before not only to the external objective world quite distinct from itself but also to the interior self against whom the objective world is set."

Another affordance of the articulation or presentation of self that is often associated with computer mediated communication is its asynchrony. Adopting Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework of self-presentation, Hugh Miller (1995) asserts that unlike computer mediated communication, face to face communication includes non-verbal cues such as the vocal pitch, eye contact and physical appearance, that are inadvertently 'given off'. In contrast, the implicit information that online communication gives off is not non-verbal but

paralinguistic, and can be more easily edited and reedited to form a “neat succinct little paragraph that is easy to understand.”³⁴ In her study of personal homepages, Katherine Walker (2000) elaborates that the pliability and asynchrony of the medium allow some users to manipulate most elements of their self-presentation until they are fully satisfied. For example, a blogger may be free to mull over their descriptions and reflections of events, paraphrase from different sources, spell-check, rephrase, insert and edit links and photographs, and finally when this articulation of identity is perfected, bloggers may post it online as an enhanced but verifiably ‘authentic’ version of themselves.

While this affordance of asynchronous communication is undeniably a feature of blogging, its novelty arises not in contrast to writing but more accurately to in contrast to speech. In fact, Ong attributed this form of selective and malleable articulation to writing’s affordance of ‘backward scanning’. In the chaotic existential context of orality, the flow of words, once uttered, cannot be eliminated, erased or changed. In contrast, writing allows one to scan backwards to words previously written and thus facilitates reflexive selectivity and elimination of inconsistencies. In this sense, the ability to edit one’s articulations in electronic contexts such as word processors and blogs is only an intensification of the affordance of backward scanning initiated by the technology of writing. Notably, the ability of backwards scanning is not impossible in speech, but is merely enhanced by writing. In addition, Ong notes that once the precision and analytic exactitude of writing is interiorized, it can and does feed back into speech.

³⁴ This phrase is extracted from the blog *A Trillion Kisses*, and was originally quoted on the previous page.

In this manner, intensifying the affordances of analytical distance and backward scanning of writing, the word-processing and multimedia functions of blogging allows bloggers to screen, sort, edit and airbrush the supposed banalities of everyday life to produce an articulation of self that is experienced by some bloggers as more exceptional, more meaningful and more *real*. Gesturing towards this intensification from writing on paper to typing in a blog, one blogger states that his blog “shows a better view of the real me than the stale [written] journal entries of my younger days.”³⁵ In fact, this enhanced version of the authentic self is perceived as so alluring that another blogger conveys that she is “working on trying to take this version [of herself] and extend it to the ‘me’ who exists in the real world.”³⁶ In this sense, the articulation of the self in blogging seems to have come a long way from its literal motivations of ‘documentation’ or ‘writing’. Blogging allows some bloggers to cut through the dead time of daily existence, the clumsiness of immediate expression, to reach the apparent truth of their being, the inner kernel of meaning to their thoughts, actions and lives.

In fact, the so-called chronicle or record of one’s life can be interpreted as much more than an enhanced yet authentic recount or reflection of one’s life – it can be seen as imbued with the perceived permanence, palpability and authority of the electronic medium to form an illuminated artifact of identity. As I have suggested, the internet exudes a sense of permanence, and makes some bloggers feel like when they blog, they are “actually accomplishing something that will last unlike the dishes, the cleaning, the laundry ...”³⁷ Returning to the previous quotation from *A Trillion Kisses*, this blogger states that sorting her life out “into a

³⁵ This quotation is from the post ‘Why do you blog?’ in the blog *I Blog about Nothing*.

³⁶ This quotation is from the post ‘Why I blog’ in the blog *Soul of a Dreamer*.

³⁷ This quotation is from the post ‘Why I blog’ in the blog *Little Things in Life*. It was previously quoted in chapter 1 of this thesis, in the section *I Blog, Therefore I Am*.

neat succinct little paragraph that is fairly easy to understand [and] so neat and tidy. It's just so nice, like a glossy coffee table book."³⁸ Another blogger concurs that writing and posting pictures in her blog feels like "I have my own little magazine to style every day."³⁹ In this way, some bloggers feel that through their blog, their life stories can be enhanced and glamorized into a coffee table book or magazine that illuminates with a permanence and tangibility that is conferred by the electronic medium. Even though the internet is neither permanent nor tangible in a conventional way, it is perceived by these bloggers to be so. It could be because unlike a written diary that may become tattered, torn, lost and forgotten, a blog exists in an electronic realm untouched by physicality and change, and can always be conjured up by the magical incantation – one's web address.

For some bloggers, the manifestation of identity in blogging bestows the authority of publication upon their articulated life story. This authority of publication can be related to what Ong (1982) refers to as the 'vatic quality' of writing and especially print. By removing utterances from their chaotic existential context and locking them into a visual space, writing de-contextualizes the text from its author. Because of its effect of detachment from its author, writing can be interpreted as an 'autonomous' form of discourse. Ong (1982 78-79) traces this autonomy back to the religious rituals of oral cultures where the utterer of a prophecy is considered a channel rather than a source of the text:

Writing, and even more print, has come of this vatic quality. Like the oracle or the prophet, the book relays an utterance from a source, the one who 'said' or wrote a

³⁸ This quotation is from the post 'Why I Blog?' in the blog *A Trillion Kisses*.

³⁹ This quotation is from the post 'why I blog' in the blog *My Happy Little Life*.

book. The author might be challenged if only he or she could be reached, but the author cannot be reached in any book. There is no way directly to refute a text. After absolutely total and devastating refutation, it says exactly the same thing as before. This is one reason why ‘the book says’ is popularly tantamount to ‘it is true’. It is also one reason why books have been burnt.

Perhaps it is this vatic quality of writing and print that confers onto blogs the authority, accomplishment and enchantment identified by aforementioned bloggers. In another example, a blogger explains that blogging “makes me feel, I don’t know... published I guess – I reread stuff I’ve written and realize how great my life really is.”⁴⁰ Yonchai Benkler (2006) proposes that the digital networked tools of the internet allows users to easily and affordably create and share content in a public space, in ways that were severely hindered by mass-media models of publication and broadcasting that dominated before the popularization of the internet. Even though blogs are not fixed in a tangible medium the same way as printed material such as books and newspapers, the legacy of print’s authority seems to live on in the aforementioned blogger’s quotation, as well as in the way blogging platforms such as *Blogger.com* pitch their services – as ‘Push-Button Publishing’.

Another possible way blogs confer the authority or vatic quality of print could be because of its ability to potentially reach a wide audience. This could be why the aforementioned bloggers imagine their life stories as a coffee table book

⁴⁰ This quotation is from a comment made on October 21, 2007 to the post ‘why I blog’, in the blog *My Happy Little Life*.

or magazine, and not say, a photo album or a scrapbook, could be because the former two are mass media forms that are published, and are available a wider audience. (Notably, the coffee table book and magazine might also be glitzier, more entertaining and possess more commercial value than a photo album or scrapbook. This aspiration of the some bloggers towards glamour and commerciality will be further explored in the next chapter.)

To reiterate, the analytic distance and backward scanning afforded by the articulation of identity in blogs, as well as the fixity and vatic quality of the manifestation of that identity can both be seen as extending the sensibilities and affordances initiated by the technologies of writing and print. However, scholars of biography such as John Zuern (2003) caution against the oversimplification that blogs are written diaries that have merely migrated online. According to Susan Herring et al (2005), the defining element of the blog is its reverse chronological ordering of posts and its dedicated channel for reader feedback. This means that unlike first generation homepages which sometimes offered a guestbook for comments on the entire site, blogs encourage readers to comment on each post the moment its author publishes it. Similarly, in their comparisons of personal blogs to written diaries, scholars of biography such as Zuern (2003), Sorapure (2003) and McNeill (2003) propose that the encouragement of reader feedback characterized the practice of blogging more of a communicative instead of an introspective act.

Notably, these scholars are not proposing that communicative and introspective functions are mutually exclusive. Rather, these functions can be interpreted through relationships of complementariness and relativity, as they are enacted in different media forms and practices, for different groups of users.

Relating this to Ong's (1982 102) work, it could be proposed that all writing is a form of communication, even when it is in a diary: "Even in a personal diary addressed to myself I must fictionalize the addressee... Writing is always a kind of imitation talking, and in a diary I therefore am pretending that I am talking to myself." Ong adds that human communication is never one-way, even when we talk to ourselves in the process of thinking, we pretend that we are two separate people. In this sense, even when addressing the self, the diary writer writes in anticipation of a response from that self.

It is for these reasons that Ong (1982 177) asserts that "the writer's audience is always a fiction." If every utterance, whether verbal or written, necessitates the fictionalizing of an audience, are there differences between fictionalized audiences that are formed by one's self (as in a diary) and that are formed by an imagined community of readers (as in a book)? In addition, are there differences between imagined communities of readers whose anticipated response is delayed (as in a letter or book) as compared to potentially immediate (as in a blog)? Although in principle, these are all communicative acts that fictionalize an audience, I would suggest that there are variations in the tailoring of messages to, and the communication that ensues with different combinations of audiences. For example, the purpose and content of a blog that is written for oneself as well as for a community of readers who may respond seconds after hitting the post button, is probably qualitatively different from that of a diary that is written for a version of one's self, as well as from a letter or book that is written for a community of readers whose response is expected to be delayed.

However, my assertion of differences between these communicative forms is predicated not on disparateness but on variation and hybridity, not on novelty

but on continuity. As I have suggested in the previous chapter, this articulation of one's life and thoughts in blogs seems to be closely related to its intention of communication to and validation from others. In the following comment to the blog *My Happy Little Life*, this purpose of presentation and validation comes into sharper focus:

I love [blogging]. And I do it because I really like to get attention. So it forces me to journal and post pictures about our lives, because no one will leave comments on my blog if I don't. It's like forced journaling because I'm getting the gratification that I so badly need.⁴¹

In sum, the enhanceive articulation of identity can be seen as transcending the self of everyday life through its technologically enabled modes of actualization, manifestation, and validation. Firstly, because of backward scanning of writing which is amplified in the asynchrony and pliability of the electronic medium, some bloggers are able to selectively and purposefully present an enhanced version of their 'true' selves. Secondly, this enhanced articulation of self seems to be transformed into an illuminated artifact of identity because of its vatic manifestation in the perceived permanence, palpability and publicity of the web. The myth of blogging achieves an added level of allure – not only does it allow some bloggers to access the so-called truth of their life stories, it also gives these bloggers an memento of that existence, to take home, to gaze upon, and to show their friends. It might be suggested that this electronic memento is perceived

⁴¹ This quotation is distinctive in its open admittance of its author's love for attention. As discussed in chapter 1, most bloggers are self-conscious about being narcissistic and use several rhetorical tactics to deemphasize, justify or naturalize their desire for validation.

by some bloggers as every-changing yet eternally frozen in time; it is a kind of enchanted mirror that shows these bloggers only what they want to see, only what they want the world to see.

And the world it seems, is always watching, always available in twenty-four different time zones, to return a knowing smile, or a reassuring pat on the back.⁴² The enhanced story of one's life, the illuminated artifact, once published is potentially immediately validated through a third affordance of feedback. Importantly, even though the mechanisms of feedback in blogging are in fact asynchronous, they create the mythical impression of immediacy and proximity which is described by bloggers as:

Having a thought, making a connection and publishing it.

And after you're done, many people connect to that one idea/thought, and in that beautiful way, the world is at one's fingertips.⁴³

In other words, it seems that the world is at one's fingertips to comment, support and validate every inane thought, every frustrated rant and every bored musing that one may have at any hour of the day or night. Reiterating this sentiment, Scott McNulty of *The Unofficial Apple Weblog* enthuses that the most rewarding part of blogging is its "pattern of immediate gratification ... You write something, and it's immediately available for people to see and comment on" (Banks 2008, 194).

⁴² Notably, not all feedback to blogs is supportive. However, as I will demonstrate in chapter four, personal blogging is not a genre that is marked by conflict. In fact, in some cases, any form of feedback, including disagreement is interpreted by bloggers as a form of validation.

⁴³ This quotation is from the author of the blog *Brandi's Blog*, and was sourced from the compilation of 'Why I blog' posts on the website <http://deepblog.com/whyiblog.0.html>

In their oft-quoted article ‘Weblogs as a Bridging Genre’, Herring et al. (2005) suggest that blogs are hybrids of older literary genres such as written diaries and print editorials. In addition, blogs also seem to be hybrid variations of other web genres that include HTML documents such as personal homepages, as well as asynchronous text-based CMC such as newsgroups. Developing this analysis, Herring et al propose that weblogs exist on a continuum with the predominantly one-way mass dissemination structure of HTML documents on one end and the dialogic and frequently updated communicative structure of asynchronous CMC on the other end. In this sense, weblogs can be interpreted as a ‘bridging genre’ between distinct web genres which make them attractive to users because of their ability to unite the best of both worlds. They allow bloggers to experience social interaction in ways that are otherwise difficult to achieve in web pages, while giving them ownership of, and control over, the communication space that is difficult to achieve in CMC.

In a similar logic, blogging can also be interpreted as a bridging genre within a much larger and older communicative ecology – along the continuum of orality and literacy. However, instead of a movement forward towards the analytic sophistication and vatic permanence of writing and print, the affordance of feedback can be seen as a movement backwards in the communicative continuum towards the immediate and chaotic existential context of speech. In this sense, it might be argued that the combinative functions of expression, documentation and communication that are actuated in the maxim ‘I blog, therefore I am’, fuse the polarities of Ong’s communicative continuum. Rettberg (2008) concurs that the dialogic nature of the Web moves blogging closer to the reciprocity of oral communication, while retaining print’s capacity for mass asynchronous

dissemination. This fusion of communicative polarities makes blogging attractive to its users because it combines the best of both worlds – it combines the asynchronous communicative structure of writing and the vatic qualities of print, with the immediacy and dynamism of speech. In this way, bloggers are able to selectively and discretionally craft their performance of identity, fix this performance into what is perceived to be a permanent medium, and have the performance validated almost immediately, and at any time of the day or night.

Blogging's fusion of orality and literacy can also be related to what Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin (1998) have called the double logic of remediation, which is propelled by two interrelated ideals of *immediacy* and *hypermediacy*. Together, the twin logics of immediacy and hypermediacy drive “culture to both multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them” (Bolter and Grusin 1998, 5). This theory of remediation provides a useful way to understand the paradoxical self of blogging. On one hand, the ideal of immediacy strives towards increased transparency of the medium – it strives towards a greater perceived authenticity of representation. This ideal is observable in blogging, in the way in which the affordances of pseudonymous self-disclosure and contiguous feedback may create a sense of amplified authenticity of the self, and intimacy with readers. On the other hand, the ideal of hypermediacy strives towards the opacity of the medium – it strives towards the multiplication of media in an effort to produce a comprehensive and enhanced representation of self (Bolter and Grusin 1998). For example, the self of blogging may be represented through a layering of different multimedia such as text, image, video and sound, in multiple panes and windows which are joined by numerous hyperlinks. Bolter and Grusin (1998) propose that

these seemingly contradictory logics are in fact mutually dependant, and that immediacy invariably depends on hypermediacy for its effect of transparency. This is because the perceptual effect of immediacy is contingent on a slew of technologized mechanisms. Conversely, as is observable from bloggers who profess that blogging “shows a better view of the real me,”⁴⁴ hypermediacy in turn produces the effect of immediacy and transparency.

With such an attractive model of communication, it is no wonder that blogs are perceived by some of its users as having powers that enable them the transformation and transcendence of selfhood. All things considered, it is also no wonder then that blogs are the fastest growing form of user-generated content on the Web today (Smith 2008). The author of *The Informal Matriarch* raves that “the fact that people like to read [my blog] everyday blows my mind.” Another blogger concurs that “once I started blogging and people started visiting my site, it was like a fire being lit under me, a flame burning in my heart.”⁴⁵ This ‘flame’ can be interpreted as the warm flush of gratification felt when one’s words, thoughts, and life are perpetually validated. It might be suggested from these quotations that the mythic articulation, manifestation and validation of the self in blogging combine to provide an intoxicating formula for narcissistic gratification. The myth of blogging appears to usher some bloggers to a rabbit hole into the enchanted truth of their existence, into a wondrous world where tedium is transformed into jest and hardship into momentous struggle. These bloggers seem to be led through an electronic wonderland where every drama of their life, every facet of their personality can be selectively expressed, affirmed and applauded.

⁴⁴ This quotation is from the post ‘Why do you blog?’ in the blog *I Blog about Nothing*, and was originally quoted in the second section of this chapter.

⁴⁵ This quotation is from a comment made on February 17, 2008 to the post ‘Why Blog? Here’s Why’, in the blog *Julie Zickerfoose*.

Despite the pliancy of its articulation, luminosity of its manifestation, and exhilaration of its validation, the enhanced self of blogging seems to be anchored by an authenticity that is stressed at every stage of its realization. Therefore, the ameliorated self of blogging does not seem to be perceived as a fabrication or prevarication – it is believed by some bloggers to be the inviolable *truth* of their lives and personalities. This could be because despite its *mode* of articulation, the *content* of the life story, with its artless banalities and candid flavor, usually grounds these bloggers’ selves in a sense of realism and authenticity. In fact, for some bloggers, this authenticity of self-articulation may be amplified because of another affordance of online communication – that of anonymity or pseudonymity. For example, the author of the blog *Michael-in-Norfolk* expresses:

There are very few people that one comes upon with whom you feel at ease in spilling your guts and innermost thoughts. I know perhaps it seems strange that I often put everything out on the internet for the world to see when I would not dare tell someone in person.

Similarly, another blogger notes that, “everything I put on here is 100% true, and I share things with you guys that I don’t share with my friends, or my family.”⁴⁶ These bloggers seem to feel that the selves that they articulate online are much more real, much more authentic than they could ever be in everyday life. This line of reasoning resonates with Turkle’s (1995) conception of the internet anonymity as encouraging a safe space for self-disclosure and experimentation of identity.

⁴⁶ This quotation is from the post ‘Why I blog’ from the blog *Let Your Freak Flag Fly*.

However, I would argue via Goffman (1959) and other symbolic interactionists such as Walker (2000), that identity is inherently performative, and even without an audience we may still be performing for ourselves in the ‘backstage’ areas of our life. Therefore, even under the aegis of anonymity, this so-called authenticity can still be interpreted as a type of performance, for others, and for ourselves. Therefore, it may be argued that blogging’s affordance of anonymity and its purported authenticity do not really overshadow its repertoire of enhanceive affordances that, in fact, present the self in subtly stylized ways.

A Life as Mediatized

At this juncture, the self of blogging seems to be simultaneously authentic yet enhanced, essential yet pliant, and appears to replicate strategically the paradoxical model of selfhood perpetuated by pop psychology – all efforts to purposefully ameliorate and transform the self seem to lead magically back to an original and authentic self. This paradoxical mode of self can also be interpreted as a function of the technological medium of its realization.

Together, the dual logics of orality and literacy, immediacy and hypermediacy, authenticity and enhancement, can be seen as creating the mythical fantasy of human unfolding. This can be related to the aspiration for transcendence that was prefigured by the declaration ‘I blog, therefore I am’, and seems to be at work in the proclamation that “blogs not only help to reveal who we are, they help us to transcend who we are.”⁴⁷ This mythical power of transcendence can be seen as forming the final link between blogging’s transmutations of banalities into exceptionalities, and seems to magically resolve

⁴⁷ This quotation is from the blog *Media Dragon*, and was originally quoted in the last section of chapter one.

its paradox of enhancement and authenticity. Encapsulating this sublime power of transcendence, the blogging guru Rebecca Blood (2002, 67) recommends that “as you read and think and write daily, you will quickly find that you are smarter, more interesting, and more articulate than you ever dreamed you could be.” Vincent Mosco (2004) explains that myths exist as a way to endow human lives with the meaning and drama needed to transcend the ultimate decay and demise of the individual. In this same way, some bloggers seem to hold onto this myth of transcendence, to the belief that they are becoming somehow better yet truer to themselves, that their lives mean something and are going somewhere.

Retracing the steps of my previous arguments, it might be suggested that this myth of transcendence operates through a repertoire of technological affordances that allows some bloggers to selectively and purposefully articulate their selves, and manifest these selves as illuminated electronic artifacts that can be perpetually validated and celebrated by others. This process collectively gestures towards a technologically mediated impetus to *perform* and be favorably received, an impetus that Andreas Kitzmann (2004) calls the ‘mediatization of the self’, which at its core is about cultivating a version of private everyday life that is suitable for public consumption. This impetus to perform, to mediatize one’s self, seems to have a curious effect on everyday life. It seems to cultivate an almost manic compulsion to harness and refine one’s private life for readers to relish:

I take pictures of things I never would have before and upload them to the computer almost instantly ... I go through my day in ‘compose post’ mode, where I’m actively selecting words to describe my children. [This]

process helps me to see them, to be mindful of who they are. It helps me appreciate their quiriness when I can share it with others and we can laugh together [virtually].⁴⁸

In a similar vein, some bloggers convey that blogging has “heightened my awareness of the everyday,”⁴⁹ and helped me “keep my eyes and ears open – I’m always on the lookout for what I want to highlight or share with the world.”⁵⁰ To reiterate, the psychological ‘interiorization’ of writing naturalizes the analytic sophistication that the technology of writing enables by incorporating the literary affordances of backward scanning, conceptual organization and reflexive distance into the thought processes. It is this recursive interiorization of the affordances of writing into speech and thought, which enables the technology of writing to restructure consciousness (Ong 1982). In other words, the analytic sophistication of writing and its subsequent intensification through computing technologies such as word processing can be seen to feed back into its antecedent communicative forms such as speech and thought.

Applying this logic of recursive interiorization to blogging, we can start to theorize about how the interiorization the technology of blogging might also restructure consciousness. For some bloggers, the technology of blogging educes a performative impulse to mediatize oneself though the processes of enhanceive articulation, vatic manifestation and immediate validation. The interiorization of this impulse may encourage some bloggers to incorporate a highly reflexive and performative sensibility into the way they go about their daily lives. In other words, the interiorization of the sensibility of self-mediatization may encourage

⁴⁸ This quotation is from the post ‘Why I blog’ in the blog *So-Called Chaos*.

⁴⁹ This quotation is from the post ‘Should I blog?’ in the blog *Firstperson Thirdcat*.

⁵⁰ This quotation is from the post ‘Why I blog’ in the blog *Peachy Perspective*.

bloggers to live their lives in ‘compose post mode’, where they are constantly crafting a narrative of self in view of its mediatization on their blog. In other words, if the recursive interiorization of writing encourages one to think *as if* they are writing, then the recursive interiorization of blogging may encourage one to live *as if* they are blogging:

Blogging makes me live larger. It makes me want to experience new things for more than just a momentary thrill ... Life is more fun to experience when you go at it with the intention of interpreting [and] presenting it to friends. I’m a whole lot more likely to say yes to any diversion, any curious experience, than I was before I started blogging. If you want to have an interesting blog, it helps to lead an interesting – and interested – life.⁵¹

From these quotations, it may be suggested that the fantasy of transcendence offered by the myth of blogging is enacted by its mediatization. Mediatization appears to work its magic by sprinkling a kind of digital fairy dust over some bloggers’ lives; the enchantment of online articulation, manifestation and validation drive these bloggers to relish and relive every moment of their lives so that it can be reported and performed in their blog. In fact, the mythical formula of articulation, manifestation and validation seems so intoxicating that some bloggers even stage their lives for the benefit of their blogs. In a strange twist, it may be argued that for some bloggers, the performance of life now

⁵¹ This quotation is from the post ‘Why Blog? Here’s Why’ in the blog *Julie Zickerfoose*.

precedes the life itself. However, the conceptual utility of mediatization lies less in its demarcation of the boundaries between artificiality and authenticity, between the mediated and the experiential, and more in permeability between and merger of these seemingly contradictory categories. Schulz (2004) explains that mediatization is constituted through four processes – how media extends the limits of human communication; how media substitutes social activities and institutions; how media combine with other non-media activities in social life; and how subjects and organizations accommodate to this media logic. In addition, the growing salience of the media is effectuated not just through its communicative infrastructures, but also through its cultural content (Jansson 2002).

In this sense, the conceptual lens of mediatization allows us to move beyond the rigid designations of authenticity and artificiality, and the experiential and the mediated, to conceive not of life *and* performance, but of life *as* performance. The previous quotations suggest that this blogger does not see her presentation of identity as a fabrication or a farce; instead, this quotation expresses a synergistic merger of the performative and experiential sensibilities of mediatization. This performative and experiential merger that seems to be taking place in the sensibility of mediatization can be related to what literary scholars and psychologists have called ‘narrative identity’. Scholars of biography such as Paul Eakin (1999) have suggested that all forms of life writing can be interpreted as a discourse of identity. The stories people formulate about themselves and their lives structure their self-concept and influence their everyday choices. The self-concept that arises out of the stories people tell themselves and others, through conversations, writing and ideation can be understood collectively as ‘narrative identity’ (Bruner, 2006).

The process of narrating our lives can be seen as a primary way of ordering experience, through which we come to understand and articulate our lives, our sense of selfhood, and our relation to our bodies and the external world. Jerome Bruner (1990) proposes that formulating a narrative of our lives and a concept of selfhood within that life, gives rise to a sense of temporal continuity, external and internal coherence, livability and adequacy. Consequently, this mode of performative narrativity is so habitual that it becomes intrinsic to the structuring of experience itself, for organizing and evaluating our experience of past, present and hence directs us into the future. It is for this reason that Bruner (2006, 114) affirms that “a life as led is inseparable from a life as told.” In this sense, narrative identity can be interpreted as a dynamic product of our ongoing life story, instead of a fixed but hidden thing that is its referent. In other words, scholars of narrative believe that there is no interior self that lies beyond our own understanding of selfhood – the conception of self is just that, a conception (Bruner 2006).

If we interpret the mediatization of the self as an extension of the performance of everyday life (Goffman 1959) and narrative identity (Bruner 1990), how can we theorize the relationship between the life as led and the life as mediatized? Returning to Bruner, a life as led is *inseparable* from a life as told – the mediatized and the so-called experiential domains are not indistinguishable, they are inseparable.⁵² This difference is of crucial significance. This inseparability comes into sharper focus in the following quotation by the prominent video blogger Steve Garfield:

⁵² This is of course factoring for instances of obvious deceit, which is a feature of online as well as offline interaction and self-presentation. However, the pseudonymity and discretionary self-presentation afforded by online environments may make deception easier (Donath 1998).

A lot of what I shoot is personal. Like what my wife and I do on the weekend. I package that into something we call 'The Carol and Steve Show.' ... It enhances our experience. (Banks 2008, 269)

The Carol and Steve life seems to be enhanced by the Carol and Steve Show, in a process where the life is harnessed to produce the show, the show is inevitably part of the life, and any effort to separate the two becomes problematic. Returning to Schulz's (2004) definition of mediatization we can see that it is constituted through four processes – how media extends the limits of human communication; how media substitutes social activities; how media combine with other non-media activities in social life; and how subjects accommodate to this media logic. What we see in the Carol and Steve Show is a complex compounding of all these processes. Extrapolating from Shultz's definition, it may be unproductive to think about mediatization in dichotomizing terms such as mediatized/experiential, blog/life, and online/offline.

In his award winning book *Mediated*, Thomas de Zengotita (2005) suggests that for most people in the advanced capitalist societies of the global north, the media is not just an object or a medium; it is a cultural logic that is pervasive, as well as a psychological sensibility that is naturalized. De Zengotita explains that under the conditions of media saturation (of form as well as content), subjects are plagued by a reflexive anxiety and crisis about authenticity, regarding if, when, and how well they are performing in their everyday lives. In other words, the performative reflexivity expressed in blogging's 'compose post mode' is only another iteration of this anxiety.

What emerges from this analysis is an expanding and evolving techno-cultural landscape in which different technologies such as writing, print, and blogging are differentially interiorized and give rise to different social, cultural and psychological sensibilities. I would suggest that all these technologies educe a transformation of consciousness that can be conceived according to different degrees of abstraction. These degrees of abstraction are themselves defined collectively and individually in relation to a benchmark of perceived authenticity that is itself constantly shifting. Throughout this chapter, and now at its close, the caveat of authenticity is of critical importance. Blogging's myth of mediatization, along with its affordances and artificialities appear to be neutralized and negated at every turn, by its espousal of authenticity. Like the self of pop psychology and of the dual logics of remediation, the self of blogging can be interpreted as pliant yet essential, hypermediated yet immediate, enhanced yet authentic – all efforts to transcend the self lead back to an authentic self that was already there in the first place. This suggests that blogging realizes a mythical self that is not merely enhanced; it is a self that through enhancement becomes *more* real than 'reality' itself – it becomes hyperreal, a spectacle of the self.

Chapter 3:

The Spectacle of Mediatization

Spectacles abound in every aspect of our lives. A boy is being delivered in a hospital to parents who greet him with latex gloves and a camcorder. A girl is celebrating her fifth birthday in a fast food theme restaurant and smiles for the camera even when there is none there. Girl and boy meet years later to the soundtrack of their favorite romantic comedy and perform their dating ritual based on stuff they've learnt from sitcoms, love songs and Hallmark cards. On their movie date, they silently wish their first kiss could be as explosive as the one they are witnessing onscreen instead of just tasting like diet coke and popcorn. As we move through our lives from one Kodak moment to the next, we can hardly remember a single thought, aspiration, gesture or conversation that wasn't mediated in some way by the images of entertainment and consumerism. This constitutes what Guy Debord (1994) refers to as the spectacle, which is not simply a collection of images, but a social relation among people mediated by images.

Using Debord's theory of the spectacle, this chapter will suggest how the mediatized self of blogging is a spectacular form of self which is underscored by the tenets of consumerism. However, before examining the spectacular characteristics of blogging, a qualification is in order. Even though Debord conceived of the spectacle as a monolithic presence in the developed world, it is by no means a universal or uniform phenomenon. Even though blogs are increasingly being created by people from all over the world, internet access and computing technologies cut across different social groups in uneven ways, and are still very much a privilege afforded by those with a certain level of economic

means. In the United States alone, blogging is a practice predominated by young, white, suburbanites (Lenhart and Fox 2006).⁵³ Therefore, the so-called ubiquity of the spectacle in developed nations may differ in its reach and effect on social groups. In his critique of internet myths, Hervé Fischer (2006, 17) reminds his readers that “while computer technology is beyond the reach of more than 90 per cent of the world’s population, it nevertheless indirectly imposes its law on even the poorest of human societies.” While those who can afford the spectacle’s entertainment are defined by its mediating qualities, those who cannot afford it are defined by its *lack* – both the privileged and the deprived are united in their spectacular captivation and its beguiling captivity.

The Commodification of Reality

In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord (1994) posits a media and consumer society which is structured around the production and consumption of images, commodities, leisure and entertainment. According to Steven Best and Douglas Kellner (1997), Debord’s critique was a reaction to the rapid modernization of France during the 1950s, and its consequent inauguration of the consumer society. Driven by capitalist expansionism and modernized manufacturing techniques, the mass production of goods required its corresponding mass consumption. Debord (1994, #43) explains that “the production of commodities reaches a level of abundance which requires a surplus of collaboration from the worker.” Therefore, instead of merely producing commodities, the worker was persuaded also to consume these commodities on a mass scale and was introduced to a life of consumptive leisure previously reserved

⁵³ In their survey of bloggers in the United States, Lenhart and Fox found that fifty-three percent of bloggers were under thirty years of age, sixty percent were white, and fifty-one percent resided in suburban areas.

for the upper echelons of society. Unlike the shackles of production, consumptive leisure was not based on economic necessity, but on consensus and was mobilized by a burgeoning array of media and entertainments that included print media, television, cinema, shopping arcades and so on.

Debord's analysis is rooted in the centrality of the commodity, which under the auspices of consumerism, escalates to a higher level of abstraction (Best and Kellner 1997). This abstraction is accomplished through the dual nature of the commodity, whose surface triviality and obviousness betrays a depth of complexity and meaning. For example, in modern consumer societies, a commodity is never a just a sum of its functionality, but exists in a semantic orbit of desire that is shaped by its mediated advertisement, packaging and the culture of its reception. Therefore, instead of consuming objects for their use-value, or utility, the subject can be interpreted more accurately as a consumer of illusions. This understanding leads Debord (1994, #36) to describe a process in which commodity fetishism,

... reaches its absolute fulfillment in the spectacle, where the tangible world is replaced by a selection of images which exist above it, and which simultaneously impose themselves as the tangible par excellence.

In this way, consumerism spawns a world of images and illusions that exist above and beyond their tangible referents, in which "the commodity is this factually real illusion, and the spectacle is its general manifestation" (Debord 1994, #47). Best and Kellner (1997) elaborate that on one hand, Marx described a

capitalist system that was marked by the degradation of *being into having*, where creative life is reduced to the possession of material objects and where relations with others is replaced by the greed of the self. On the other hand, Debord (1994, #17) describes a consumerist system that is marked by the transformation of *having into appearing*, where tangible commodities are surpassed by their semiotic representation, “from which all actual ‘having’ must draw its immediate prestige and ultimate function.”

Steven Best (1994) suggests that the spectacle and its proliferation of images escalate abstraction to the point where subjects no longer live in the world per se, but in an abstract image of the world. In this way, the spectacle converts direct experience with objects, as well as with other people, into a fantastic universe of images and signs, “in which subjects do not constitute their own lives and society but contemplate the glossy surfaces of the commodity world” (Best 1994, 49). It is for this reason that Debord (1994, #1) declares that the spectacle constitutes a falsification of social life where “everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation.” In their article ‘Debord and the Postmodern Turn’, Best and Kellner propose that Debord’s theorization of the spectacle entails a relatively passive subject that submissively consumes media and commodity spectacles on the screen or in the mall. Best and Kellner go on to postulate a new stage of the spectacle that that they refer to as ‘the interactive spectacle’, which entails a more active subject that interacts with media technologies such as the computer, internet and video games.

These media technologies enable users to create and interact with digital objects and environments, and also with each other through these mediated channels. Citing the example of Jennifer Ringley’s infamous webcam site

Jennicam,⁵⁴ Best and Kellner add that internet technologies allow ordinary individuals to turn their everyday lives into a sort of televised spectacle. Blogging can also be interpreted in this way, as a process in which some bloggers turn their daily lives and thoughts into a mediatized spectacle composed of witty anecdotes and dramatic accounts, which are punctuated with carefully orchestrated photos, images, videos and links. Seen in this light, the mediatized self of blogging is not just a quotidian performance of personality, it can be interpreted as an extravaganza of identity complete with all the bells and whistles (such as enhancive articulation, manifestation and validation) afforded by its technologized mode of mediation. Because of the affordances of its articulation, manifestation and validation, which were proposed in the previous chapter, the self enacted by blogging is not merely a *performance*; it can be seen as a technologically mediated *spectacle* that does not just enhance, but outshines and displaces the unmediated self of everyday life.

Another theorist of consumer society, Albert Borgmann (1992), offers a useful framework to understand the properties of his version of the spectacle, which he refers to as ‘hyperreality’. Like the spectacle, hyperreality generally denotes increasingly technologically mediated and disembodied ways of experiencing the world and social relationships within it. Within the sphere of leisure, what Borgmann calls ‘final hyperreality’ encompasses entertainment and media technologies that produce simulations that rival the ‘real’ world in their

⁵⁴ Jennifer Ringley set up one of the first webcam sites offering an unedited look into her university dormitory room. The site, which was online from 1996 to 2003, streamed images of her going about her daily activities such as sleeping, eating and even having sex, twenty-four hours a day (Knight 2000).

seductive qualities of pliability, richness and brilliance.⁵⁵ Borgmann cites the examples of television, videogames, and cyberspace, which entice users with hyperrealities of varying degrees of brilliance, richness and pliability that outshine tangible reality. Together, these three qualities can be used to contextualize the enhancive affordances of the blogging self, and to understand how its mediated articulation constructs it as a spectacular form of self.

Firstly, what Borgmann refers to as pliability denotes the ability to manipulate and interact with an on-screen simulation. Applying this to the schema of blogging, pliability can be attributed to blogging's affordance of asynchronous communication, which allows bloggers to screen, sort, edit and airbrush their life stories to perfection, or stylized imperfection. Secondly, the quality of brilliance entails a multimedia simulation that confers a sense of flawlessness and integrity by excluding unwanted external information. Adapting this to blogging, the pliability of a blogger's self-articulation might contribute to a sense of thematic integrity, in terms of its selective content and design, and hence creates what Borgmann refers to as hyperreal brilliance. Finally, the quality of richness entails a simulation of superlative variety and encyclopedic completeness, which is evident in blogging's abilities of compilation. For example, a blog is typically an amalgamation of various multimedia such as text, image and video, which are organized, compiled and accessible according to their date of creation, thematic category, popularity, and so on. This creates a narrative of self that is encyclopedic in its coverage and potentially limitless in its arrangement.

It might be argued that these qualities of pliability, brilliance and richness constitute a mediatized self which is marked by the multiplication and layering of

⁵⁵ Borgmann distinguishes between final hyperreality which is used in the sphere of consumptive leisure, and instrumental hyperreality, which is used in the sphere of labor to carry out tasks in abstracted and technologically mediated ways.

different media contents and forms, to produce a mode of selfhood that is marked by what Bolter and Grusin (1998) referred to as hypermediacy. As aforementioned, the emphasis placed by the ideal of hypermediacy, on its purported communicative immediacy and expressive authenticity, allows some bloggers to articulate a 'better view of the real me.'⁵⁶ As I also suggested in the previous chapter, the twin logics of hypermediacy and immediacy are mutually dependant. This is because, on one hand, some bloggers feel that the pliability, brilliance and richness of their mediatized selves more accurately and authentically represent who they are. On the other hand, the effect of communicative immediacy experienced through blogging's affordance of feedback seems to be reliant upon the multiplication of various technologized mechanisms.

In other words, the pliability, brilliance and richness of the blogger's self-articulation can be seen to produce a more spectacular version of one's 'authentic' self. It might be suggested that the opposing flows of immediacy and hypermediacy, authenticity and enhancement meet at a point of confluence where the mythic and the spectacular fuse to produce a potent transfiguration of the self that is much more than the sum of its parts. On one hand, blogging's spectacular aspects of selfhood appear to be marked by a sense of drama, glamour and charisma. On the other hand, as I have suggested in the previous chapter, blogging's mythical mode of selfhood seems to be anchored in authenticity, naturalness, and the rarified qualities of truth and being. Notably, the spectacular and mythical aspects of the blogging self may not be discrepant. It may be argued that the mythic quality of authenticity retains its salience even in Debord's

⁵⁶ This quotation is from the post 'Why do you blog?' in the blog *I Blog about Nothing*, and was originally cited in chapter 2 of this thesis.

conception of the spectacle. Steven Best (1994, 50) proposes that “Debord saw not just the blurring of illusion and reality but the authentication of illusion as more real than reality itself.” From this theoretical viewpoint, it may be argued that out of the authoritative potency of myth, and the enthralling magnetism of spectacle, emerges a superlative and irresistible mode of selfhood that is endowed with both the pleasure of capriciousness and the force of destiny. Entwined with the veridical stories of some bloggers’ lives and enlivened by the Technicolor fantasies of mediated consumption, the spectacular myth of identity seems to be cooed into dream of origination and transcendence: a dream forged in its technologized articulation, molded by its mediated manifestation, and crystallized by its self-interested validation.

However, it may be argued that the mediatized self of blogging is spectacular not just through the *medium* of its articulation, but also in terms of its cultural *content*. Returning to the concept of mediatization, Andre Jansson (2002) proposes that it also refers to the process in which mediated cultural products gain prominence as cultural referents, and become central to the way subjects in consumer societies understand themselves, and how they relate to each other. In the previous chapter, I defined the mediatization of the self as the cultivation of a version of private everyday life that is suitable for public *consumption* (Kitzmann 2004). It is in this definition that blogging’s illuminated artifact of identity can be seen to reveal its true nature – it is not merely a document or an object, it is a commodity. Some bloggers do not simply wish to be read and appreciated; they want to be consumed and celebrated, in blogs that are imagined as “my own little

magazine”,⁵⁷ or “a glossy coffee table book,”⁵⁸ in which they are the featured artiste, the darling ingénue, the celebrity.

I Want a Famous Life

Debord (1994) envisioned the spectacle as a totalizing and monolithic force in modern social life; he conceived not just of an accumulation of spectacles, but of the *society* of the spectacle, a pseudo world that gained a general unity from the confluence of images that have come to represent every aspect of life. From this theoretical framework, it might be argued that the mythic spectacle of identity that is borne of technologized mediatization, exists within a cultural constellation of representations and discourses on media, consumerism and technology, in which it is only a facet. The discourse of consumerism is epitomized in the commodity and is championed through its most potent channel – the media. Therefore, it is conceivable that to exist in a consumerist society is to be defined by its rules of commodification, to remake oneself as a commodity, to be delivered by the illuminating qualities of mediation, and to aspire towards the apex of its personification – celebrity.

Kitzmann (2004) elaborates that the mediatization of the self denotes a desire to present oneself in the language of fame and celebrity and to be consumed as such, as a self-styled media object. For example, in a compilation of interviews with top bloggers, the author of *Steve Garfield's Video Blog* offers that:

⁵⁷ This quotation is from the post ‘why I blog’ in the blog *My Happy Little Life*, and was originally cited in chapter 2 of this thesis.

⁵⁸ This quotation is from the post ‘Why I Blog?’ in the blog *A Trillion Kisses*, and was originally cited in chapter 2 of this thesis.

A lot of what I shoot is personal. Like what my wife and I do on the weekend. I package that into something we call 'The Carol and Steve Show.' ... It enhances our experience. (Banks 2008, 269)

From this quotation, it may be suggested that within the spectacle, the boundary between so-called lived reality and its spectacular representation dissolves to produce a reality which is increasingly mediatized, and a mediatization which increasingly comes to dominate reality. The Carol and Steve life seems to be enhanced by the Carol and Steve show, in a process where the life is harnessed to produce the show, the show is inevitably part of the life, and any effort to separate the two becomes meaningless. Debord (1994, #8) explains that:

Lived reality is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle while simultaneously absorbing the spectacular order, giving it positive cohesiveness. Objective reality is present on both sides. Every notion fixed in this way has no other basis than its passage into the opposite: reality rises up within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real.

In this way, lived reality appears to merge with its spectacular representation in a nebulous mass where the two are almost inseparable. Some bloggers live in a society drenched in consumerist fantasies and mediated images, where they seem to know their favorite sitcom characters better than they know

their friends, where they live vicariously through the televised lifestyles of the rich and famous, where they believe the latest *ipod* will make them truly happy. In a life that is walled in on every side by screens and store displays and computerized windows, it is conceivable that bloggers have come to live our lives as a biopic of unending sequels in which they are always seeking a fresh angle, a surprise twist, a monumental conclusion. For example the author of *The Life of P*, documents her relocation to New York City, with clichéd blog post titles such ‘Pamish in the city’, after the popular *Sex and the City* television series that was also based in New York City, and muses:

Despite its capricious reputation, I shall look and write
about each day with rose-tinted glasses [and] kitschy purple
feathers. That every waking day is a New York moment;
my own little version of a primetime reality TV show.

As subjects in a consumer society, bloggers know that it’s *just* a movie, a video game, a TV show. Yet despite these seasoned dismissals, some bloggers still wish that the fantasy could somehow break through the screen and flood our lives with the same excitement and euphoria that we were always promised. Well now it can, sort of. As some bloggers are swept up by the seductive beckons and warm assurances of the mediated fantasy that now seems to engulf them, it seems only natural that since they are already performing for themselves and the people around them, that they expand this audience to include the *world*. It might be suggested that blogging now joins a host of new interactive technologies that promise to let bloggers star in our own docudrama, which they can design to their

liking, create at their leisure, and which even comes with a designated channel for fan mail.

In fact, blogging can be interpreted as the latest incarnation in a line of consumer technologies that encourage subjects to star in the performance of their life. According to Kitzmann (2004, 148), as early as 1942, a Kodak campaign proclaimed that “life is a movie ... with a movie camera, you can keep it all.” Unmediated reality is no longer enough on its own – it needs to be commemorated through mediatization, to be transformed into spectacle, to have significance in bloggers’ lives (Kitzmann, 2004). Neal Gabler (1998) adds that with the advent of photographs and home movies, consumers began to do more than perform for camera, they began to tailor the major events of their lives to meet its demands. For example, it seems that the birthday celebration is never complete without the token shot of candles being blown off the cake, while the vacation cannot continue until everyone poses at the designated Kodak Photo Spot.⁵⁹ Since the popularization of photographic technologies, consumers have been encouraged to mediatize themselves and their lives; the only difference is that now digital technologies allow them to edit, caption, add a soundtrack, and publicize their daily lives for the world to admire. As subjects in a consumer society, we have always known that ‘life is a movie’, now *YouTube* gives us the power to ‘broadcast yourself’.⁶⁰

It might be suggested that some bloggers want their lives to be entertaining because entertainment has become the definitive paradigm through which they come to experience and evaluate themselves, others and the world. And at the

⁵⁹ A Kodak Photo Spot is a location with a Kodak-sponsored sign indicating a recommended spot at which to take a photograph.

⁶⁰ ‘Broadcast Yourself.’ is the slogan of YouTube, a phenomenally popular video sharing website where users can upload, view and share video clips.

center of this flurry of lights, cameras and action, is the celebrity, beckoning bloggers to enter a world of unparalleled glamour, excitement and happiness. Debord states that celebrities exist in the spectacle as the embodiment of lifestyle consumerism at its height, by acting out various styles of extravagance and enjoyment for the world to see. In addition, “the consumption celebrity superficially represents different types of personality and shows each of these types having equal access to the totality of consumption, and finding similar happiness there” (1994, # 61).

Debord understood that to be the poster child of consumerism, the celebrity needed to personify its elevation as well as its mythical accessibility. In the decades since Debord conceived of the spectacle, this alluring formula for celebrity seems to have inflated to the point of obsession. On one hand, the public’s obsession with entertainment personalities has intensified, with magazines and even entire television channels dedicated to a salacious and sensationalistic brand of star gazing. On the other hand, the elevation of stardom is paralleled by its concomitant myth of democratization. According to cultural theorists of fame, the celebrity system is experiencing a relative shift from reverence to democratization. This shift might be attributed to two interconnected trends, that of the growing intimacy with celebrity, and the increased popularity of reality television.

Sean Redmond (2006) explains that the ubiquity of the celebrity system in all forms of media seems to have effectuated an increasing sense of intimacy with stars. On one hand, as compared to the classic Hollywood studio system, where the private lives of stars were stringently edited by movie studios, contemporary stars reveal more of their personal lives in magazines exposés and tell-all talk

shows. On the other hand, at the demand of rapacious fans, who feast on every detail of stars' private lives, the media paparazzi seem to be more fervent in their attempts to detail what stars eat, where they go, and who they date. In particular, fans of all degrees of ardor love to witness the debacle of stardom. For example, the celebrity stories that seem to get the most buzz are the ones where celebrities mess up, when they get busted for solicitation of prostitution, in the case of the 1995 Hugh Grant scandal with Divine Brown. Or when they check into rehab, shave their heads, and lose custody of their children, as in the recent media spectacle of Britney Spears. Redmond explains that viewers take pleasure in the debasement of celebrities because it helps us get through their own misery. This creates a sense of intimacy, by demystifying stardom and elevating viewers' sense of self-worth.

Su Holmes (2004) adds that while celebrities are becoming more like everyday people, everyday people seem to be becoming more like celebrities. This can be attributed to the increased prevalence of reality television formats such as *Big Brother* and *Real World* MTV series, which became immensely popular in Europe and the US respectively. These programs feature contestants who are just being themselves on television, and are caught on camera performing unglamorous and 'authentic' acts, such as grooming, cooking and watching television. This can be interpreted as feeding into the ideology of democracy, which gives viewers the impression that 'that could be me, I could be famous too'. It might be argued that reality formats are replacing the success myth of celebrity with the new myth of democracy, where fame is no longer a result of talent and hard work but a result of just being oneself. This conflation of authenticity with fame seems to be the kind of dynamic that is at work in the aforementioned blogs.

It could be this bizarre desperation for the merger of self and celebrity that produces programs such as *I Want a Famous Face*, a reality show where participants undergo plastic surgery to look more like their favorite stars. This program adopts the narrative of transformation, in which the semblance of celebrity is the magical cure for a lifetime of banalities, injustices and inadequacies.

Under the enchantment of the celebrity system, the belief in the possibility of fame seems to be matched by the desire for it, a desire which is referred to by David Marshall (2006) as ‘the will to celebrity’. This will to celebrity denotes a desire for fame and a fervent belief in its attainability. It might be argued that this belief is fed daily by the entertainment industry, its backbone of lifestyle consumerism, and is manifested by a legion of bloggers who craft their spectacles of identity in the hopes that it will someday be their ticket to fame. Even though in reality most blogs are unknown and unsung (Herring et al 2005), some bloggers cling onto the handful of success stories where ordinary people writing about their lives hit the big time. An often quoted success story is that of *Belle du Jour*, an anonymous blogger turned book author who wrote about her trysts as a London call girl. In a prototypical rags to riches story, *Belle du Jour’s* internet fame translated into a lucrative book deal, which was then transformed into hit television series starring the British starlet Billie Piper.

As a result, some bloggers may believe that as long as they cultivate their spectacle of identity, the possibility of discovery and the meteoric rise to fame is just a mouse click away. These bloggers seem to languish in their own delusions of grandeur, admitting that they “blog in the hopes that someone will discover me and offer me millions of dollars to keep on writing thoughts about nothing in

particular.”⁶¹ Similarly, another blogger muses that instead of just blogging, she “should be in New York writing for some big publishing house!”⁶² In a society saturated with discordant and seductive images, and rife with fantasies of consumerism, the mediatization of the self can be interpreted as a manifestation of the acquiescence to these images and fantasies. This acquiescence appears to take its form in the will to celebrity, a will that is abetted by the simultaneous myth of its democratization.

It might be suggested that the spectacular myth of the mediatized self promises to lift bloggers out of the ‘universal pain of anonymity’ that was introduced by De Zengotita (2005, 124) in the first chapter of this thesis. With the magnetism of celebrity at the apex of a consumerist dream that beckons from every televised screen, every illuminated window, that tantalizes with the fantasy of its attainability, it is no wonder that some bloggers seem to despise the mediocrity of their existence and are “desperate to feel that I have made some impact on the world ... [and] need other people to feed back to me that I exist.”⁶³ Within the consumerist fantasy, the value of some bloggers’ life performances seems to be judged by the size and applause of their audience. In this sense, it might be argued that the existential crisis that was described in the first chapter is spawned by the irreconcilable chasm between zenith of celebrity and its nadir of unremarkable existence from which the mythic spectacle of blogging offers an imaginary escape.

By lifting some bloggers out of the blandness of their quotidian lives, this mythical dream of escape and transcendence might also blind them to the

⁶¹ This quotation is from the post ‘Why Do I Blog?’ in the blog *The Fat Lazy Guy*.

⁶² This quotation is from the post ‘Why I blog?’ in the blog *DramaPond*.

⁶³ This quotation is from the post ‘What to expect from blogging’ in the blog *Ramblings of the Bearded One*, and was originally cited in chapter one of this thesis.

actualities, politics and injustices of their lived existence. It is in this aspect that myth might be seen as synonymous with spectacle – both suppress the structures and inequities of capitalism that sustain its consumerist fantasy, by providing that euphoric clarity conferred by the dream of transcendence, being and celebrity. It is for this reason that Debord (1994, #21) refers to the consumerist fantasy as a ‘permanent opium war’, in which “the spectacle is the nightmare of imprisoned modern society which ultimately expresses nothing more than its desire to sleep [and where] the spectacle is the guardian of sleep.” In this sense, blogging may provide some of its authors with a pleasurable distraction from the discomfiting actualities of their everyday lives, by enchanting their mediatized life stories through the affordances of enhance articulation, manifestation and validation.

A Genealogy of the Mediatized Self

Vincent Mosco (2004) informs us that if the effect of myth is the evacuation of politics, then the critique of mythology can restore and regenerate it. With this goal in mind, this section will attempt to briefly trace the cultural genealogy of the mediatized self, and suggest how this self, along with the pop psychology self and the remediated self are in essence, variations on the same theme. As I have suggested throughout this thesis, the mythic spectacle of identity that is enacted by blogging is seems to be authenticated by the actuality of the life story; the psychic engineering of personality appears to be perpetually legitimated by a self that is always already there; the hypermediacy of online presentation is constantly equilibrated by the force of its immediacy. It must be remembered however, that the authentication of the myth and spectacle of the mediatized self, are both representations, and that the ‘truth’ of the self is more usefully

understood not as fixed unchanging essence, but a staged presence, in a play of contrasts that serves to uphold the logic of its perpetuation – that of consumerism.

The dream of transcendence that was prefigured by the statement ‘I blog, therefore I am’, its disdainful rejection of the banality and anonymity of everyday life, its fascination with the spectacle of mediatized selfhood, and its ambition towards the psychic absolution of celebrity, can be interpreted as facets of the same mythical tale. This is the ubiquitous tale of a nobody who embarks on a quest to find oneself. Traveling through a jungle of possible appearances, interests, alliances and personalities, the nobody discovers the sublime truth of her unique identity, of being itself and of the universe at large, and emerges triumphant as a heroine of her own making, as a mistress of her own domain, as a verifiable individual. This is the mythical tale told by commodious individualism, which engenders a kind of pseudo empowerment that is bestowed every time one enters a mall, flips through a magazine, turns on the television, surfs the net, or opens one’s own closet. As subjects in a consumer society, we are always being asked, and are always asking ourselves – who am I? Or rather, who do I want to be, today?

In his prominent book *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch (1978) suggests that consumerism creates an endemic and insatiable desire for commodities that is fueled by the pervasive forces of advertising, entertainment and celebrity. These forces promote consumption as a way of life, enticing subjects towards consumptive goods and experiences as the path to personal fulfillment. The message of consumerism is that with the right commodities, anyone can be whoever they want to be. In other words, consumer capitalism encourages the accumulation of commodities *for* the self, towards the culmination

of the self as the ultimate commodity. It is for this reason that Lasch (1978, 92) states that “advertising encourages men as well as women to see the creation of the self as the highest form of creativity.” This desire for self-authorship seeps from our consumptive choices to almost every aspect of modern life – subjects in a consumer society always seem to be searching for the right outfit, and the most eligible friends, and the most fitting words and images, to truly express who they are, in the performances that they stage in their everyday lives, in their jobs and relationships, and now, in their blogs – a performance that in blogging, has been mediatized as spectacle, and naturalized as myth.

Neal Gabler (1998) reiterates that consumption is ultimately about the magical transfiguration of the self through the creation of a purportedly unique personality. Gabler adds that consumption and its mediated entertainments provide a seductive and gratifying emancipation from reason, responsibility, tradition, class and other bonds that restrained the self. This is because consumption provided the sets, costumes, atmospheres and fantasies for the enactment of what Gabler (1998, 205) called the ‘life movie’, in which self-creation can be experienced as a form of empowerment. In this sense, the mediatization of the self in blogging can be interpreted as an extension of commodious self-creation and its feelings of empowerment; subjects in consumer societies are always already performing in a ‘life movie’, blogging can be seen to merely give them the technologized tools and platforms to discretionally articulate, digitally manifest, and exponentially publicize it for the world to admire and validate. Notably, beyond the reins of consumerism, selfhood was always already a performance. However, Gabler (1998) distinguishes that while the performance of the modernist self was tied to relatively fixed markers of social

status and roles, the consumerist self is tied only to the flimsy buoy of personality which is set adrift in a sea of consumptive possibilities. “The only difference between this new role and the old one was that the new one purported to be real, an expression of one's soul, whereas the old one never purported to be an expression of anything but one's social standing” (Gabler 1998, 229).

This obsession with consumptive self-creation ushers in what Richard Sennett (1992) in his landmark book *The Fall of Public Man*, refers to as the culture of personality. Before the domination of consumerism as a way of life, the enlightenment self was defined by a belief in ‘natural character’, as a common thread running through humankind. According to Sennett (1992), character belonged to nature and was reflected in people. In other words, natural character was not created by one’s life experiences, but was revealed through them. However, with the onslaught of consumerism, all social phenomena need to be interpreted in terms of ‘personality’ in order to be meaningful. This is because if subjects in consumer societies are all of the same natural character, there is no need to differentiate oneself through conspicuous consumption, but if these subjects are inherently different, then they need to buy a host of commodities to express their uniqueness, distinction, and personality. It is this obsession with personality that seems to order and fuel the semantic orbit of desire that underscores commodity fetishism, its manifestation as spectacle, its worship of celebrity, and its compulsion to mediatize the self through blogging, a compulsion which is enacted by the nexus of technologized articulation, manifestation and validation.

Sennett (1992) adds that the culture of personality and its associated self-authorship entails a brand of pseudo empowerment that simultaneously

degenerates into a kind of psychic burden. Under the enchantment of consumerism, some subjects now believe that they are the authors of their own personality and have become obsessed with creating meaning for every event in their life story, with 'finding themselves'. However, as Stewart Justman (2005) laments, this quest of self-authorship is ultimately a quest without an object. Every new commodity ignites a desire to have something else, to be someone else, and designates the consumerist self as ever-changing, elusive and vacant. In his landmark study *The Saturated Self*, Kenneth Gergen (1991) proposes that this consumerist self has no fixed essence to be true to, but is emergent, reformed and redirected as it moves through the arcades and screens of consumptive potentiality. Thus, the self of consumption can be interpreted as constructed, mutable and thoroughly relational – without any fixed essence to anchor itself in, and no powerful necessity to choose between different expressions of identity, the self is set adrift in a sea of commodious possibilities, tied only to its momentary and whimsical performances.

It is perhaps this hollowness of the consumerist self and the fickleness of its performances that stirs the existential crisis that blogging addresses and mollifies. Some bloggers need so desperately to demonstrate and validate their uniqueness, to “remind myself and others that I’m still here.”⁶⁴ It might be possible that beyond the staged performance of the life movie, the mediatized spectacle of that movie, there seems to be nothing but a black hole of emptiness and meaninglessness that threatens to subsume the psychic self. Andreas Kitzmann (2004, 168) explains that because the mode of selfhood enacted by blogging inherits the obsessions and anxieties of the consumerist self, “a

⁶⁴ This quotation is from the post ‘Why do I blog (when I do)?’ from the blog *Diary of a Rat*, and was originally cited in chapter one of this thesis.

repertoire of anxiety is thus spawned, including ... the anxiety of obscurity, and the anxiety of oblivion.” Unlike Sennett’s (1992) idea of ‘natural character’ which conferred onto the self the surety and assurance of universality, the consumerist self exists in a solitary orbit of ostensive uniqueness. Unlike Gabler’s (1998) notion of the modernist self, which was anchored to the fixity and security of its social roles, the consumerist self is set adrift to the flows of its own desirous whimsies. Finally, unlike Gergen’s (1991) conception of the romantic self, which emerged from the depths of the soul, from an unknowable and innate mystery, the consumerist self has to contend with its own inescapable artificiality and superficiality.

Bloggers appear to inhabit a consumerist self which is plagued by an absence of fixity, security and depth. This gaping hole at the vortex of the spectacular consumerist fantasy might be a reason why bloggers are always chasing after the truth of their identity, the transcendence of their being – it may be why they need to blog, to articulate, manifest and validate their performances of identity, to know that they truly exist. Gergen (1991, 242) explains that this consumerist self is defined not by any anchoring essence, but by its performative relations, which precede and are more fundamental than any interior sense of self:

We can replace the Cartesian dictum *cogito ergo sum* with *communicamus ergo sum*, for without the coordinated acts of communication, there is simply no “I” to be articulated.

It might be because of these reasons that the statement ‘I blog, therefore I am’ holds such a powerful and mythical force in the discourse of blogging. In a

society that is populated by an endless array of consumptive possibilities and mediated personalities, a world that is suffused by image and surface, some bloggers need to hold onto the myth of the mediatized self to naturalize, rarify and sublimate the spectacle of identity that they have painstakingly created. These bloggers need their myth of the mediatized self, of its truth and transcendence, just as some consumers need their myths of consumerism, of its fetishistic enchantment of commodities and its psychic conferral of personality, because they gesture towards something larger than their performances and their purchases. Like an atheist who has turned her back on the mystery, security and generality of the modes of selfhood that it has now succeeded, it appears that the consumerist self must find new rites of passage, new doctrines and principles, and new places of worship, such as the mall, the amusement park, and now, the internet.

It might be argued that the myth and spectacle of blogging are each other's mirror image; one is reflected off the other, each seemingly different but performing the same function – that of the enchantment, fortification and naturalization of the mediatized self and the system of consumerism which underscores it. Myth and spectacle, immediacy and hypermediacy, authenticity and enhancement join each other in a web of mutual dependence, at the center of which lies the mediatized self, pregnant with possibilities, bubbling with fantasies, ever ready with its suite of technologized tools, to transform bloggers' every thought, memory and trait into a cosmic pearl of identity for the self and the world to admire and desire. Yet beneath this tenuous web of caprice and conjuration, it is possible that the consumerist self is nothing more than a sum of its appearance, its performance, its mediatization. Some bloggers' existential crises and their inflated obsessions in their storied identities, in their mediatized performances, seem to

stem from the fear of the undercurrent of emptiness that threatens to bubble over. These bloggers' crises stem from the fear that beyond the appearances they so desperately try to constitute, that beyond the spectacle that so fascinates them, there might be nothing but an abyss of faceless possibilities, a void of meaninglessness.

Chapter 4: The Network and the Void

The internet is formed of digital pages and portals, files and folders, disks and drives, which are powered by currents and charges, and connected by electronic wires and waves. As we navigate the vast information architectures of the net, what we see is more than a sum of its structure and content; what we see, hear, feel and experience is a presence that rises above and beyond its mechanical construction and its electronic materialization, a presence that constitutes a world on its own – a parallel world, a fantasy world, a cyber world that is woven from our collective ambitions and aspirations, dreams and desires. This cyber world is alive with colors and lights, abuzz with sights and sounds, bustling with voices and personas. It is buoyant with the boundlessness of its potentiality, yet dense with the mystery of its distention. It is the ‘consensual hallucination’ prophesized by William Gibson (1986, 5) in his inauguration of the term cyberspace.

The cyberspace of our consensual hallucination is a universe made of bits and bytes, ones and zeros. It is created from pure electricity, a kind of digital dark matter that can seemingly be willed into any shape, hue and form that we so desire. In short, it is the stuff of dreams – a digital Atlantis, Avalon and El Dorado all rolled into one. That is why cyberspace can be whatever we want it to be; it can be our own private *Niketown*, *Disneyland*, or *Playboy Mansion*, each endlessly customizable, each perpetually accessible, and each incessantly amenable to our needs. In the early nineties, Microsoft asked its customers “where do you want to go today?”, a slogan that has since been dropped, perhaps because the idea of digital travel and its metaphors of navigation, have become so ingrained in the

everyday practices of using the internet, that it has somewhat lost its power to inspire and to promote. Today, it seems like a matter of fact that the internet can take us wherever we want to go – all we need is the right address. In the same way, cyberspace can be whatever we want it to be – all we need is the right code.

The Myth of Digitality

Cyberspace is able to invoke a sense of plasticity and plenitude because it embodies the myth of ‘digitality’. In the popular imagination of cyberspace, this mythical vision of the digital is often contrasted with an inept and inconvenient ‘reality’. For example, in his influential book *Being Digital*, Nicholas Negroponte (1995, 69), the founding director of MIT’s Media Lab made the famous and perhaps now hackneyed comparison between atoms and bits, where the former is a cumbersome relic which can supposedly be surpassed and even replaced:

In the world of atoms, physical limits preclude having both breadth and depth in the same volume – unless it's a book that's a mile thick. In the digital world, the depth/breadth problem disappears and we can expect readers and authors to move more freely between generalities and specifics.

Vincent Mosco (2004) describes Negroponte as a pivotal mythmaker of the heralding of the so-called electronic age who bade an unregretful farewell to the coarse materiality of the world of atoms while welcoming a new digital world of infinitely malleable ‘electrons’. Negroponte proposes the now familiar promise of transcendence, where inhabitants of cyberspace can step out of the spatiality,

temporality and materiality of the physical world, and into a shiny digital world of fluidity, abundance, and possibility.

Negroponete's promise of digitality seems to resonate with bloggers' dreams of transcendence which were described in the previous chapters. To reiterate, bloggers earnestly reveal that "blogs not only help to reveal who we are, they help us to transcend who we are,"⁶⁵ and that they are "working on trying to take this version of myself and extend it to the 'me' who exists in the real world."⁶⁶ This can be interpreted as the dream of human unfolding that is reflected in the declaration 'I blog, therefore I am', a declaration that may be actualized through the technologized mediatization of the self in blogs. This technologized mediatization appears to produce a spectacle of identity that is marked by the hyperreal qualities of pliability, brilliance and richness, hypermediacy and immediacy – qualities that are able to enact enhancive modes of articulation, manifestation, and validation of the blogging self, on the basis of their operation in the *digital* medium.

In other words, it might be argued that the myth of digitality, with its promise of technologized mediatization allows bloggers to supposedly transcend the tedious temporality and fixed materiality of their everyday existences, to endow their lives with some form of meaning and purpose, some semblance of truth and transcendence. Being digital seems to offer bloggers a way to cut through the dead time of their workaday lives and to intensify the vividness of their communicated appearances, to attain a state of self which is better, faster, more appealing than the self that exists in the so-called real world of bad hair days, lame one-liners and awkward pauses. Both the mediatized spectacle of

⁶⁵ This quotation is from the blog *Media Dragon*, and was originally cited in chapter one.

⁶⁶ This quotation is from the post 'Why I blog' in the blog *Soul of a Dreamer*, and was originally cited in chapter two.

identity and its transcendent myth of blogging can be interpreted as two heads of the same chimerical beast – both performing different but complementary functions, and both drawing its spectacular and mythic energy from the meta myth of digitality.

Accordingly, the digital form that the blogging self takes appears to be suffused with a sense of possibility, plenitude, and potency. This might be because the digital dark matter that constitutes cyberspace and the blogging self within it is infused with pliability, iridescent with brilliance, and saturated with richness; it is multiplied in its hypermediacy and purified in its immediacy. This can be interpreted as the spectacular logic of the digital, a logic that is fueled by the collective belief in its abundance and possibility, that is seemingly propelled by the force of its own will alone, that emerges from the wellsprings of imagination, develops at the speed of thought, and stretches out to infinity. This is the mythical dream of infinite potentiality; of boundless energy and immeasurable abundance that the digital conjures. It might be for these reasons that some bloggers believe that:

Here, on this blog, it is different. This blank space opens itself up to me, poses whatever question I would like to answer that moment [and] burns with possibility.⁶⁷

In line with this sentiment, Hervé Fischer (2006) describes virtual space as a fabulous and submissive space, a smooth and unresisting space that has no contour, depth or texture. This sentiment is mirrored by another blogger, who

⁶⁷ This quotation is from the post ‘Why I Blog’ in the blog *Soul of a Dreamer*.

enthuses that online, “there are no boundaries to ideas, interaction and optimism; blogging can be as deep and as wide as you make it out to be.”⁶⁸

However, despite the magic of its conjuration and the poetry of its promises, the myth of digitality can be interpreted as mythic in a much more commonsensical way – as a fallacy. Cyberspace and blogging may be different to non-digital media in its ability to conjure a techno-fantasy that is seemingly unrestrained by the so-called ‘real’ world, where instead of actualizing design into artifact through a relatively tedious process of manufacture and materialization, users can simply translate ideas into image through a supposedly streamlined process of digitization. However, this digital imagination of cyberspace is by no means limitless. Blogging *cannot* be as deep or wide as we want it to be; the effect of plasticity conferred upon the mediatized self is invariably contingent upon the electronic architectures of its computing software and hardware. Blogging’s affordances of technologized articulation, manifestation and validation are dependent upon a series of technical, pragmatic and ideological choices and constraints that are based on larger structures that are beyond a blogger’s control. On a technical level, the color, texture, form, and aspectual functionality of a blogger’s mediatized spectacle of identity is often dictated by the affordances and limitations of the digital platform of its manifestation. On a material level, Negroponte’s (1995) shiny digital world of fluidity, abundance and possibility is rooted in *actual* wires and waves, currents and charges that prescribe bloggers’ access to and interactivity with their spectacle of self. The myth of digitality is ineluctably dependent on its material infrastructure, on the proverbial bricks and mortar, and nuts and bolts that it so despises.

⁶⁸ This quotation is by the author of the blog *Media Dragon*, and was sourced from the compilation of ‘Why I blog’ posts on <http://deepblog.com/whyiblog.0.html>

Furthermore, at a phenomenological level, the elaborate fantasy of cyberspace, and the spectacular mediatization of bloggers' identities is precisely as William Gibson's (1986) dystopic vision prophesized – it is a consensual *hallucination*. Stephen Graham (2003, 340) highlights the crippling naiveté espoused by the myth of digitality, in its assumption that:

... human societies, cultures and economies are seen simply to *migrate* into the electronic ether, where identities will be flexibly constructed, any services might be accessed, endless fantasy worlds experienced and any task performed, by human agents acting *inside* the limitless domains of constructed electronic environments.

The myth of digitality and its dream of electronic migration, the mediatized spectacle of identity and its magical transfiguration of self, as well as the myth of blogging and its quest for meaning through the transcendence of the banalities of the unmediated self, can all be interpreted as ultimately futile. Albert Borgmann (1992) explains that despite its glamour and plasticity, the hyperreal spectacle and its superlative vision is neither substantial nor sustainable. This could be because its discontinuity with the 'reality' that it augments exacerbates the comparatively colorlessness, shallowness and meaninglessness of the unmediated reality that some bloggers are entrenched in. Despite the brilliance, richness and pliability of their mediatized spectacle of identity, most bloggers do not lead their everyday lives as a series of punctuated witticisms, or as a collage of Kodak moments. Rather, most bloggers' lived realities are often messy, disjointed

and repetitive. In this sense, it may be argued that bloggers' existences are ultimately embodied, their amusements are ultimately limited, and their dreams of transcendence are ultimately futile. Commenting on this eventual return to reality, Borgman (1992, 96) offers that:

It is typically a resentful and defeated return, resentful because reality compares so poorly with hyperreal glamour, defeated because reality with all its poverty inescapably asserts its claims on us...

Furthermore, blogging's impulse to harness these moments for their spectacularly tragic, comedic or dramatic entertainment value, seems to devalue the actuality of lived reality, and also degenerates into a psychic burden that is ultimately unsustainable. For example, a blogger expresses her disenchantment with blogging by offering that she is:

... no longer feeling the need to blog, no longer feeling the need to document my life and [am] going out to enjoy life ... More love, more being, more allowing; less to-do lists, *less needing to be something else*, less documentation. After three years of documenting my life, it is time to spend that energy in new and beautiful ways.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ My emphasis is added to this quotation is from the post 'bare with me ~ on blogging.....' in the blog *My World through My Eyes*.

The Myth of Connectivity

Within the discourse of blogging, the myth of digitality seems to be joined by another powerful myth – that of connectivity. Rob Shields (2000, 147) offers that the spatial metaphors used to describe the internet, such as the *website*, the *homepage*, the electronic *frontier* and the information *superhighway*, offer a “mythical overview, a totalizing sense; they promise a commanding vision of computer-mediated communications processes.” However, the site, page, frontier and highway are metaphors that have become worn with use and now seem banal or outdated. These metaphors appear to be succeeded by another commanding vision of cyberspace – that of the network and its infinite connectivity. In a telling example, one blogger comments that “if I write in a journal, that’s where it is, just there. But on a blog on the ‘interweb’ it goes *anywhere and everywhere*.”⁷⁰

This anywhere and everywhere can be interpreted as the alpha and omega of the network – the spatiality that it conjures, manifests as potentiality in its purest form. Just as the myth of digitality proposes a mode of self that can be molded into anything and everything, the digital space of the network offers a magical portal that can take that self anywhere and everywhere. Even though the internet may not be ontologically spatial, it seems to have this effect because of its structure of links and nodes. In his illuminating analysis of hypertext, Rob Shields (2000, 150) offers that the link functions mythically as interconnections to an ‘elsewhere’. Shields explains that the mythical quality of the link is governed by its indexicality, which denotes a conceptual leap between two semiotically related objects, and does so through a process of inference, coupling, and also through the elision of its own function. By concealing its own conceptual footsteps, the leap

⁷⁰ My emphasis is added to this quotation is from the post ‘Three Reasons Why I Blog’ in the blog *My Life, or Something Like It*.

enacted by the digital link produces an imaginary sense of space, and creates “an aura of uncanniness, foreboding, or anticipation” (Shields 2000, 153). Shields (2000, 153) adds that it is this spatial effect conjured by the process of linking that “brings forth ‘the Web’ or ‘the Net’ as a totality – as something larger or more encompassing than the material presented at any one time on a video display.”

While both impart a similar sense of potentiality, a possible distinction between the old metaphors of spatiality, and the current metaphor of the network, is that while the former emphasized the *navigation* of cyberspace, the latter has evolved to signify a kind of ubiquitous *access* – a kind of access that we have come to understand as ‘connectivity’. Within the network, bloggers no longer need to traverse the digital world; as long as they are connected to the network, they are always already everywhere. Mosco (2004, 114) reiterates that:

... the dream of cyberspace, then, is not a multidimensional data grid from which one picks where one wants to go today and how best to get there. Rather, the chaotic, disorganized realm of plural cyberspaces has no highways or interchanges and no direction; it is just a vast universe of interconnectedness.

This myth of connectivity gives some bloggers the means to access the infinite possibility that the network holds – it is the superlative channel for these bloggers to reach out and ‘interface’ the world of potentiality as it exists for them in the digital imagination. Kevin Robbins (2006) reiterates that the dream of connectivity entails a desire to make contact with the world. For example, some

bloggers enthuse that they “want to share their life or lack thereof with the world”⁷¹ and that they can “write whatever [they] want, click a button and (potentially) millions of people can read it”⁷². For all its power of conjuration, the ‘world’ or ‘elsewhere’ of blogging does not seem to be about access to the riches of information or entertainment that cyberspace has to offer – it seems to be simply about access to the other. Once again, it might be argued that the dichotomous affair between the blogging self and its elusive other is replayed in the interwoven myths of digitality and connectivity. While both seem to be linked by the mythical thread of potentiality, digitality relates to the plasticity of its *form* and its augmentation of the mediatized spectacle of *self*, while connectivity relates to the infinitude of *spatiality* and its expansion of bloggers’ access to the audience of the *other*. However, connectivity does not seem to be simply about ubiquitous access to the other. Robbins (2006, 151) explains that connectivity is about “achieving ‘immersive, multisensory, telepresence’ – to make contact across the world.” In this sense, connectivity is about reaching through one’s screen, across geographical boundaries and physical obstacles to impact another person and be impacted by him or her. For example, one blogger expresses that:

The desire to reach out and connect with others is inherent
in human nature. I am not ‘unplugged’ anymore now that I
blog, I am connected, and that is what really matters in life!
When a stranger from far away can reach you in your

⁷¹ This quotation is from the post ‘Meme: Why Do I Do This?’ in the blog *Real Euphoria*.

⁷² This quotation is from the post ‘Why do I blog (when I do)?’ in the blog *Diary of a Rat*.

kitchen and change your day – that is a true and beautiful connection.⁷³

These quotations seem to portray the myth of connectivity in a romanticized way, a way that is reminiscent of an older digital myth, that of virtual community. In the first chapter, I suggested that online community was often cited as a motivation for blogging. To reiterate, virtual community is a concept pioneered by Howard Rheingold (1993) in the early nineties, and refers to the idea of people finding genuine friendship, support and romance online, across geographical boundaries. According to Rheingold, these online communities were not defined by their physical location, but were based on mutual interests and affinities. Mosco (2004, 35) adds that the myth of a virtual community of interests postulates that “until now, your choice of community was limited mainly by accident of birth; today it is entirely open to choice and subject to constant renewal and change.” In this way, it might be suggested that virtual community came to represent a kind of liberation from the bonds of geography, and also from the traditional markers of class, ethnicity, and even gender, that previously determined the formation of communities. In contrast to the supposed rigidity of traditional communities, the virtual community was believed to be based solely on interest and intellect, and marked by freedom and fluidity.

However, as I suggested, this idea of virtual community has been criticized by a slew of theorists such as Fernback and Thompson (1995) as an ephemeral and superficial collectivity that lacks the commitment, accountability and diversity that binds a community together. Following this line of argumentation, personal

⁷³ This quotation is by the author of the blog *Unplug Your Kids*, and was sourced from the compilation of ‘Why I blog’ posts on <http://deepblog.com/whyiblog.0.html>

blogging can be interpreted as falling short even as a community of interest. This might be because personal blogs are not based on any topic, interest or issue, but are rather solipsistic monologues focusing on one's life and experience. For example, in her blogging handbook, Rebecca Blood (2002, 70) unabashedly urges bloggers to "pretend your audience thinks you are the most fascinating person alive, and use whatever tools you have to let them know exactly what you think about current foreign policy, your favorite brand of tofu, or your new haircut." In this sense, the discourse of blogging unapologetically encourages and legitimates a narcissistic sensibility where the blogger exists in a solipsistic orbit of self-interest.

Geert Lovink (2008, 2) states incisively that blogging is not about diversity and inclusiveness, but are "secluded social networks that ... are characterized by a culture of desired affiliation." In spite of, and perhaps because of the vast potentiality for diversity that cyberspace and the blogosphere offers, bloggers are able to seek out others who are just like themselves. For example, a blogger remarks that he blogs "to find like minds – the internet promises us infinite opportunity to connect with others; it's like being in the biggest dorm room in the world and we can run into people who share our idiosyncratic world views."⁷⁴ Similarly, the author of *Real Euphoria* remarks that by blogging online:

Eventually you will come across people who have a similar way of thinking. In the physical world it is so rare to meet someone who understands you, in the online world you realize they are all around. I love you all.

⁷⁴ This quotation is from the post 'Why do I blog (when I do)?' in the blog *Diary of a Rat*.

It might be suggested that the blogosphere brims with so much possibility for connection with an infinite number of people, that it is only a matter of time before every blogger finds a warm cozy community of readers who endorse the same foreign policy, dig the same brand of tofu, and think that their haircut is oh so cute.

It could be for this reason that Robbins (2006, 159) proposes that, “cyberspace, with its myriad of little consensual communities, is a place where you will go in order to find confirmation and endorsement of your identity.” In this sense, some bloggers advertise their life and personality, while their readers respond depending on their degrees of affinity and interest, in what can be interpreted as a solipsistic exchange of assurances. The blog, however, does not seem to be a community of interest; it might be more accurately understood as a cult of personality – membership in a ‘community’ based upon one’s life story can be seen as a direct endorsement of that life. It might be argued that it is the connections made between different articulations of identities in an ocean of disparate voices that confers onto those identities a sense of validation. And it is through this mutual exchange of validation that two strangers are apparently ‘touched’ by one another’s existence. Seen in this light, the magic of connectivity dissipates to reveal what might possibly be the true nature of blogging – it is not just an enchanted portal to an elsewhere, but a narcissistic gateway to the fulfillment of desire. It might be argued that the true design of cyberspace is not as an enigmatic jewel of plenitude or a selfless circle of friendship, but a mirror for the vanities of the self. After stripping away the layers of myth and magic, the enigmas of possibility and potentiality, we travel once again through the arcades

of the consumerist self, through the hall of mirrors, and arrive unsurprisingly, at the pool of Narcissus.

Throughout this thesis, I have suggested that blogging is about the mediatized articulation, manifestation and validation of one's identity. However, as I have emphasized in the previous chapters, the narcissistic connotations of this desire for validation is deemphasized and inoculated by bloggers in various ways. Instead of seeing the validation they desire as narcissistic, some bloggers believe it to be either a neutral sort of response, or a warm and fuzzy kind of support. For example, one blogger states as a matter of fact, that "the feedback I have received on this blog has reinforced my perspective."⁷⁵ In another example, a blogger gushes that "[I blog for] support – there have been many times when I needed a pick me up, some advice, friendship, answers etc. and so many people were there for me ... it makes me feel loved, validated, supported. (I love technology, always and forever.)"⁷⁶ Just as the comparatively denotative motivations of blogging may serve to naturalize its more connotative meanings, and to legitimate its ideological intentions and ignominious functionality, the network's myths of digitality and connectivity seem to operate to mystify its narcissistic desire for validation.

In this way, it might be argued that the solipsism and narcissism in blogging's desire for connection and validation seems to be sugarcoated in the warmth and fuzziness of virtual community. In this sense, the blog can be interpreted as an ingeniously self-serving kind of 'community' where, since everyone likes the same things, thinks in the same way, and has the same problems, it follows naturally that everyone will agree with, reinforce and support each other. The connections between bloggers and their audience seem to

⁷⁵ This quotation is from the post 'Why Blog?' in the blog *Excelcior the Journey*.

⁷⁶ This quotation is from the post 'Why I blog' in the blog *My Happy Little Life*.

constitute a felicitous collectivity based on the arbitrary endorsement of lifestyle and personality; these connections can be seen to crystallize to form tenuous alliances constellating around the sovereignty of one person – the blogger. Therefore, it might be argued that the blog is not an open forum for the ‘meeting of minds’ – it is more accurately a dictatorship, created, authored and moderated by a single person, who writes not about generalities, but specifically about his or her life and experiences. For example, in the *Blogging for Dummies* guidebook, Gardner and Birley (2008, 172) assert that “your blog is your domain, your kingdom, and your place in the world where your word is final.”

Within the autocratic realm of one’s blog, those who fail to agree, reinforce, or support one’s word – well, they can just navigate away. For example, one blogger declares defensively that “I am me and you can either take me or leave me.”⁷⁷ In another instance, a blogger premises that “I hope those who read this enjoy some of what I post – if not then go elsewhere.”⁷⁸ These quotations resonate with the self-centered precepts made by blogging handbook authors such as Gardner and Birley (2008) and Blood (2002). And even though these precepts may initially seem justified as an affirmation of the value of one’s own opinions within one’s blog, they nevertheless have important implications for the blog as a form of community. The subtext of these assertions of self seems to be that the blog is not a forum for dissent or dialogue, but a pacified enclosure for extolment and mutual validation. This pacification of difference and otherness becomes more apparent in the following quotation, where a blogger responds to criticisms by her readers, by declaring that “maybe my blog IS too introspective, but that’s

⁷⁷ This quotation is from the post ‘Meme: Why Do I Do This?’ in the blog *Real Euphoria*.

⁷⁸ This quotation is from the post ‘Why I Blog (Or Don’t Blog as the case may be)’ in the blog *There is Nothing New Under the Sun*.

why you don't have to read it – so I'll keep 'adding to the noise', and you can keep reading if you like."⁷⁹

Robbins (2006, 153) laments that the digital myth of connectivity through a community of interests and similarities is motivated by the desire to be free from the challenge of difference and otherness. In this sense, the blog's version of 'community' can be interpreted as antithetical to the idea of a public sphere, a term developed by Jurgen Habermas (1989) to refer to a domain of freedom and democracy, where individuals, in all their diversity, can come together to discuss issues of *public* interest. At a fundamental level, it might be argued that most personal blogs do not seem to be founded on any principle of openness, but are sequestered communities of backscratcher, intoxicated with their virtual mirror images, and reveling in an orgy of mutual gratification. Despite the romanticized embellishments of connectivity and community, the spectacular myth of blogging does not seem to be about the search for, or communion with the other, nor does it seem to be about the discovery of the self, or the fantasy of human unfolding – it seems to be about the discovery of the self *in* the other. This revelation leads us back to the ingenuity of the mythical concept 'I blog, therefore I am', whose resonance amongst bloggers stems from the subtle verity of its declaration, a declaration that excludes any space for dialogue with the *other*.

Machinic Resonance

It might be suggested that the virtual other exists not in any kind of meaningful dialogue with the self, but as bloggers' personal fan club, as a niche of consumers constellating around one shared mediatized spectacle of identity. The

⁷⁹ This quotation is from the post 'Navel gazing, Africa, and blogging' in the blog *Just showing up*.

degrees of individuality, difference and diversity of cyber others that some bloggers encounter seem to be reduced to one pivotal point of significance – either you’re with me or you’re against me. And those who are against authors of personal blogs are often subject to deletion, banishment and various other exclusionary tactics instituted as a blog platform’s ‘features’. In the realm of one’s blog, it seems that dissenting others have no right to speak and no option to participate. In fact, with one push of the delete key, the virtual other and all their utterances may cease to exist altogether. Robbins (2006, 156) suggests that virtual communities of interest and their brand of online sociality “may, in fact, work to insulate us against the possibility of being touched by the other.” This is because the digital architecture of blogging allows users to manage and control what they have come to think of as their ‘interface’ with reality.

According to the discourse of personal blogging that I have suggested, the virtual other can be contained, compartmentalized and coordinated to cater to one’s needs, at any time of the day or night. For example one blogger enthuses that “I can vent at any hour of the day or night, when the need/urge presents itself, [and] I know I can receive constructive and caring support from the other side of the world.”⁸⁰ Similarly, in the *Blogging for Dummies* handbook, Gardner and Birley (2008, 11) state reassuringly that “you can blog as often as you like, and your readers visit when they’re ready to get more information.” From these remarks, it might be argued that relationship between the blogging self and their virtual other is predicated on the principles of choice, controllability and usability. In this sense, the myth of connectivity does not seem to be about access to the potentiality and diversity of, or about community or communication with, but

⁸⁰ This quotation is from the post ‘Meme: Why Do I Do This?’ from the blog *Michael-in-Norfolk*.

about *mastery* over the virtual other. Robbins (2006, 154) explains that cyber communion shirks the real complexity and disorder of actual sociality for a “manageable order that can be established in a domain where the dangers and the challenges of the real world are negated – a domain purged of worrisome shadows, masqued faces and opaque stares.”

In this way, it might be suggested that the virtual other of blogging ceases to be a dimensional being with all the variations and complications that come with being human, with all the emotional baggage and bonds that are necessitated by social interaction, but seems to be crudely reduced to a technical affordance that one can toggle on or off, that one can postpone indefinitely and resume with at their convenience. In fact, this mode of interaction facilitated by blogging software seems to form the basis of blogging’s appeal for some users:

Bloggging is the perfect way for me to interact with people;
I can have the interaction while being alone. Maybe what I
like about this format is that I have more control over my
interaction with people – if I bug you, or you irritate me,
we just don’t click the link and everyone is happy.⁸¹

It might be argued that when social relations are proscribed by the desire for choice and manageability, the virtual other ceases to exist as a textured individual with a unique set of social and emotional needs and offerings, but exists as the sum of their function. And this function, as I have suggested throughout this thesis, seems to be that of narcissistic validation. The solipsistic model of

⁸¹ This quotation is from the post ‘Three Reasons Why I Blog’ in the blog *My Life, or Something Like it*.

community and the functionalistic mode of sociality extolled by the discourse of blogging that I have suggested, seem to promote the view of the virtual other as a disembodied and de-contextualized form of resonance that is best understood in bloggers' own terms, as 'feedback'. For example, one blogger states that "the *feedback* I have received on this blog has reinforced my perspective,"⁸² while another blogger offers that "the positive *feedback*, self-fulfillment and personal growth I'm experiencing from these endeavors are well worth the effort."⁸³

The referral to the responses of the cyber other as 'feedback' might stem from the application of the terminologies and ideologies of information technology to human social relations. In the language of information technology, feedback is the process in which part of the output of a system is returned to its input, in order to regulate its further output. This conception of feedback can be seen to connote a sense of impersonality and automatism, which prioritizes the significance of the blogger's utterances, while relegating the response of the other to the level of machine-like resonance. This process of communicative mechanization comes into sharper focus in the following quotation, where, referring to the comments received on her blog, a blogger allegorizes that "our lives are connected by a thousand invisible threads, and along these sympathetic fibers, our actions run as causes and return to us as *results*."⁸⁴

From this quotation, it might be suggested that the responses of the virtual other are not conceived by some bloggers as arising from any kind of meaningful social interaction or creative thought processes, but are understood as automated

⁸² My emphasis is added to this quotation is from the post 'Why Blog?' in the blog *Excelcior the Journey*.

⁸³ My emphasis is added to this quotation is from a comment to the post 'Why do YOU blog?' in the blog *Dust off the Butterfly*.

⁸⁴ My emphasis is added to this quotation by the author of the blog *Media Dragon*, which was sourced from the compilation of 'Why I blog' posts on <http://deepblog.com/whyiblog.0.html>

‘results’ or ‘feedback’ of one’s input into a mechanistic system. This ideological mechanization of the virtual other could be interpreted as an effect of the infinite potential for connectivity presented by the network. This could be because the sheer abundance of choice for readers and responses confers onto them a certain degree of impersonality. For example, after the fifth nondescript vote of reassurance from anonymous or faceless readers, some bloggers would perhaps start to mentally categorize them as variations on the same theme that are valued not for their qualitative content but for their aggregated quantity.

In fact, this logic seems to be taken to the extreme in the following quotations, where some bloggers disregard the content of the comments they receive, and seek validation in its most literal sense – as the basic acknowledgement of their utterance. For example, one blogger admits that “I always smile when I get a comment, even if I don’t agree with it. It does feel good to have people leave comments.”⁸⁵ Similarly, another blogger remarks that “I like it when I read lots of comments (both positive and negative) on a certain topic that I’ve posted. It means that there are people who’d read my article and simply just found it interesting to read.”⁸⁶ While these remarks seem to buck the trend of narcissistic gratification that I have associated with blogging, they can be interpreted as further compounding the centrality of the blogging self at the expense of its communicative others. It might be argued that to disregard the content of the virtual other’s response is precisely to attribute to them the impersonality of ‘feedback’.

According to the logic of these quotations, the communicative presence on the other side of the screen is not another living, breathing, thinking, and feeling

⁸⁵ This quotation is from a comment to the post ‘Why I Blog?’ in the blog *Peachy Perspective*.

⁸⁶ This quotation is from the post ‘Why I Blog’ in the blog *Sakura*.

human being, but seems to be an interchangeable receptacle for information, a ubiquitous node of transmission, that mechanistically provides feedback for whatever stimulation it receives. In his book *The Transparency of Evil*, Jean Baudrillard (1993) describes a loss of dimensional intersubjectivity, where virtual space no longer facilitates an enabling interval or exchange between subjects. Instead, cyberspace is a scene of communication without community, which is not filled with voices and presences, but saturated with information and resonances. It might be argued that these bloggers, separated from each other by the imagined choices and perceived inconsequentiality of the screen, engage in a machinic form of communication, where the virtual other is reduced to a machinic resonance existing only for the purpose of automatic validation. Baudrillard (1993) proposes that the screen then is not a window to the richness and diversities of a world of others, but a mirror for the desires of the self; the other does not exist within or through the screen – the other *is* a screen. In response to this mechanization and subsumption of the communicative other, Robins (2006, 159) recommends that:

Encounters with others should not be about confirmation, but about transformation ... [and] requires the renunciation of narcissistic desires to fuse with or to control the other – it requires the recognition, that is to say, of its essential otherness, and of the experiential possibilities to be derived from its distance.

Furthermore, it might be suggested that the virtual others of blogging are not just mechanized, but are conceptually cumulated to form a collective system

of nodes and receptacles that exists independently of their individual responses, a system that has come to be mythically known as the network. In a telling example, one blogger poeticizes that “the internet knows everything, and is all too eager to help. (And I have each and every one of you to thank for that.)”⁸⁷ In a very real sense, the network does not seem to be experienced as a congregation of human presences or a medium through which human communication is exchanged. Rather, it might be argued that the medium of the network subsumes the totality of human communicative acts into a massive system of automated inputs and responses where the blogger is trapped in a solitary orbit of machinic resonances.

Within this solitary orbit, the exchange of machinic resonances does not seem to be governed by obligation or conviction, but by a mode of automated reciprocity that operates according to mutual connections of desired affiliation. This mode of reciprocity is referred to affectionately by some bloggers as ‘link love’. According to blog experts, in the blogging world, the easiest way to attract readers and to grow one’s community is to participate and comment in other blogs. For example, in an interview in Banks (2008, 89), Mike Masnick of the popular blog *Techdirt* explains that “if you link to others and you respond in their blogs, you will see a kind of natural growth ... so pay attention to other bloggers. Link to them. Comment on their sites.” In his analysis of the social mechanics of blogging, Mark Tremayne (1997) explains that this pattern of reciprocal linking has become a norm in the blogosphere because it is mutually beneficial. This is because, if the goal of personal blogging is narcissistic validation, which may be measured by some bloggers through quantitative instead of qualitative means, then the foremost task of these bloggers would be to grow their readership.

⁸⁷ This quotation is from the post ‘Five Reasons Why I Blog’ in the blog *Jeremy Dempsey Talks*.

According to the logic of ‘link love’, the more links bloggers receive on the sites of other bloggers, the better their chances are of attracting more readers to fulfill their narcissistic ambitions.

This principle of reciprocal linking seems to have become the golden rule of blogging. For example, in another interview with Banks (2008, 97), Mark Frauenfelder of the popular blog *BoingBoing.net* states unapologetically that:

I always put a link at the end of my blog posts ... the other bloggers appreciate it and will return the favor, linking to BoingBoing. And it’s a nice, sharing kind of thing that works really well ... It’s kind of scratching each other’s back.

From this quotation, it might be argued that just as the feedback of the virtual other is mechanized as machinic resonance, the relations with that other are mechanized as an algorithmic form of sociality. This is because the practice of reciprocal linking seems to be based less on the qualitative merit of the linked blog or on sincere affiliations between bloggers, and more on mutual citation for the purposes of the inflation of popularity. In other words, if I link to you and you link to me, we can both increase our popularity and quasi-celebrity in our own blogospheres. This seems to be the supposed win-win situation that is adopted by famous and quotidian bloggers alike. For example, one blogger gushes that “when I do get comments, it is usually from other bloggers, I love them.”⁸⁸ Similarly,

⁸⁸ This quotation is from the post ‘Why do YOU blog?’ in the blog *Dust off the Butterfly*.

another blogger admits that “I wanted as many people to read it as possible, so to promote myself, I’d comment on other blogs.”⁸⁹

Machinic resonance and algorithmic sociality can be interpreted as two sides of the same coin, two parts of the same system. Resonance and sociality seem to work by mediating the exchanges between some bloggers and their readers, and translating these qualitative exchanges into quantitative impulses that can be systematized and automated to ensure the efficacy and efficiency of the network’s function, as the mythical portal to the fulfillment of blogger’s desires for narcissistic validation. However, in doing so, the network seems to subsume the textured differences of communicative acts, and mechanizes the individuated presences of virtual others, by reducing them to their functionary valences. It might be argued that the network alienates bloggers from each other by imposing a calculating system of exchange and functionality onto a social sphere which, according to writers like Howard Rheingold (1993), have the potential to become a digital agora for the revitalization of the public sphere. It is possible that instead of bringing bloggers together, the network has kept them apart, isolated in their digital enclosures, separated from each other through a spectacular screen that captivates yet alienates, where their loneliness is placated by the reassuring resonances of their own voices, by the assuasive reflections of their own images.

It might be argued that despite the diversity of virtual others advertised by the network, despite the possibility for interaction offered by the myth of connectivity, despite all the fantasies and amusements of the consensual hallucination, the blogger, it seems, is always alone. For example, in his analysis of the popular blog *Pamie.com*, Michael Keren (2006, 107) cites Pamela Ribon’s

⁸⁹ This quotation is from the post ‘Why I Blog’ in the blog *The Informal Matriarch*.

laments that “this place makes no sense out loud ... it only works when it’s one person in front of the computer. Whether that person is me or you. We’re always alone when we’re together, no matter how many people are reading.” This melancholic observation of blogging gestures towards a sense of disenchantment with the digital fantasy and its myth of connectivity. The cyber world may be alive with colors and lights, abuzz with sights and sounds, bustling with voices and personas, but these voices do not exist *for* bloggers. They seem to exist as data, as resonance, as echo, regulated by laws of homology, reciprocity, and automatism. These voices seem to pander to bloggers’ words and whimsies, mimic their actions and reactions, playing all the requisite parts in the grand drama of virtuality. But behind the curtain, beneath the stage, there is a hollowness that looms, a silence that brews, that threatens to strip away the layers of glamour and glitz, magic and myth, to reveal the performance for what it is – a solitary puppet show where the blogger is holding all the strings. In the wake of this realization, one blogger comments that blogging is:

... like being in the biggest dorm room in the world with like opportunities ... in practice though, the conversation is a bit one-sided ... I’ve had well over 50,000 people stop by the blog in the first year and most have been absolutely, resoundingly silent. Flip the channel if it’s not entertaining enough.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ This quotation is from the post ‘Why do I blog (when I do)?’ in the blog *Diary of a Rat*.

It might be suggested that the cruel law of reciprocity entails that for some bloggers to feed off the narcissistic web of resonances, they too must exist as machinic resonance. Just as readers exist to some bloggers as nodes of potential validation, these bloggers may exist to their readers as interchangeable sources of infotainment – the blogging self and other seem to be implicated in a utilitarian system where both exist as channels that can be flipped on or off, without emotion, obligation, or consequence. This could be why the discourse of blogging seems to envision a cyberspace that is brimming with potentiality yet resounding with hollowness, that is simultaneously connection and atomization, possibility and resignation, everything and nothing. This could be why bloggers, in their mythical quest for meaning and transcendence, oscillate between the metaphorical polarities of the network and the void. For example, the author of *My Life, or Something Like It* remarks that writing in a blog is better than writing in a paper journal because “there is feedback – I’m not just writing into a void, though the internet seems a lot like a void sometimes.” Similarly, another blogger declares that “this blog is my megaphone into the void.”⁹¹

This can be interpreted as the rude reality that waits at the heart of the network, emerging when the myth of digitality wanes, when the myth of connectivity ebbs, when the attention and applause received by some bloggers, deafens and distorts the gratification that it used to confer. At the eye of the storm of connectivity and digitality, color and lights, voices and personas, there seems to be a dead calm, a silence that looms over the enterprise of blogging. It is possible that this ominous yet enigmatic void reminds some bloggers of the superficiality of their spectacle of identity, of the vanity of their desire for connection, of the

⁹¹ This quotation is from the post ‘Why I Blog (Or Don’t Blog as the case may be)’ in the blog *There is Nothing New Under the Sun*.

hollowness of their exchange with the other, and finally, of the ultimate futility of their dreams of transfiguration and transcendence. It is possible that this void that is perceived by some bloggers is the rude reality they face when they see their own image in the screens and displays that now consume them, when they realize that the person animated by their fancy words and glossy pictures is not *really* them, when they recognize that they have been ranting about themselves for the past three hundred entries in the last two years, when they come to terms with the fact nobody really cares and that it doesn't matter anyway – they are just one more voice joining a sea of disparate voices, as an echo in the void that only they can hear. In his observation of the consumerist spectacle, Steven Best (1994, 60) encapsulates a sense of melancholy and futility that plagues the consumer, just as it plagues some bloggers:

The aesthetic promise of the commodity constantly gives way to a rude reality, an unsurpassable lifeworld where money cannot buy everything and mystified signifiers are irrelevant to actual human needs. Within postmodern consumer culture, subjects wear designer jeans yet remain lonely and unhappy; the spectacle is ubiquitous but people are still bored; everyday life is *shit and people know it*.

Conclusion:

The Mythical Conciliation

When I first started thinking about personal blogging, I was persistently drawn to one metaphor, that of a message in a bottle. Although it is easy to dismiss blogging as purely narcissistic pursuit, I always felt that there was something more to it. I felt that there was a hidden depth, a secret meaning to why so many bloggers were exposing the drama and vulnerabilities of their lives, the comedy and banalities of their existences for the world to see. This is why I chose to begin this thesis with a blogger's message for the universe, an artless and poignant message that expressed an ontological longing to be heard and remembered, for his or her life to have purpose and meaning. As I have suggested in my analysis, some bloggers send their message into the void of cyberspace, tinged with a simultaneous sense of anticipation and resignation, hoping for some kind of reply, for someone or something out there to reassure them that they are special, that they do matter, that the world is different because they lived, because they spoke, because they existed.

Whether these messages are written flippantly or soulfully, my analysis suggests that when some bloggers start typing the story that will become the record of their digital life, the message is often the same. These messages can be interpreted as desperate pleas for some kind of salvation – salvation from the desolate islands of their social isolation and psychic anguish. As suggested by their own words, in posts that are brimming with hunger and melancholy, some bloggers set these messages adrift into a digital ocean of possibilities, into an electronic void of incertitude, in the hopes that someone, somewhere, marooned

on an island of their own, will be touched by this message, will be changed by these words. And as I have suggested in my analysis, some bloggers write with the hope that through their connection, two wretched souls will somehow be delivered from banality of their workaday existences, from the superficiality of their identifications and performances, from the hollowness of their everyday social exchanges, and from the pervasive superfluity and penury of their consumerist experiences.

 Blogging seems to emerge from this existential void and grow into something inexplicable yet ineluctably powerful. Driven by the absences in some bloggers' lives and fueled by the desires of their culture, blogging seems to be drawn up into the tapestry of myths that feed bloggers' fascination with narcissistic fulfillment and technological mediation, both of which are underscored by the generalized commodification of experience. My analysis suggests that the myth of blogging is both a manifestation and mollification of the failings and inconsistencies of a consumerist culture that enchants yet disenchants, that conjures spectacle yet imposes reality, that entices with celebrity yet has to contend with banality, that advertises a connectivity riddled with isolation, that favors a digitality crippled by its own impossibility, that promises so much yet delivers so little. For all its seduction and potency, myth and magic, brilliance and pliability, for some bloggers, blogging seems to recede back into a void, and like so many cultural endeavors in the consumerist milieu that always gratify yet never satisfy, blogging can be interpreted as an exercise in futility.

 Despite its flaws and delusions, its insidiousness and detriments, my analysis of the myths of blogging and the spectacle it conjures, is rooted in a sense of empathy towards the yearning and ineffability that blogging incites. In other

words, it is not my intention to discount or dismiss the meaning that the myths of blogging confer. My analysis of myth has suggested how it distorts reality, how it naturalizes ideology, but also how it confers meaning onto human experience. As I have suggested in my introduction, Vincent Mosco (2004) contends that myths *are* forms of reality that help people make sense of the seemingly incomprehensible, by endowing human lives with the meaning and drama needed to transcend the ultimate decay and demise of the individual. Another theorist of myth, Lee Drummond (1996, 28), offers that “myths are attempts to grasp the fundamental problems of human existence by framing them in narrative.” Drummond (1996) adds that myth offers a space of ambivalence and ineffability that allows subjects to interpret and placate the irreconcilable tensions of their cultural milieu.

Therefore, it is within the enigma of myth that some bloggers may negotiate the tensions between the manifest and the ineffable, between blogging’s more denotative motivations and its more connotative meanings, between the affirmation of the integrity of the self in the project of blogging, and its desperate desire for the validation of the other. It is within this mythical space that some bloggers can contend with the disjuncture between the irreconcilable polarities of the spectacle and its rude reality, between the idealism of virtual community and the desolation of machinic connectivity, between the network and its void. However, the negotiation of these oppositions does seem to diffuse its tensions – it merely rehashes and displaces, rarifies and subdues them, in the unceasing drama of virtuality, within the perpetual theatre of the consumerist experience. There is no question that the myths of blogging and the myths of consumerism constitute, order and confer meaning onto the cultural reality that its subjects are mired in.

There is no denying that myth and culture, as well as culture and ideology, are inextricably interwoven in the fabric of the contemporary consumerist experience. Hence, it may be irrelevant to ask whether or not bloggers need or want or should have their myths; instead the critical question is – at what *cost*?

At the close of my analysis, I advocate not for a functional or symbolic analysis of myth, but for a cultural ethics of demystification. What are the ontological costs of blogging's myths of transcendence and digitality, its reverence for the mediatized spectacle of identity, and its disavowal of reality? What are the psychic costs of consumerism's myth of self-authorship, its worship of celebrity, its performative artifice, and its malaise of ontological anxieties? Finally, what are the social costs of blogging's myth of connectivity, its mechanization of the communicative other, its stifling fantasy of mastery, and its narcissistic retreat into solipsism? This analysis has attempted to sketch out these desires and address their costs within the discourse of personal blogging and within the larger framework of consumer culture. In doing so, I hope my analysis will contribute to the growing body of critical cultural research on blogging and engage with a scholarly dialogue that moves beyond a unidimensional survey of blogging's motivations, and beyond a celebratory testimonial of blogging's potential for the reinvigoration of creativity, community, and democracy. I hope that by addressing the symptomatic desires, anxieties, and contradictions that may be present in the discourses of personal blogging, and in the words of actual bloggers, that my research can contribute to a politicized and ethical understanding of the practice and consequences of personal blogging, its sensibility of technologized mediatization, and its underscoring system of

consumerism. In his critical analysis, Michael Keren (2006, 14) encapsulates some of these pernicious consequences of the myths of blogging:

[The] blogosphere involves journalism without journalists, affection without substance, community without social base, politics without commitment. It replaces action by talk, truth by chatter, obligation by gesture, and reality by illusion.

In my opinion, these costs are too burdensome to endure and too portentous to ignore. Thus, the task of demystification must go hand in hand with the reinstatement of that which myth colonizes, of that which it negates in the process of its own naturalization. The task of demystification must reconceptualize and re-politicize the spectacles of virtuality and mediatization, and the myths of digitality and connectivity that now exist not in opposition to but as an integral part of the reality of modern consumer societies. The task of demystification then, is twofold – it must reinvigorate the primacy of lived experience, the dialogic necessity of human interaction, and the integrity of selfhood, and in doing so, must reevaluate what it means to live, what it means to communicate, and what it means to be an individual in the mediatized limbo within spectacle, myth, and reality.

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