Internet Detectives: Performativity and Policing Authenticity on the Internet

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Abstract

It is possible to detect a certain crisis of subjective authenticity in the fictional/real writings of members of certain online communities, such as LiveJournal and Myspace. Some community users construct 'false' stories about their lives, deploying the unique forms possible online as a means of enriching the 'narrative'. However, these stories are often hunted down and 'uncovered' as 'false' by others looking to reinforce the strength of their own online presence. This article is a reading of the performative character of some examples of this 'policing' of authenticity online, in a mode inspired by both Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler.

1. Introduction

Often reflected in contemporary cultural texts is a crisis of identity, usually equated with the postmodern. This crisis is often linked with the rupture of any form of originary authenticity. With the use of social networking websites and communities such as *LiveJournal* and *MySpace* accounting for a significant proportion of the time spent online by many users of the Internet, it is now possible to read this same phenomenon in the actions and fictional/real writings of members of these communities. Community users can construct large, elaborate stories about their lives, deploying the unique facilities and media possible in online presentation and performance as a means of enriching the narrative. However, these stories are actively hunted down and "uncovered" as "false" by others looking to reinforce the strength of their own online presence. Like Raymond Chandler's hard-boiled private eye, Philip Marlowe, the contemporary, real life "detectives" of the Internet shore up their own sense of fracturing subjectivity by using the clarity and insight of the Cartesian mind to eliminate a somehow non-viable agent or subject. In doing this, they restore an uneasy narrative order to a structure threatened by the social ruptures and instabilities that non-viable agent reveals.

In this article, I examine a performative character that emerges in the production of and response to certain forms of online "writing" seen particularly in conjunction with the *LiveJournal*/blogging system and community. With some users making use of social networking sites as a platform for staging alternative identities, the relentless pursuit and attack of these "fictions" by other, more "genuine" users displays a vividly performative character that acts to defend structures of subjective authenticity.

In Judith Butler's original full-length study of the performative nature of gender, *Gender Trouble* (1999), she notes Jacques Derrida's reading (1987) of Franz Kafka's *Before the Law*, wherein the *anticipation* of an 'authoritative disclosure of meaning […] is the means by which that authority is attributed and installed: the anticipation conjures the object' (xiv). Butler's work shows that the (endless) deferral of the "source" of genuine gender is exemplified by repetitive gesturing towards the anticipated gender-from-biology, and that this gesturing (performance) conjures and armours the perceived appearance of that authenticity. Gendered performances do not express or describe something existing *before*, but imbue a subject with (the appearance of) the qualities of that which is anticipated. Gender 'operates as an interior essence that might be disclosed, an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon it anticipates' (xiv). The problems with assumed authenticity are cloaked by the very expectation of its arrival: we find that the stabilisation of gender is paradoxically reliant upon its own expectation and that the organisation of structures and practices that protect those expectations actually serve to bring about exactly what we expected to happen all along. By this I mean that the practical construction of a valid "subject" (gendered or otherwise) happens largely through, as Butler describes, 'certain exclusionary practices that do not "show" once the juridical structure of politics has been produced' (5).

This point in particular is the key to my study: these "exclusionary" practices – the implicit and explicit policing of the performances of authenticity – can be seen both in literary texts and also in action in certain Internet communities, and serve to set up an opposition of authentic and non-authentic: the former is bestowed on the subject whose position allows him the responsibility of policing that distinction, while the status of "inauthentic" is thrust upon the objectified agent whose failure to "pass" is the necessary supplement to the authenticity of the policing subject. In other words, the "detective"; the one doing the "policing", gains the position of being the authentic subject *because* of their "investigation" of the one being "policed". The "policed" subject is "unmasked" as being unable to provide a comparably authentic performance to this "detective", and so their agency becomes less (or in-) viable. It is this dyad that informs my study of the policing of subjective authenticity on the Internet.

2. Patrolling the Boundaries

Perhaps one way to exemplify this effect of reinforcing authentic subjectivity by exclusion would be to briefly consider the film *Blade Runner* (1982). The film displays a caricature of state-enforced conformity to the notion of authenticity, and a typical response to threats to that notion of unified selfhood. Main character Deckard's job in hunting down escaped humanoid 'replicants' is not simply intended to eliminate faulty products that have become delinquent and potentially dangerous, but to police the very basis of what is considered genuine and human, whose boundaries have become visibly unstable by the emergence of non-humans who easily and seamlessly pass as 'natural'. As Scott Bukatman (1997) points out, the film is 'filled with tests: there are tests to determine who's human, who's fit to reproduce, who's fit to emigrate... the obsession with boundaries, definitions, and standards indicates that these definitions are in crisis' (69).

In terms of the performative, by working hard to exclude and then violently eliminate difference through the hyperbolic responses of testing and extermination (direct, or, in the case of those disallowed from emigration or reproduction, indirect), the state in *Blade Runner* both anticipates and then, by citation, enunciates the "genuine" human self that it is trying to protect. "Humanness" is defined in terms of traits that have been retrospectively marked as human in opposition to the other that has been pre-decided as non-human, such as demonstrable empathy, and "true" memory. (Both of these, though, being traits that could incidentally never be used even now to determine the extent of "humanness" anyway; mental states such as, for example, autism/Asperger's Syndrome or schizophrenia feasibly render the provability of "authentic" displays of empathy or memory unstable). This "policing" of authenticity, then, is a notion with precedent not only in cultural theory, but in fiction. It is my contention that this kind of policing of authenticity, complete with a visible performative character, is in operation widely on the Internet, and particularly on the Web, through forums, arts communities, and blogging/journal systems. Allucquère Rosanne Stone's (1991) widely-cited article 'Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?' describes a well-known early Internet controversy in which a middle-aged male psychiatrist named Sanford Lewin was able to successfully pass as a severely physically disabled woman – variously 'Joan' or 'Julie' depending on the account (here 'Julie', in keeping with Stone's most recent account) – who, ostensibly unable to get outside the house very often, could nevertheless participate in online communities with the aid of a typing device fixed to her head. When the "true" identity of Julie was revealed, outrage ensued. Those who had interacted with Julie, and especially those who had told her years of deep and personal secrets, felt 'raped' by what felt to them like a terrible, cruel fraud (Stone 1991: 505). Stone's example shows the ways in which a thoroughly convincing alternative identity can be built out of text and maintained comfortably for extended periods of time. However, it also nods towards a phenomenon that has not been widely covered in

studies of online interaction. To date, little work has focused on the way that those producing 'illusory' identities on the Internet are often actively hunted down and 'unmasked' by other users. Through studying examples of these occurrences, some instances of Internet interaction may be uncovered to be performative, in terms of Judith Butler's understanding of the idea, and in the same way that *Blade Runner*'s panicked slaughter of boundary-destabilising others may, as I have read it above, be understood. Certain efforts to police an authenticity of identity on the Internet reveal the processes by which an "authentic" online self (i.e. an online self that gives a fair approximation of a user's supposedly "true", offline self) become apparent. Then, the processes become clear by which that sense of authentic identity is in fact *performed* and *constructed* by citation of anticipated norms.

3. Internet Detectives: Fake Accidents and LJDrama

On December 7, 2005, a contributing editor to a website called *LJDrama* – the '*LJ* standing for *LiveJournal*, a popular piece of weblog software and its vast online community of users – posted a story reporting an incident in which a *LiveJournal* user had purportedly faked her own near-death to gain attention from her peers in a display of what has been described by Marc Feldman (2000), in an article of the same name, as 'Münchausen's by Internet'. A short quotation from the site illustrates the basic outline of the story:

> When will people learn that faking your own near-death is so very last year? It doesn't seem that fireandsmoke [sic] has gotten that particular memo, as she posts any number of entries to her journal starting on Sunday morning, detailing the horrors of the car accident she supposedly has gone through, as told by her friend Cindy and her attending doctor in the ER.

> It fails to occur to her that real doctors wouldn't have the time or the inclination to update some random attention-starved, whining patient's online journal with glowing descriptions of her 'effervescent personality' and 'strength of character,' while glossing over completely incorrect treatment for her supposed injuries, throwing HIPAA to the wind. (*LJDrama*)

So according to this (anonymous) editor at *LJDrama* – a website officially unaffiliated with *LiveJournal* itself, but serving as an indexing service for those interested in the "drama" that occurs within it – a *LiveJournal* user by the name of 'fireandsmoke' (who, it is delightedly pointed out by another user of *LiveJournal* itself, has already clandestinely changed her online name from 'titsy_mcclure' [*Livejournal* 2005]) generated a detailed farce in which she was supposedly involved in a serious car accident that both threatened her life and yet revealed, for all her

LiveJournal friends to see, her 'effervescent personality' and the 'strength of character' that allowed her to survive. What is most interesting about this case for the purposes of my study is not the possible reasons why fireandsmoke (or 'Desi', or 'Desiree' variously throughout the reports, supposedly referring to her "real" name) chose to carry out this act – but rather the performative character of the actions undertaken in "exposing" her "fraud".

The act of uncovering fireandsmoke's supposed deception is, in fact, an (almost gleefully) extended and detailed process of "uncovering" piece by piece the points at which fireandsmoke's purported experiences are untrue. *LiveJournal* user Lyme, who provides the most detailed account of the uncovering (as well as accounting for most of the work in doing so), begins with a reference to an earlier suspicious incident in which fireandsmoke (hereinafter 'Titsy' as Lyme refers to her) "faked" an oophorectomy and the accompanying period of recuperation (Lyme n.d.). Lyme then moves through a point-by-point account of how she disassembled every piece of "real-world" information that Titsy had provided pertaining to her supposed accident. This information included things such as the name of a doctor who was supposedly updating Titsy's *LiveJournal* for her, and a certain amount of apparently wildly inconsistent information regarding the treatment for her supposed condition ('putting someone with a concussion on morphine?!'). In this account, Lyme also points out the fact that calling every hospital in New York revealed no patient under Titsy's real name. The *coup de grace* of the investigation, though, and arguably the point at which Titsy's masquerade spirals into painful obviousness, is when Lyme reports that in order to back up her claims, Titsy had uploaded a scanned picture of her hospital ID bracelet, which turned out to be a hastily digitally-retouched copy of one belonging to somebody else. Lyme links to pictures of the bracelets and marks out, in a pointedly numbered list:

> 1. The barcode at the top.
> 2. The positioning of the bracelet.
> 3. If you look at the bottom edge, you can see what appears to be the tips of 2 fingers holding the bracelet in the scanner. These appear on Titsy's as well
> 4. Look at the numbers along the bottom of the bracelet. You will find that they are the same digits as those on Titsy's, and the numbers are even smudged/obscured in the same fashion.

> She took this image, enlarged it, cropped the right side, covered over the original data, and inserted her own. I put the bar over her real name, but I have the original she posted intact, still, if anyone wants to see it. I have been using PSP and photoshop since I was 15. I am pretty good at spotting photomanipulated images and tricks used to hide that they have been manipulated. (Lyme n.d.)

Further to this, Lyme obtains 'IP evidence' from a LJ_abuse, a staff of official moderators working for *LiveJournal* whose role is to deal with the thousands of complaints like this that are generated. Interestingly, the LJ_abuse staff appear to be overwhelmingly voluntary – policing the LJ community is a prestige position in high demand. The report from LJ_abuse, according to Lyme, shows from forensic evidence (IP records and other uniquely identifying information from Titsy's account) that all of Titsy's *LiveJournal* posts were made from her home or work computers.

The initial preamble to Lyme's investigation is perhaps the most revealing, because of the direct comparison in "realities" that is made by Lyme between herself and Titsy. To initially set up Titsy's claims as false, Lyme refers, as I mentioned above, to the oophorectomy that Titsy had earlier claimed to have undergone, and compares it to her own experience with the same operation; Lyme points to inconsistencies in Titsy's story from that experience (inconsistent, incidentally, with what Lyme had experienced, not with any other supposed yardstick of truth). Lyme describes how her own cyst had been removed and takes pains to refer to the physical, concrete elements of the surgery – the cyst was '12cm in diameter including the ovary it killed'; it took 'ten staples to close up', and that '3 ½ years later, there are parts of the tissue around the incision that are still numb'. Titsy, on the other hand, could provide (or report) no such "evidence" consistent with Lyme's own experience.

So, by Lyme's investigations, are we to assume that a "real", "authentic" user is only one who can "prove" who they are with "'real world" artefacts, or in some way tie their identity to a stable, offline body? If so, then her own identity is called quickly into question. The exhaustive, desperate attempt to pin down real life "proof" simultaneously reveals and undoes the attempt to maintain the continuity of the unified, authentic self that carries out the investigation. By positioning herself and her own "true" story – that of her oophorectomy - in opposition to Titsy's "untrue" story, Lyme's identity is not "tested" in the same way. With Titsy's supposedly self-evident and obvious façade as an opposition, it is natural to simply assume Lyme is telling the truth. These performances of opposition to the non-authentic are, though, the only proof that we, as Internet users reading the story for the first time, have of Lyme's claim to "truth". It is, of course, possible that Lyme would be able to provide real-world "proof" of her oophorectomy and related experiences, but the a priori assertion of her honesty, weighed against the apparently overwhelming evidence for Titsy's "untruth", implies that Lyme simply does not need to provide proof. Stacked against Titsy's melodramatic performance, Lyme's assertions appear internally consistent, logical and true, because any need to access an authentic basis for that truth has been delayed in(de)finitely.

Lyme, then, wishes to stabilise her own truthful subject and produce an identity against Titsy's "false" one by using her "offline" body as a point of emergence for that truthful identity. So let us return to Butler. She (1999) writes:

> [a]ccording to the understanding of identification as an enacted fantasy or incorporation... it is clear that coherence is desired, wished for, idealized, and that this idealization is an effect of corporeal signification. In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface of the body*, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. (173, emphasis in original)

So, for Butler, the 'desire' for 'coherence' of subjectivity is what produces the effect of that apparent coherence, through 'words, acts [and] gestures'. The *policing* of this coherence, then, is an instance of a subject's deploying these games of citation as a method of coping with apparent disruptions to the "naturalness" of authenticity. This policing takes place explicitly in the Lyme/Titsy investigation, and uncovers as untenable not just the stable truth of Titsy's claims, but the implicit appeals to bounded, rooted authenticity of identity made by Lyme and simultaneously reinforced by her investigations. Both propping her/self up against Titsy's pantomime-like performance and making repeated attempts to stabilise online identity in terms of coherent, linear links to an "offline" body makes visible Lyme's own identity as just another performance, albeit a more socially viable one. Anticipating and thus taking for granted her own authenticity, and using Titsy's subjective instability as a fulcrum against which to push, Lyme generates (and makes invisible) an ostensibly stable, plausible truth – 'the anticipation conjures the object' (Butler 1999: xiv). In fact, Titsy's performance could almost be read as a direct analogue of Butler's description of drag performances – '*in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself* – as well as its contingency' (175, emphasis in original). Of course, it is easily arguable that Titsy's intention is not to subversively employ the Internet as a stage on which to uncover the performative character of Lyme's supposed (assumed) but deferred authenticity, and indeed, that Lyme's intention is not to use the circumstances to mount a fortification of her own sense of truthful identity – but whether it is "intended" or not, the evidence of this performative character is compelling. Neither Titsy nor Lyme could possibly account for all of the (infinitely) potential questions involved with the 'proving' of their respective identities, so their performances produce contingent truth effects in varying degrees of social plausibility – whether they "intend" to or not.

The Internet is popularly celebrated for its potential to destabilise bodily boundaries and give us a space to abandon the prejudices of our flawed societies. However, the activities of some Internet users appear to quite clearly re-inscribe the practices of

exclusion that we can see as being used to reinforce originary authenticity in the 'offline' world.

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