

Being and Television: Producing the Demand to Individualise

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Abstract: Consumer culture addresses us with various forms of a demand to ‘be ourselves’. Ostensibly an emancipatory call, how can it be expressed in the form of a demand? This article enquires after the role of television in producing this demand. It is represented in its most contradictory form in the *Big Brother* format. The allusion of the show to an authoritarian regime is realised in a capricious game, whose goal, as the participants recurrently explain, is “to be themselves”. It is not coincidental that this articulation of a demand for authenticity in the language of a regime is represented on television. The article argues that *Big Brother* stages a demand that the medium of television addresses at its viewers, as manifested by the institution of the celebrity. Using Daniel Boorstin’s conceptualisation of the celebrity as a substitute for the traditional hero, the article presents the celebrity as a focal point of an ethical demand that television addresses towards its viewers. A new form of celebrity, namely “the ordinary celebrity”, suggests that it is a demand to be oneself as distinct from others. In this sense, television plays a crucial role in post-Fordist economy, maintaining a context where being true to oneself entails expressing one’s difference from others through consumption.

Keywords: brands, authenticity, television, celebrity, post-Fordism, *Big Brother*

1. Introduction

Contemporary consumer culture confronts us with various forms of a demand to ‘be ourselves’. Nike pronounced this demand explicitly in the slogan “be yourself” which Renata Salecl (2004, 30) reads as evidence that “consumerist society seems to thrive on a particular feeling of inadequacy that people commonly experience today”. Taken literally, this slogan raises an intriguing question. We tend to understand the phrase “be yourself” as an emancipatory call, a proposal to take off our social masks, stop making efforts to please others, and just be who we are. The question is, how can this phrase articulate a demand? How can it be expressed in the form of an injunction? That this is indeed the case is suggested by some resonating Nike slogans, such as “free yourself”, “find your greatness” and “make yourself”. Such expressions indeed induce their addressees to change, but in a specific manner: not to someone other than they already are, but by realising to the fullest who they are. They present the possibility to ‘be oneself’ as a task that demands an exertion of effort. They suggest that one cannot just passively be oneself, but must actively pursue it as an intentional goal, whose realisation is uncertain.

The call to “be oneself” is not unique to Nike advertising. Its origins can be traced back to the creative revolution in advertising in the 1960s, which according to Thomas Frank (1998) corresponded with the rise of counterculture in the US and its values of freedom and individualism. Frank quotes a number of slogans and jingles from the 60s and 70s that foretell the urge to “be oneself”, though they still seem to emphasise its emancipatory meaning: “we let you be you” (Barney’s Men’s Store, 1974); “It lets me be me” (Nice ‘n’ Easy, 1971); “U.B.U” (Reebok, 1980s); “you be you, and I’ll be me” (Pepsi, 1970s); “Express yourself” (Suzuki, 1969). Moreover, the call to ‘be oneself’ seems symptomatic to contemporary consumer culture, where

goods serve as symbolic tools for expressing, fabricating and innovating personal identities (Arvidsson 2006). This tendency was apparent already with the emergence of brands, but it is accentuated with the newer marketing idea of mass customisation (Pine 1993).

This article enquires into how the demand to be oneself is produced. What can confer on it the form of a demand? We can easily associate this demand with the rise of the Internet. The earliest Internet manifestoes underlined the limitless possibilities of individualisation that the Internet offers. Nicholas Negroponte, for example, fantasised about a “Daily Me” newspaper (1995, 153). In parallel, the Internet and the network metaphor are at the focus of intensive theoretical efforts at explaining the reconfiguration of capitalist economy in the last few decades. In Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s work on “the new spirit of capitalism” (2006), the trope of “network” is seen as a new, non-hierarchical, organising principle of production and labour. Digital media are seen as facilitating the rise of “prosumption” – an active, participatory form of consumption (Toffler 2013; Chen 2014). Researchers show how new media gave rise to new forms of labour, designated “digital labour” (Fisher 2012), how information becomes entangled in production and profit-making processes (Fuchs 2011; Dantas 2017), and how corporations use network effects to maintain monopoly (Staab and Nachtwey 2016).

Against this background, this article raises a somewhat counterintuitive claim, that the prototypical ‘old medium’ of television plays a crucial role in producing the demand to be oneself. The Internet indeed offers unprecedented possibilities of individualisation, yet what should be kept in mind is that a possibility is not a demand. That television plays a role in producing this demand is suggested by the medium’s fascination with it. It is most explicitly represented in various reality shows. Programmes such as *American Idol* and *The Moment of Truth* enact an inducement to authentic expression, predicated on rendering authenticity questionable, presenting it as an achievement that requires an exertion of effort. The most explicit staging of this contradictory demand is no doubt the *Big Brother* format. The show’s allusion to the metaphor of a totalitarian regime is grounded on its fabrication of a fully observed and managed living space. Yet the intriguing point is that the inhabitants of this space most often understand their goal in the show in terms of a requirement to be themselves. The televised *Big Brother* is a regime that does not demand docile servitude, but an authentic expression of self.

This article argues that it is no coincidence that the demand to be oneself is represented most explicitly on television. It is represented on television because the medium of television takes part in the practical production of this demand in everyday life. The demand of authenticity addressed to *Big Brother*’s participants thematises a similar demand that the medium addresses to its viewers. Such a demand is implied from our confrontation with television celebrities. To notice this we only have to recall a form of fetishistic inversion involved with celebrities: the fact that someone is a celebrity is strictly speaking a fact about other people, for whom that person is a celebrity. The existence of celebrities is thus involved with our own mode of being: with who we are and what we are supposed to be. That television addresses to its viewers a demand for authenticity is suggested by a new form of celebrity that evolved together with the reality genre: “ordinary celebrities”, who lack exceptional talents or achievements but can “perform their ordinariness with some degree of specificity or individuality” (Turner 2010, 22). When “traditional” celebrities were held to lead glamorous lives, strictly speaking it meant that in acknowledging them as celebrities, viewers produced their own life as lacking glamour, ordinary. “Ordinary

celebrities”, by contrast, are held to live ordinary lives. But when they present their ordinariness “with some degree of specificity or individuality” it may mean that viewers produce their own ordinariness as lacking distinction. The confrontation with the ordinary celebrity thus entails an implicit demand to be oneself as distinct from others.

The present article thus suggests a certain division of labour between old and new media in relation to the demand to express unique individuality through consumption. While the Internet provides producers and consumers with unprecedented possibilities of individualisation, television takes part in turning this possibility into a demand. New media provide endless possibilities to personalise consumption. Television partakes in fashioning a context where authentic being entails uniqueness, difference from others.

The first part of the article will present post-Fordist economy as the broad context against which the demand to be oneself makes sense. It makes sense *as a demand* insofar as consumers’ efforts to express unique individuality serve a macro-economic, impersonal need. The second part will discuss *Big Brother* and enquire after the mechanism that it utilises to articulate the urge to authenticity in the language and imagery of a regime. The third and the fourth parts will address television beyond the level of representation. They will argue that the institution of celebrity pertains to how the demand to be oneself is practically produced, and that television has a unique role in its enactment.

2. The Impersonal Need to Individualise

The demand to be oneself is inherent in post-Fordist economies. The rising importance of methods of “flexible accumulation” (Harvey 1989, 189-200) entailed a diversification of production. With the crisis of the Fordist economy in the 1970s, firms could no longer maintain sufficient profitability from standardised mass production, and turned instead to techniques of accumulation that rely on technological innovation, increased obsolescence of products, and diversified production in small batches. It is in this economic context that the need to express unique individuality can wear the form of an injunction. Diversification of production provides greater opportunities to express unique individual taste in consumption. But as individualised consumption serves an impersonal macro-economic need, it can be seen as following an imperative: individualisation driven by non-individual logic.

Contemporary marketing literature brings this point home, presenting undifferentiated commodities as a horrendous threat to producers, rather than as a predicament of consumers. Pine and Gilmore (2011, 1) open their book *The Experience Economy* with an entrepreneur’s nightmare: “Commoditized. No company wants that word applied to its goods or services. Merely mentioning commoditization sends shivers down the spines of executives and entrepreneurs alike. Differentiation disappears, margins fall through the floor, and customers buy solely on the basis of price, price, price.”

Indeed, the shift to post-Fordist economy involved a reconfiguration of the relations between goods and identities. Adam Arvidsson claims that Fordist advertising relied on a fixed categorisation of social classes, and their corresponding imageries and forms of address. It was not blind to the social meanings invested in goods, but it referred to goods as expressing a relatively stable and pre-established system of social identities. The emergence of brands, in parallel with the demise of Fordist capitalism, involved a new symbolic function of goods, as tools with which consumers fabricate and innovate their own meanings and identities. Brands are not

about expressing an already-established identity, but about *becoming*: “What people pay for [...] is not so much the brand itself as what they can produce with it: what they can become with it” (Arvidsson 2006, 68).

A marketing manifesto associated with the changes in advertising in the 1960s is worth recalling in this context. Ernest Dichter’s “Discovering the ‘Inner Jones’” (1965) spells out explicitly the tensions inherent in individualised consumption. Dichter writes of an impending “consumer rebellion”: people become less preoccupied with “keeping up with the Joneses” and turn instead to a “search for inner satisfaction”. However, the telling point is that Dichter qualifies the rebellion with a new version of the familiar symbol of implicit social coercion: “the inner Jones”. Rather than a rebellion against social competition, “the inner Jones” seems to suggest internalisation and intensification of it. This invocation of “the inner Jones” is not a mere slip of the pen. Dichter presents the search for inner satisfaction as infinitely more demanding than the pressures of social comparison. On the one hand, he concludes his forecast with the claim that the person who will be admired by the new Joneses is he “who more truly becomes himself”. On the other hand, this search of inner satisfaction involves more intense, and actually insatiable, practices of consumption:

Human needs are not to be visualised in the form of a pie chart, which when filled by one form of satisfaction creates a state of static balance. The model one has to imagine is that of an ever-expanding rubber balloon; no sooner have we reached a desired goal than we think of another need to be fulfilled (Dichter 1965).

Read in retrospect, Dichter seems to have diagnosed a central axis of the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism: whereas there is a limit to what can be sold within the confines of the need to be like others – a limit apparent in the crisis of Fordism – the need to be oneself affords potentially limitless grounds for consumption. He brings to the fore a basic paradox of post-Fordist economy: a drive to “be oneself” articulated in the language of social coercion; a liberation from social comparison which demands an intensified investment in consumption.

Dichter’s diagnosis underscores a question that the turn to post-Fordism raises in relation to the social meaning of commodities. The diversification of production opens a possibility for expressing unique individuality in consumption. But the *need* to express unique individuality cannot itself be explained by the diversification of objects. To explain this need we have to enquire how subjectivity is shaped in parallel to the change in the production of objects. The next few sections will enquire into the role of television in shaping this subjectivity. First, we will consider how the demand to be oneself is represented in its most contradictory form on television, and later we will enquire how this demand is enacted in the confrontation of viewers with the medium.

3. *Big Brother*: Regime of Difference

Mark Andrejevic (2002) argues that reality television plays an ideological role in contemporary post-Fordist economies. The trend of mass customisation, opposed to Fordist mass production, relies on the processing of information collected from consumers. Programs like *The Real World* present compliance with surveillance as a sign of openness while delegitimising the insistence on privacy by presenting it as a wish to hide some unpleasant secret. Such programs thus play an important role in

“training viewers and consumers for their role in an ‘interactive’ economy” (Andrejevic 2002, 251). However, the link between television and post-Fordist economy may run deeper than the role of naturalising marketing practices. Television may be involved with fabricating the mode of being of subjects in post-Fordist economies. It both represents and produces the drive to be oneself as an ongoing project, which supports the economic practice of relentless search for the expression of unique identity in consumption.

The expression of emancipation in a language of implicit social coercion, captured by Dichter’s “inner Jones”, informs various reality formats. On the one hand, the genre presents an insatiable desire for authenticity, predicated on rendering any gesture of authenticity inherently questionable. On the other hand, this search of authenticity is accompanied by austere metaphors of political and social discipline and control. The best example is naturally the *Big Brother* show. While the title of the show invokes the archetypal symbol of authoritarianism, the participants recurrently present their task in the show in terms of “being themselves”.

The allusion of the program to the symbol of political coercion rests on the way it realises Orwell’s dystopia of a fully observed and managed space. At first sight, this allusion may seem purely ironic. Instead of the coerced homogeneity of Orwell’s disciplined society, its televised version presents us with a celebration of difference. Instead of an authoritarian regime, *Big Brother* displays an ongoing game, characterised by utterly capricious rules. Participants are induced to strange challenges, which often involve absurd role-playing – many of them charged with political connotations (a participant is arbitrarily appointed as the dictator of the house; the participants are divided into rich and poor, policemen and criminals; participants are forbidden for some days to utter the word “no”). Furthermore, participants can never be sure what is really expected of them, since often the overt challenge presented to them is a cover for a secret one, the success in the latter involving failing in the former.

In truth, the ambiguous status of rules in *Big Brother* suggests that its invocation of a regime is not merely ironic. It should be read against the background of a further feature of the format. While daily life in the show is governed by a plurality of capricious rules, the contest as a whole can be described as a total, all-consuming game precisely because it lacks a governing law. Success in challenges only marginally affects the prospects of winning the big prize, because all decisions regarding the winner, as well as regarding the weekly evictions from the house, are made by viewers. Participants must use various skills to succeed in challenges, but the questions what is required of them in order to win the show remains opaque.

This tension between plurality of rules and the absence of a governing law confers on the show its Kafkaesque atmosphere. It echoes Kafka’s universe, where bureaucracy and law are both multifarious and opaque. Formally speaking, the show recapitulates the cosmos of Kafka’s *The Trial*, where an immense bureaucratic apparatus, informed by an infinity of absurd rules, takes action concerning a crime whose nature remains unknown throughout the novel. As Žižek (1989, 43) describes it: “the Kafkaesque subject [...] does not understand the meaning of the call of the Other”. Žižek’s important point, however, is that this opaqueness of the Kafkaesque law is not merely a wild fantasy about modern bureaucracy and state. It articulates something real about the workings of the law. It reflects how the law actually interpellates us, mobilises us: an ideological apparatus “exercises its force only in so far as it is experienced, in the unconscious economy of the subject, as a traumatic, senseless injunction” (Žižek 1989, 43). *Big Brother* manifests precisely this paradox,

where the law is internalised precisely when it is unintelligible. The participants' interpretation of their ultimate task as "being themselves" does not run in contrast to the carnivalesque nature of the show, but is its supplement. It does not mark an ironic gesture toward the totalitarian metaphor but a possible realisation of it, in an opaque law that addresses its subjects' being. This paradox is enfolded in Kafka's most famous parable, "Before the Law". After spending his whole life awaiting entrance at the gates of the law, the "man from the country" becomes aware of a bothering puzzle, which he presents to the gatekeeper:

'Everyone strives after the law,' says the man, 'so how is it that in these many years no one except me has requested entry?' The gatekeeper sees that the man is already dying and, in order to reach his diminishing sense of hearing, he shouts at him, 'Here no one else can gain entry, since this entrance was assigned only to you. I'm going now to close it' (2009/1915).

This can be easily read as a description of the law in *Big Brother*. Precisely because the overall law of the game is sealed, unknown to the participants, they experience it as a personalised law, which addresses them as unique individuals; a law that addresses its subjects' being rather than merely their deeds.¹

Big Brother does not refer directly to consumer culture, the space for consumption in the show being extremely limited by the weekly budget of the house. Yet examining its apparatus may teach us how 'being oneself' can be produced as a subject of a demand. This apparatus rests upon various contrivances that highlight the performative aspect of participants' behaviour, thus casting doubt on its authenticity and rendering 'being oneself' a goal to be achieved. The performative aspect is naturally highlighted by capricious role-playing games. In one mission, for example, the participants were asked to dress for some days in costumes of the *Wizard of Oz* characters. They were not asked to enact anything related to the theatre musical. But conducting their everyday life in such costumes had the effect of presenting ordinary conduct as strangely performed. More importantly, the performative aspect is implied in the casting procedures of the show. Participants are cast as both 'ordinary people' and as identifiable social types, with considerations akin to fictional television, making ordinariness itself appear performed. Furthermore, the casting brings together into the hermetic space of the house participants

¹ Another show, *The Moment of Truth*, brought to extremes the combination of authenticity and coercion. Its form unmistakably invoked a totalitarian interrogation room. Prior to the show, participants were administered a polygraph test where they were asked the most intrusive questions. During the show they were confronted again with some of these questions, in front of their families and friends in the audience. A prize of \$500,000 was granted for replying in full accordance with the polygraph test results. Even the most uninhibited participant could not be guaranteed success, because some of the questions concerned the equivocal realm of fantasies, fears, emotions and desires. The totalitarian connotation was apparent in the demand for confession, in an interrogation where any question can be asked, especially those that highlight egoistic, hedonistic, or anti-social personality traits. Above all, it was apparent in the form of a question which is already an allegation (to quote one question from the Israeli version: "Deep in your heart, do you consider yourself a parasite?") The contender hesitatingly answers "Yes", and after a moment of silence jumps in joy when the computerised voice affirms that he was correct – he does indeed consider himself a parasite). How could this blunt allusion to totalitarian form be settled with the hedonistic content of the questions and answers? One has to note that the ultimate 'sin' interrogated is not the one insinuated by the questions, but rather the sin of not being true to oneself.

associated with different, and often antagonistic, social and cultural environments. Because they do not share what Goffman (1978) would call “the definition of the situation”, the implicit knowledge of how people “naturally” perform various social roles, they are bound to appear to each other as precisely that: performing roles. And since a successful interaction depends not only on an agent’s mastery of the signals he performs, but on his addressees’ ability to correctly decipher them, participants may experience even their own conduct as artificial. One participant in the Israeli version of the show revealed this explicitly in a confession to the Big Brother. His monologue started as a complaint of the cynicism of other participants who are masquerading in order to win air time and viewers’ appreciation. But at a certain moment he turned to talk about himself and suddenly burst into tears: “[...] and after two weeks here, I even feel that I am fake myself. I do the things I always do. I live the way I live for years, and suddenly all I do seems to me fake”.

A possible reservation may be raised by considering *Survivor*, the second successful format most associated with emergence of reality television. In *Survivor* the articulation of self is the complete opposite of the demand to be oneself. Participants in the show recurrently exclaim that they do not behave like their real selves. When they cheat or betray friends in order to win, they excuse their conduct as ‘playing the game’. This contrast between the two shows actually underlines the relevance of *Big Brother* to consumer subjectivity. There is a clear reason for the contrast, and it has to do with the different games underlying both formats, and their relation to money. Like *Big Brother*, *Survivor* is a ‘total game’ in the sense that it encompasses every aspect of life during the show. The marked difference, however, is that in *Survivor* the participants are expected to actively do things in order to win the prize. Money is ever-present in *Survivor*, as it confers the ultimate meaning on the televised events. What the format is designed to show is what people are willing to do to make money. Spending money, by contrast, is completely absent from the show. In *Big Brother* it is the opposite: the only presence of money is in the context of consumption, in the weekly budget of the house. The two shows can be thus read as two complementary perspectives on capitalism: production and consumption, work and leisure, making and spending money. In making money we are ‘playing the game’, suspending our ‘true self’, while in spending it we are expected to be ourselves.

To construct the demand to be oneself, *Big Brother* makes use of difference, placing participants from different social contexts in the same closed space. A general lesson that may apply to consumer culture at large can be drawn from this. The call to be oneself can be turned into a demand, and can be understood in terms of a regime, when ‘being oneself’ is taken to mean primarily ‘being unique, different from others’; when ‘be yourself’ naturally means ‘be different’. The call ‘be yourself’ has an emancipatory sense when it means ‘be whatever you are, *regardless* of others and their expectations’. It holds an emancipatory potential in social environments that demand homogeneity – 20th-century authoritarian regimes, as well as environments associated with Fordist capitalism, such as the American suburbs of the 1950s. But when ‘being oneself’ primarily means ‘being different’ it assumes the character of a social demand: it entails that others are intimately involved in one’s being. When authenticity entails uniqueness, difference from others, we can therefore speak of a ‘regime of difference’. There is some logic in invoking the symbol of ‘the big brother’ to qualify the regime of difference. Formally speaking, a regime of difference is more intrusive than regimes of social homogeneity. Discipline aimed at social homogeneity presupposes the idea of a ‘social mask’, that

is, of a distance between one's social appearance and one's 'true self'. A regime of difference, by contrast, addresses this alleged 'inner self'. It presupposes that being true to oneself means expressing one's difference from others. The freedom it precludes is the freedom to be like others, the possibility to be oneself *even if* that means being like others.

The regime of difference staged in *Big Brother* articulates a fundamental principle underlying post-Fordist economy, epitomised in the emergence of brands. As noted, Arvidsson argues that branding involves new symbolic uses of goods. Branded goods are "building blocks whereby consumers can create their own meanings" (Arvidsson 2006, 68). Returning to Naomi Klein's (2000) work we can point at the grammar within which these meanings are created. Brands, to follow Klein, are differentiations. They assume their modern form when firms realise that their true commodity is the brand – the symbols and images that were formerly thought to be merely qualifiers of commodities. In that sense, brands are differences turned into things (there can be that many types of beer in a supermarket insofar as they carry symbols, rather than due to the more limited scope of discernible tastes). Read together, Arvidsson and Klein provide an account of the post-Fordist regime of identity. Goods are to express identity, under the assumption that identity is grounded on difference, and within the material possibility to infinitely multiply the space of differentiation.

4. Beyond Representation: The Ordinary Celebrity

It is no coincidence that television stages the demand to 'be oneself'. The direct representation of this demand in *Big Brother* thematises a similar implicit demand that the medium addresses at its viewers. Broadcast television delivers the same content to an anonymous crowd, yet implied in it is an injunction to each individual viewer to be oneself. The fact that television entails an ethical demand can be made evident in consideration of the phenomenon of celebrity. Marx's comment about "reflex-categories" makes this clear. Marx's example for this category is "king", yet it applies verbatim to celebrity: "One man is king only because other men stand in the relation of subjects to him. They, on the contrary, imagine that they are subjects because he is king" (Marx 2007/1867, 66). The 'being a king' of one person is in fact a way of other people's being subjects. They relate to him as if he is a king in and of himself, thus obfuscating the fact that it is their relation to him that makes him a king and makes them subjects. This fundamental structure applies to celebrities. One person is a celebrity insofar as other people relate to her as if she is a celebrity in herself, regardless of their relation to her. Her being a celebrity is thus an element of their being non-celebrities, or 'ordinary people'.

With the advent of the reality genre, however, a new form of celebrities have emerged. Graeme Turner calls them "ordinary celebrities", that is, people who lack exceptional talents or achievements but become celebrities due to their ability to "perform their ordinariness with some degree of specificity or individuality" (Turner 2010, 22). The theoretical challenge that this new form of celebrity poses is to understand how it is involved with the ways of being of viewers. 'Traditional' celebrities constituted viewers as 'ordinary'. The talents they had, their extraordinary achievements or their glamorous lives all constituted viewers as un-glamorous, grey and ordinary. What lack, then, do ordinary celebrities cast on people? Turner's definition provides an answer: performing their ordinariness "with some degree of specificity or individuality", the new celebrities constitute viewers as lacking

individuality. Thus they embody an ethical ideal similar to the one represented on *Big Brother*: be yourself as distinct from others.

To be precise, this imperative is not exactly new. Rather, it makes explicit a social phenomenology that characterised television from its earliest days. The television celebrity was always ordinary. Long before the emergence of the ordinary celebrity, scholars have distinguished television celebrities from movie stars in terms of their greater familiarity and proximity to the viewer. John Langer (1981) pointed out the difference between cinema's "star system" and television's "personality system". Similarly, David Marshall (1997, 119) argued that film and television have positioned celebrities in different ways: the former through the construction of distance, and the latter through familiarity. This difference was played out in the earliest days of television. Several episodes of *I Love Lucy* found in it fertile ground for comedy. Lucy, the frustrated housewife, envious of her husband Ricky's career in show business, constantly tries in vain to find a place in it for herself. In the seventh season, as she accompanies Ricky to Hollywood, some episodes feature movie stars playing themselves. The comedy revolves around Lucy's awkward attempts to approach the stars she admires. With Lucy, television created the ordinary celebrity as a fictional construct long before it materialised in the reality genre.

The ordinariness of celebrities was foretold in one of the foundational texts in the study of celebrity culture, Daniel Boorstin's (1961) critique of mass media *The Image, or, What Happened to the American Dream*. His famous qualification of celebrities as "known for their well-knownness" is bound to appear today prophetic, and his descriptions seem remarkably appropriate to contemporary reality TV celebrities: "the celebrity is usually nothing greater than a more publicised version of us. In imitating him, in trying to dress like him, talk like him, look like him, think like him, we are simply imitating ourselves" (Boorstin 1961, 83). Boorstin's text is not widely read today. It is perceived as an expression of elitist abhorrence of mass media more than as a theoretical account of it. However, it is worth re-reading today, because beneath its moralistic contempt of celebrities lie two theoretical observations which are important to our question. First, Boorstin provides a framework for understanding the celebrity as an ethical figure. Second, his work points at a unique link between the phenomenon of celebrity and centralised mass media, and more specifically between celebrity and television.

The ethical backdrop of Boorstin's discussion is apparent in his conceptualisation of the celebrity as a mass media substitute for the traditional figure of the hero – and Boorstin includes in that category the greatest figures in Western tradition, like Moses and Jesus. The ethical weight of such figures is obvious: they present subjects with ethical ideals, they form communities and identities. For Moses to be a hero for someone is an essential aspect of that someone's being Jewish, of her belonging to an imagined congregation. Like the hero, the celebrity is a focal point of mass identification, a public figure embodying the recognition of a crowd. But in its personal characteristics the celebrity cannot but be the opposite of the hero. While a hero is greater than an ordinary person, a celebrity cannot but be ordinary. Boorstin's text is important because it provides a structural explanation for this opposition. This aspect of his work is overshadowed by Boorstin's nostalgic attitude to heroes. He seems intent on portraying how "the media" demolished the tradition of heroes. Yet his argument unwittingly shows that heroes, too, are products of media, and that the difference between them and celebrities reflects a difference between their respective media environments.

Consider the respective media of the two types of figure. The hero “is made by folklore, sacred texts and history books” (Boorstin 1961, 72). The celebrity, by contrast, “is the creature of gossip, of public opinion, of magazines, newspapers and the ephemeral images of movie and television screens” (1961, 72). The difference between the two figures lies in a temporal-economic distinction between their respective media: gossip and newspapers on the one hand, and folklore and sacred texts on the other. The figure of celebrity articulates the basic economic imperative of modern media, which Boorstin puts forward in the first lines of the book. It is the need to innovate, to create an endless stream of new content: “The simplest of our extravagant expectations concerns the amount of novelty in the world. There was a time when the reader of an unexciting newspaper would remark ‘How dull is the world today!’ Nowadays he says, ‘What a dull newspaper!’” (Boorstin 1961, 19). Within this temporal economy, the celebrity cannot but be composed of details and trivialities. Yet the hero, too, expresses the temporal-economy of his media: “The hero was born of time: his gestation required at least a generation [...] A maker of tradition, he was himself made by tradition. He grew over the generations as people found new virtues in him and attributed to him new exploits. Receding into the misty past he became more, and not less, heroic”. The hero is greater than us because he is created in the media of tradition, where the same stories circulate throughout generations. Eventually, the difference between heroes and celebrities boils down to an all-too-simple distinction between media and their temporalities. Heroes are created in a media environment where the same text can be read or told time and again; celebrities are the result of the need to produce new texts every day.

The difference between their temporal economies informs the different social and ethical roles of heroes and celebrities. Heroes embody ethical and religious ideals of communities. The point in juxtaposing them to celebrities is that the latter, too, embody a social formation that bears some resemblance to religion. This possibility arises from Boorstin’s definition of celebrities as “known for their well-knownness”. This phrase is usually invoked today as a contemptuous remark about the shallowness of celebrity culture, but it contains much more. Read carefully, it provides a precise social phenomenology of the figure of celebrity. Defining celebrities not simply as ‘well known’ but as “known for their well-knownness” means that they are inherently social. It means that our relation to them implies the existence of others. Yet it is crucial that these others are only implied. Because they are only implied, the celebrity is a stand-in for them. That is why we can legitimately refer to a celebrity ‘aura’: that mysterious quality which sharply distinguishes the celebrity from ordinary people, though it cannot be accounted for by any of the positive characteristics of the person of a celebrity. Aura designates the irreducible sociality of celebrities: the fact they stand in for a certain social formation whose only manifestation is their celebrity status.

The theoretical tool which is most appropriate for this type of sociality is Durkheim’s conception of the sacred. The sacred, according to Durkheim, is not defined by any positive qualities, but only through its opposition to the profane. But this absence of positive characteristics of the sacred is the obverse of its being an elementary embodiment of a religious community. The acknowledgement of an entity as sacred is socially held, meaning that it is not simply common to all the individuals in a church. Rather, the belief is what makes them part of a church. That is why the sacred, for Durkheim, can be a stand-in for the unfathomable forces of society. This parallel was taken up by Nick Couldry’s (2003) neo-Durkheimian analysis of media rituals. Celebrities, according to this view, are one of the basic markers of the

distinction between what's 'in' and what's 'not in' the media – a distinction on which the symbolic power of media rests and which the media reaffirm in various ways.

However, Boorstin's juxtaposition of celebrities and heroes highlights a paradoxical feature of the application of the religious categories to mass media. Modern media, to follow his suggestion, reconfigured religious categories within a temporal economy which is radically alien to the world of religions: "The celebrity [...] is always a contemporary" (Boorstin 1961, 72). The point, however, is that its contemporariness does not relinquish its religious undertone. Rather, it produces the most peculiar form of religious space: *a religion in which tradition is strictly impossible*. This finally explains the ethical aspect of the celebrity. Within the temporal economy of mass media what the celebrity accomplishes is to be oneself as distinguished from others: celebrities "succeed in skillfully distinguishing themselves from others essentially like them" (Boorstin 1961, 74). The existence of celebrity implies that others, those who acknowledge her as a celebrity, do not succeed in being themselves as individuated. The celebrity is a condition that confers meaning of the injunction "be yourself". Boorstin acknowledged something similar: in imitating a celebrity "we are simply imitating ourselves [...] By imitating a tautology we ourselves become a tautology standing for what we stand for, reaching to become more emphatically what we already are" (1961, 83). Boorstin wrote this before the emergence of the ordinary celebrity, when imitating celebrities still appeared like imitating someone *else*. In relation to the ordinary celebrity his claim can finally be read literally. The celebrity has come into its own. It has become what it has always been, namely a challenge to the being of others. The ordinary celebrity is the condition where people can try to become more emphatically what they already are.

5. Celebrities as Markers of Distinctions between Media

Boorstin's definition of celebrities has a further advantage. It can be used to highlight a special link of celebrities with television. At the time of its publication in 1961, the phrase "known for their well-knownness" was prone to be read as a pun, and Boorstin himself describes it as a tautology. Read in retrospect, this phrase can serve to distinguish centralised media, such as newspapers, radio and broadcast television, from decentralised ones, such as the Internet. "Known for their well-knownness" is a phenomenological counterpart to the technological infrastructure of broadcast television, in its distinction from computer networks. On television everyone is potentially 'known for her well-knownness' due to what Daniel Dayan (2009) called the "sharedness" of the medium. Anyone on television is seen by an indefinite group of others. The celebrity, therefore, is a personification of the structural features of a medium. She embodies our relation to the medium as inherently shared. The celebrity gives a face to the sense that we watch television together with other people, even when we are alone in our living room. It enfolds the shared aspect of television into the confrontation of any viewer with a television persona.

On the Internet, to pursue this comparison, we have no indication of whether we watch alone or as a part of a crowd. To be sure, when we watch a popular channel on Youtube, we are *informed* that it was already watched by millions of others. But the fact that its popularity must be explicitly indicated practically proves that no sense of sharedness is implied from our confrontation with the medium, enfolded into our relation to the medium's personae.

Due to their centralised structure, newspapers and radio can also produce celebrities. Boorstin's main example of celebrity, Charles Lindbergh, indeed, predated television. Yet it seems that television occupies a special position in the

production of celebrities. Turner, for example, notes that “television has learnt that it can also invent, produce, market and sell on its celebrities from scratch” (Turner 2010, 156). While traditionally the media used to pick up as celebrities people who had already acquired recognition (in sports, news or entertainment contexts), television can now produce celebrities ‘on its own’. There may be a good reason for this. Due to its liveness, television can be understood as a space of being. In common parlance people can ‘be on television’, and maybe ‘on the radio’. We would less often say that someone is ‘on the newspaper’ or ‘on the Internet’. While obviously illusory, the notion that people are ‘on television’, enclosed in a separate space, distinguished from ours, may express a salient feature of the phenomenology of the medium. It accompanies broadcast television from its beginning to our own days. It was staged in an early episode of *I Love Lucy*, where Lucy tries to persuade her husband to take her as the commercial announcer in his television pilot show. For that purpose, she removes the inner components of their television set, leaving just an empty box, and to his astonished gaze performs a cigarette commercial from within it. The remarkable point in this scene is that it suggests that the medium of television emerges together with an impossible desire to be on it, to literally get ‘inside’ television: to be what one is in real life, yet on television. But this same illusion seems to inform the *Big Brother* format. The fact that the presenters are positioned outside the house, and not in a studio, aims to highlight the sense of enclosure of the house, its separation from the outside world. But this separation may receive its full meaning as an intimation of another one, between the ‘inside’ of television and the rest of the world. The interview with the newly evicted about his life inside the house – to which we have been observant witnesses – may receive its excited tone due to a question not asked: ‘what’s it like to be on television?’

Mark Andrejevic (2004) describes the reality genre as a reaction of the medium of television to the rise of the Internet. Programs in the genre incorporate a limited interactivity into production, by allowing viewers to influence the course of televised events. These new production practices can be seen as an implicit reply to popular critiques of television, which were highlighted by the rise of the new medium of the Internet, namely that television is inauthentic, planned from the top down, and fosters passive consumption. The reality genre, however, can also be seen as a different type of reaction to the Internet, marked by differentiation rather than imitation. In the genre, television not only assimilates features of Internet communication, it also highlights its *difference* from the Internet. In various ways, the unique characteristics of the medium of television are part of the implicit subject matter of reality shows. To take a simple example, music competition shows like *Pop Idol* make use of, and thematise, the liveness of the medium. The fact that we watch the show simultaneously with an anonymous crowd is implied from the show’s being a competition. In this sense, the subject matter of the show is, in part, the medium of television itself. A simple economic constraint lies at the root of this reflexivity: in order to survive, television must find contents that are uniquely appropriate to it, and preferably, contents which can only be broadcasted. But the process of finding such content entails an exploration of, and experimentation with, the medium – a process which in the context of art we would call modernism.²

² Raymond Williams has shown that television had an experimental character at the moment of its inception: “Unlike all previous communications technologies, radio and television were *systems primarily devised for transmission and reception as abstract processes, with little or no definition of preceding content [...] It is not only that broadcasting facilities preceded the demand; it is that the means of communication preceded their content*” (2003, 18-9)

Part of this reflexive exploration of the medium is the diversification of forms of celebrity. In addition to the ordinary celebrity, various reality shows bring to the screen past celebrities trying to revive their fame – personae whose categorisation as either celebrities or ‘ordinary people’ is uncertain. Tom Mole (2004) wrote of “hypertrophic celebrities”, whose process of production as celebrities is no longer concealed, but becomes “an object of fascination as the individuals it promotes”. In special seasons of shows like *Survivor* we see celebrities in unusual circumstances, naked, suffering and even humiliated. This diversification of what was traditionally considered the most stifled cultural form is one more way in which television explores its ‘material substance’, its distinction from similar media. It is formally parallel to the way painting was forced, according to Bazin (1960), to rediscover itself after the invention of photography.

This view of the reality genre puts into context the new forms of celebrity. Andrejevic follows the view that they represent a “demystification” of celebrity (2004, 10). It’s an understandable conclusion – after all, celebrities are now but ordinary people. Ordinary celebrities, however, can just as well be seen as an intensified mystification. They are utterly ordinary, lacking any talents or achievements, and *nonetheless* celebrities. Their aura is more mysterious precisely because there is no positive quality to which it can be attributed. In this sense, the ordinary celebrity manifests Walter Benjamin’s notion of aura. In its original context, art, Benjamin’s definition of aura is somewhat enigmatic: “[...] the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be” (Benjamin 1968, 222). The ordinary celebrity, which remains distant however familiar and similar she is to us, provides a concrete meaning to this concept.³

On the face of it, celebrities are also created on the Internet. Joshua Gamson (2011), for example, writes of self-made fame. The question is whether Internet celebrities are the same kind of phenomenon as television celebrities. Some recurrent characteristics of Internet celebrities suggest that they are not. Josh Ostrovsky, nicknamed ‘the fat Jew’, is a social media star with more than ten million followers. Interviewed in the documentary *The American Meme* (Marcus 2018) he says: “Everywhere I go, I want people to think, ‘what the fuck!’. If it makes sense, I don’t want to be there. No one on the Internet can be normal. Everyone on social media is so extreme, right?” This should be read literally: on the Internet, to gain wide recognition, one cannot be normal. What the Internet cannot produce is the ordinary celebrity. This impossibility articulates the topology of the medium of the Internet in its difference from television. To recall Boorstin, on the Internet one can be ‘well-

[emphasis in original]). The reality genre suggests that television is inherently an experimental medium. Each new format is an answer to the question, ‘what new use can be found to the immense apparatus of television?’

³ It is no coincidence that television materialises Benjamin’s notion of aura. The medium recaptures the two basic conditions that make art “auratic”, according to Benjamin: uniqueness and presence (“Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be”). The uniqueness of art, which is eliminated by mechanical reproduction, is recovered on television: because of its live nature, every moment in broadcast television is unique. The aura of art, according to Benjamin, recuperates its “cult value”, which depends on presence of the object rather than on its being on view. Something similar happens in the reality genre, where television goes beyond representation. As Bill Nichols puts it, reality TV “absorbs the referent”. It does not “represent an absent referent so much as cannibalize and assimilate it into a different type of substance” (Benjamin 1994, 52).

known', but not "known for one's well-knownness". Put another way, due to its open-ended interface with non-mediated reality, there is no 'inside' to the Internet. One cannot be 'on' the Internet, because most people are simultaneously inside and outside of it.

What does it mean that on social media everyone is "extreme"? Let us consider an example. Brittany Furlan, listed by *Time* as one of the 30 most influential people on the Internet in 2018, uploaded to Instagram a parody of Beyonce's erotic pregnancy photograph. She sticks her exposed belly out; one hand caresses it gently, while the other holds a fat burrito to her mouth. The point here is not simply the parasitic character of the image. More important is the way it recovers the fundamental duality of the celebrity. On television, it is the structure of the medium that sustains the celebrity as both ordinary and extraordinary. In the photograph this duality is paralleled in the juxtaposition of the erotic and the abject. The figuration of such duality in the *content* of the photograph compensates for its lack in the structure of the medium.

A further distinction between television and Internet celebrities is the direct connections the latter typically sustain with their fans. Paris Hilton recounts in *The American Meme* her intensive travels across the globe for meeting fans. Kirill Bichutsky, known as "the slut whisperer", is seen constantly updating his million followers as to the locations of the parties he will attend (where he takes extremely misogynistic photos of women sprayed with champagne). At first sight, these active relations with fans seem to reflect the need of Internet celebrities to promote themselves in the absence of professional public relations services. They highlight, however, a deeper difference between television and Internet celebrities. They underscore the fact that a television celebrity embodies a type of sociality which is *irreducible* to interpersonal relations. The television celebrity stands in for an imaginary crowd that renders her a celebrity. The Internet celebrity, by contrast, is acknowledged by a real crowd, which can be maintained by engaging with it.

6. Conclusion

The call to be oneself has an essential role in post-Fordist economies. It is connected, on the one hand, to new profit mechanisms, and on the other hand, to new forms of consumer subjectivity, grounded on the notion that being oneself requires the display of uniqueness, a difference from others. Some basic intuitions point at the role of the Internet in fashioning this subjectivity. The present article argues, however, that while the Internet makes unlimited individuation possible, television plays a role in turning this possibility into a demand.

This economic role of television can be theorised using Agamben's exploration of the religious nature of capitalism, following Benjamin and Debord. All religion, according to Agamben, rests on separation: the removal of things from common use into a separate sphere, as expressed, for example, in consecration to the gods. "Not only is there no religion without separation, but every separation also contains or preserves within itself a genuinely religious core" (Agamben 2007, 74). Agamben uses this conceptual framework to explain Benjamin's enigmatic claim that capitalism is the most extreme form of a cultic religion, where "things have a meaning only in their relationship to a cult" (Benjamin 1996, 288). Capitalism is religion, Agamben explains, because separation is inscribed already on its fundamental object, the commodity, which is suspended between use value and exchange value. He shows how this basic separation unfolds into a series of splits affecting various aspects of life: language, the body, sexuality and more.

The medium of television – most typically broadcast television – is a further embodiment of separation. Notice that Debord’s concept of the spectacle applies immediately to television much more than to the Internet: “The images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream in which the unity of that life can no longer be recovered. *Fragmented* views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a *separate pseudo-world* that can only be looked at” (Debord n.d., 7). On the Internet, one may speculate, images do not regroup into a new unity, but are constantly dispersed. Furthermore, on the Internet, it may not be true that images “can only be looked at”. They are constantly acted upon. Television splits reality in two: unmediated reality, and the stream of images that confronts it. The Internet unfolds an overflow of points of contact between mediated and unmediated reality.

The separation informing television is reflected in the form of viewers’ subjectivity, in their senses of being who they are and whom they are supposed to be.

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