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# NARCISSISM AS ETHICAL PRACTICE? FOUCAULT, ASKESIS AND AN ETHICS OF BECOMING

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# NARCISSISM AS ETHICAL PRACTICE?: FOUCAULT, ASKESIS AND AN ETHICS OF BECOMING

**ABSTRACT**

The emergence of the auto/biographical society brings with it fears of a drift towards a culture of narcissism in which the mutuality and ethicality of collective life may be eclipsed in favour of a self-indulgent `aesthetics of existence'. This paper focuses on auto/biographical practice and regards it as a quintessential `technology of the self' in the Foucauldian sense. However, and paradoxically, this positions auto/biography within a thesis which emphasises the constitution of the self as a project of aesthetic inscription which poses dangers for ethicality and commitment to public life. The notion that an aesthetic disposition is ethically indispensable is as intriguing as it is contentious. The paper explores this problematic through the lens of Foucauldian ethics; a critical (re-)examination of the character of our aesthetic investments in the practice of reading and writing auto/biography, suggests the potential for realising a different kind of ethical relation to ourselves and others. These issues are explicated by reference to the popular cultural text, *Dead Man Walking* – an auto/biographical narrative which is explicitly `aestheticised' as entertainment.

**173 words**

# NARCISSISM AS ETHICAL PRACTICE?: FOUCAULT, ASKESIS AND AN ETHICS OF BECOMING[1]

## INTRODUCTION

Amongst its many legacies, the `narrative turn' has reinvigorated critical thinking of the ontology of `the self', and in this regard has propelled auto/biographical studies into the heart of contemporary sociologies of identity/subjectivity.  There is little doubt that auto/biography has become an important resource and topic for theorising and conceptualising different selves, how they are constructed and composed from varied socio-political, historical and cultural sites, and how they connect and engage with others, both similarly and differentially located in time and space.  Yet, as Plummer (2001) puts it, there may be a `dark side' to this success story with fears that the exponential growth in the production, consumption and academicisation of auto/biographical work reinforces and intensifies what Lasch (1979) describes as a `narcissistic culture' of self-absorbed individuals with no sense of shared morality, collective responsibility or commitment to public life.  Such pessimism is further buttressed by a contemporary flirtation with postmodernism, which works to undermine the possibility of political intervention founded on a universal ethics.  It seems paradoxical, therefore, to turn to a postmodern analytic to rethink the potential for ethical reflexivity in auto/biographical practice. Suppose we accept as axiomatic the notion of auto/biography as a `technology of the self' in the Foucauldian sense. This, then, positions auto/biography within a thesis which emphasises the constitution of the self as a project of aesthetic inscription and ethical (self-)formation. The idea that an aesthetic disposition is ethically indispensable is as intriguing as it is contentious, not least because it challenges the Habermasian notion of the separate spheres of the `cognitive', the `ethico-political' and the `libidinal-aesthetic' (Eagleton, 1990 cited in Bennett, 1996: 657).  However, to examine the character of our aesthetic investments in the practice of reading and writing auto/biography at least

opens up the possibility for realising a different kind of ethical relation to ourselves and others.


## AGAINST AESTHETICS

> We pay for our commitment to individuality by incurring the dangers of lives floundering in capricious subjectivism, the pursuit of arbitrary whims, the loss of real selves in unrealistic dreams, and by cutting mistakenly the life giving interaction between self-formation and responsible cultivation of our given social and cultural world.  Only the future can show whether the price is too high and whether we can live responsibly with the ideal of the self. (Weintraub, 1978: 379)


This eloquent observation captures very well the (perceived) socio-cultural dangers of the `autobiographical society'. Yet, at what point does `creative individuality' cease to refine our knowledge and understanding of the world; under what conditions does 'life giving interaction' degenerate into `capricious subjectivism'; and why should these processes be understood as necessarily regressive ones?  Equally, what marks the passage from socially accountable practices of `self-formation', `responsible cultivation' and `giving each man his due' to a hedonism based on the self-interested `pursuit of arbitrary whims' and `unrealistic dreams'? It seems to me that the movement to the `dark side' suggested by Weintraub is also represented as a movement across an (imagined) boundary between `truth-seeking rational enquiry' and `ethico-political discourse' on the one hand, and `aesthetic values' on the other (Norris, 1992: 163).  This positions what could otherwise be construed as the parochial concern of auto/biographical studies, within a wider philosophical debate on the relationship between the cognitive, ethical and aesthetic realms of human experience – in Habermasian terms, the mutually exclusive spheres of science, morality and art.

One of the many contributions of postmodern theories of the aesthetic is to eschew the modernist separation of the spheres and to restore to the centre of socio-political life the affective, sensual and spectacular dimensions of human existence. Such a perspective draws on an explicitly Nietzschean worldview in which the aesthetic attitude governs all spheres of life, including the ethical. As Wolin points out, in Nietzschean ethics, actions are deemed as ethical if they demonstrate a will or force which is `glorious, sensational or dramatic ….. patterned after a *dramaturgical model* …(and) valued solely as a *performative gesture*' (1986: 74 *Emphasis in original*). Largely regarded as Nietzsche's heir, Foucault's later works on ethics (Foucault, 1984a, 1985, 1986, 1989a, 1989b) and his elaboration of an `aesthetics of existence', are said to be indicative of his tendency to `pan-aestheticism' and a perspective which

> …. favors either an attitude of narcissistic self-absorption or one of outwardly directed, aggressive self-aggrandizement. In neither case is there a discernible trace of human solidarity, mutuality or fellow-feeling. Instead the ethical universe of aesthetic decisionism is a Hobbesian state of nature … with a flair for style (Wolin, 1986:85).

Eagleton, likewise, is highly sceptical of Foucault's ethical theses arguing that from within such a schema `(e)verything should now become aesthetic, Truth, the cognitive, becomes that which satisfies the mind … Morality is converted to a matter of style, pleasure and intuition …. (of) turning oneself into an artifact' (1990: 368). Indeed, as Vintges suggests `(n)otoriously, *the* issue in the debate around Foucault's work is its lack of an ethics' (2001: 166 *original emphasis*). For Thacker, Foucault `has difficulty with questions of normativity' (1993: 13) and fails to establish normative criteria for distinguishing between `good' and 'bad' kinds of aesthetic practice. Fraser (1994) accuses Foucault of being a `moral nihilist'; and Eagleton charges him with

espousing `a subject-centred morality with a vengeance' (1990: 394). More potently, he argues that Foucault's emphasis on the aesthetic conceals brutality and coercive power behind a cloak of beautiful, self-delighting forms; and asks, `(w)hat would a stylish rape look like, precisely?' (*ibid*: 394).  At the same time, feminist critics (such as Balbus, 1985; Diamond and Quinby, 1988; Hartsock, 1990; Sawacki, 1991), keen to apply Foucault's ethics to questions of `aesthetic embodiment' - dieting, exercise and body-building, for example – argue that such `self-surveillance is a form of obedience to patriarchy' (Bartky, 1988: 81), and conclude that Foucault crucially fails to address how normative judgements of self-fashioned, aestheticised bodies are always-already produced within a field of power relations. This is similar to Dews' complaint that `Foucault wishes to avoid judging power-knowledge complexes from a normative standpoint' (1989: 37); and, again, Best and Kellner (1991) object to Foucault's inattention to structures of domination, hegemony and inequality, claiming that the aesthetic turn encourages a `micropolitics of desire' rather than collective forms of resistance guided by an ethics of social justice.

On these readings, the boundary between the aesthetic domain and other spheres of life is completely erased; and under conditions of this kind of aesthetic imperialism, ethical convention and political obligation are repressed, expelled and then banished altogether. As a framework for thinking about and responding to the dangers of auto/biography's narcissistic `dark side', Foucault (it seems) offers us only a one way ticket to an auto/biographical world of spectacular drama and grandiose sentiments in which auto/biography *per se* would be nothing more than a narrativised, personal soundbite.  However, this is to read Foucault narrowly and in a way which glosses over the finer points of his thesis which, far from representing aesthetics as the Other to ethics (and cognition), makes a persuasive theoretical case for thinking about their dialogical and dialectical interrelationship.  My point of departure here is Bennett's (1996) very persuasive defence of Foucault, in which she examines the various

conceptual elements of the charge of `aestheticization' as it has been levelled against him, and finds his critics wanting on a number of counts.


**MUST WE BURN FOUCAULT?**[2]

In the first place, Bennett takes issue with the particular configuration of the `aesthetic' which informs the complaint of `pan-aestheticism'. In Eagleton (1990), Wolin (1986) and Norris (1992), she argues, the `aesthetic' is invoked as a discourse of modernity, `as the province of a reactive, undisciplined sensuality' (1996: 654), and as `an autonomous "realm" whose criteria of value are nonrational, amoral, and apolitical matters of beauty and style' (*ibid*: 658). It is not as though Foucault himself is consistent about the concept, or favours any one formulation of it. As Thacker (1993) points out, his account is thoroughly ahistorical and makes no distinction between the Greek sense of `aesthetic' as a socially located and ethical process of subjectivation, the Kantian notion of `aesthetic' as `pure disinterestedness', or Baudelaire's `aesthetic' as dandyism. Nonetheless, despite Foucault's own failure to specify the content of the `aesthetic', Bennett's point is that his critics tend to ignore Foucault's emphasis on `askesis', rather than `aesthetic', as the organising focus of his ethics.

> Technologies of the self … permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality…. (This) implies certain modes of training and modification of individuals, not only in the obvious sense of acquiring certain skills but also in the sense of acquiring *certain attitudes* (Foucault, 1988a: 18 *my emphasis*).

In this passage, Foucault draws attention to an `aesthetic' which is educable in terms of both the techniques *and* sensibilities required to enact and mobilise it. The `aesthetic', then, is not so much a realm of ideality, a psychic state or a stylish lifestyle, but is better understood as a culturally grounded process of subjectivation - an `askesis' (or `asceticism') - which, Bennett argues, is akin to `a *disciplined* form of sensuousness. *This* aesthetics – aesthetics as sensibility-formation – has implications for ethics that are irreducible to fascism, hedonism, or indiscriminateness' (1996: 654 o*riginal emphasis*). In other words, Bennett concludes, the connection between aesthetics and ethics depends upon how aesthetics is figured. So, the turn to Foucauldian ethics as a response to the perceived aestheticisation of auto/biographical practice, may not be as outrageous as it initially appears if we recognise that our engagement with auto/biography (as readers, writers, academicisers, publicists, critics) is integral to a process of sensibility-formation and the cultivation of an aesthetic disposition which is socially, politically and culturally encoded. Foucault is very clear about this, and is quick to point out that the `care of the self', in relation to Roman `aesthetics of existence', is `not an exercise in solitude, but a true social practice'(1986: 51); talking of processes of subjectivation in Antiquity, Foucault regards these as `practices of liberation, of freedom … starting of course from a certain number of rules, styles and conventions that are found in the culture' (1989a: 313); and elsewhere, with reference to `technologies of the self' in modernity, he notes that `these (ascetic) practices are … not something that the individual invents by himself. They are patterns that he finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group' (1987: 122).

Bennett's second argument is to dismiss the common complaint that Foucault lacks a normative standpoint and is, at worst, a `moral nihilist'. This kind of critique, she suggests, confuses Foucault's failure to place a command morality at the heart of his

ethics with the view that he rejects altogether the need for rules, prohibitions, doctrines and evaluative criteria. Bennett is swift to remind us of Foucault's recognition that ethics necessarily refer to elements of the code, and she draws attention to his assertion that:

I had to keep in mind the distinction between the code elements of a morality and the elements of ascesis, neglecting neither their coexistence, their interrelations, their relative autonomy, nor their possible differences of emphasis … I am not supposing that the codes are unimportant (1985: 31-32).

However, the key point here is that while Foucault recognises that ethics *may* refer to prescribed rules of action, ethical conduct cannot be simply read off from the moral code associated with it - what is crucial is the `*manner* in which one ought to form oneself as an ethical subject acting in reference to the prescriptive elements that make up the code' (Foucault, 1985: 26 *my emphasis*). In short, moral principles are ethically insufficient[3]; referring to Greco-Roman *nomoi* (law and customs), Foucault argues that `more important than the content of the law and its conditions of application was the *attitude* that caused one to respect them' (1985: 31 *my emphasis*). Here, again, we encounter Foucault's emphasis on sensibility-formation as the key dynamic of ethical practice wherein 'there is … no forming of the ethical subject without "modes of subjectivation" and an "ascetics" or "practices of the self" that support them' (*ibid*: 28). On this analysis, auto/biographical practice, as an archetypal `technology of the self', is indispensable to ethics and lies at the heart of the formation of an aesthetico-ethical sensibility which, far from negating the moral code, subjects it to qualification, problematisation and critique. There is no `dark side' to auto/biography in this formula, inhabited by a `capricious subjectivism' and driven by the `pursuit of arbitrary whims', so much as a reflexive `little space between morality and ethics' (Connolly, 1998: 111).

Nonetheless, Foucault does not elaborate on how we *ought* to fill out this `little space', and his critics remain dissatisfied (and unconvinced) by Foucault's refusal to specify a normative content for his ethics.   McNay (1992: 87) suggests that Foucault's most sustained consideration of normative substance is found in his essay *What is Enlightenment?* (1984b).   In this piece, Foucault regards Kant's formulation of the Enlightenment as an attitude of critical self-awareness, as relevant to the formation of a modern ethics of the self; he also draws on Baudelaire's work on dandyism to indicate the form that this critical self-awareness might take.   He refers, for example, to `the asceticism of the dandy who makes of his body, his behaviour, his feelings and passions, his very existence, a work of art' (*ibid*: 41-42), and concludes that `(m)odern man …. is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself' (*ibid*: 42). It is perhaps unfortunate that Foucault uses dandyism to illustrate a contemporary ethical-sensibility, as it has been invariably read as demonstrative of his preference for theatricality as a guiding principle of ethical action. This prompts Bennett (1996) to highlight a particular strand of critique – associated primarily with Wolin (1986, 1992) - which berates Foucauldian ethics for promoting not the content of ethical choice, but its dramatic and spectacular effects.  For Wolin, such an ethical position offers only one choice, that `of a glorious life which rides roughshod over the trammels of social respectability and convention' (1986: 81).  From this perspective, Foucault's aesthetics of existence are re-interpreted as `performative gesture' (*ibid*: 74), 'provocative actions', `narcissistic self-absorption' or `outwardly directed, aggressive self-aggrandizement' (*ibid*: 85); and his emphasis on critical reflexivity is re-read as as a `micropolitics of desire'  (Best and Kellner, 1991: 290) centred on the body and its pleasures. As Bennett puts it, `Foucault's project of crafting a sensibility is reduced to an unreflective submission to the body.  Foucault's aesthetics is thus stripped of its ascesis' (1996: 662).

The representation of Foucault's ethics as a self-centred, affective and embodied kind of vitalism is completely contrary to Foucault's insistence that ethics requires a process of *reflection* not only about the relationship of self with self, but also of the relationship one has with others – more about this below.  In an interview in 1984, Foucault makes the important link between freedom, ethics and reflection, asserting that:

> … it is obvious that by liberating our desire that we will learn to conduct ourselves ethically … for what is ethics, if not the practice of freedom ….  Freedom is the ontological condition of ethics.  But ethics is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection (Foucault, 1994a: 284).

Elsewhere, Foucault fleshes out some of the key principles of this reflective process; for example, in *Power, Moral Values and the Intellectual*, Foucault describes himself as a `moralist' and lists `three elements in his "morals" … refusal, curiosity, innovation' (1988b: 1).  By refusal, he enjoins us not to accept anything in our culture, social arrangements and experiences as self-evident, fixed or definitive.  Refusal is helped by attributes of curiosity and innovation; `I dream of a new age of curiosity' (Foucault, 1994b: 325), he says, regarding curiosity as the capacity and concern to find strangeness in all those things in life which are seen as familiar, traditional, necessary, fundamental and important.  The corollary to curiosity is innovation, an ability to perpetually seek out new things to think about and imagine, and never resting content on acquired knowledge and beliefs.  This is an explicitly Nietzschean position: in Nietzsche's words, `(w)e have to *learn to think differently* – in order at last, perhaps very late on, to attain even more: *to feel differently*' (Nietzsche, 1982: 104, aphorism 103, *original emphasis*).  In addition, Foucault regards refusal, curiosity and innovation as motivated by what he refers to as the `danger principle'; in

his elaboration of a genealogy of ethics, he describes such a disposition as the well-spring of our ethical choices:

> My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous… If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do…. I think that the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger (1984a: 343).

In the light of the foregoing analysis, it may be the case that the `dark side' of auto/biography is looking far less gloomy than at outset: but even if we accept that the reflexive, sensibility-forming and innovative qualities of reading/writing auto/biography have considerable ethical purchase, how far do Foucauldian ethics support `the life giving interaction between self-formation and responsible cultivation of our given social and cultural world' (Weintraub, 1978: 379)?  Put another way, can Foucault's ethical analytic also be pressed into the service of collective action, coalitions of resistance, political alliances and a shared commitment to social justice?  Bennett points out how Foucault's materialist critics are especially vexed by this issue.  Eagleton, for example, claims that `Foucault's vigorously self-mastering individual remains wholly monadic.  Society is just an assemblage of autonomous self-disciplining agents, with no sense that their self-realisation might flourish within bonds of mutuality' (1990: 393).  Best and Kellner (1991) and Callinicos (1989) accuse Foucault of failing to position his ethics within a wider analysis of the socio-economic and cultural conditions of late modernity.   However, Bennett counters these criticisms by first, arguing that Foucault is not only insistent but consistent in his view that power is the condition of possibility of any form of subjectivity, and there can be no process of subjectivation outside of a regime of power.  Secondly, in response to Eagleton's specific comment that Foucault has `no sense' of the connection between self-formation, mutuality and collective action, Bennett reminds

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us of the impossibility of self-realization given its embeddedness within social relations. Whatever the ideal of caring for or knowing the self, Foucault acknowledges that such a task is performed within a web of social constraints which always fail in their attempt to prevent `intersubjective bonds likely to disrupt the regime' (Bennett, 1996: 660). Besides this, Bennett notes Foucault's rejection of rationalist politics, democratic institutions and public discourse as the privileged sites of self-determination, mutuality and/or resistance, and his preference for a model of self/other relations which emerge through tactical alliances, localised struggles and counter-hegemonic discursive practices. She further argues that Foucault's critics not only fail to recognise their own inability to distill a universal ethics for social change and political transformation, but are also inattentive to the dangers and violences engendered by such an ambitious project; as Foucault quite scathingly asserts:

> Recent liberation movements suffer from the fact that they cannot find any principle
> on which to base the elaboration of a new ethics. They need an ethics, but they
> cannot find any other ethics than an ethics founded on so-called scientific knowledge
> of what the self is, what desire is, what the unconscious is, and so on (1984a: 343).

Bennett, then, concurs that within his ethical schema, Foucault's `aesthetics of existence' are best understood as `one of the means through which we improve the quality and generosity of our connectedness to others' (1996: 661). This point is very persuasively elaborated in Connolly's (1998) [4] essay in which he draws on Foucault's (1984a) genealogy of ethics to suggest four key dimensions of an ethical sensibility which, in combination, suggest the form which a Foucauldian `ethico-politico spirituality' might take (*ibid*: 119). Firstly, Connolly talks of our propensity to unsettle the ontological necessity, inevitability and purity of established self/other dualities (such as identity/difference; innocent/guilty; normality/abnormality); secondly, he suggests the active cultivation of a capacity to recognise the ambiguity and

contingency of one's identity; thirdly, he enjoins us to develop a generous sensibility to one's difference from others, and to understand how that difference informs the definition of self-identity; and fourthly, he encourages the exploration of new possibilities in social relations opened up by a genealogy of the self.

## AUTO/BIOGRAPHY AND COLLECTIVE LIFE

Despite the foregoing, I am still not convinced that auto/biographical work needs Foucauldian ethics to `rescue it' from a twilight zone of narcissism.  It seems to me that the dystopian strand of critique is very narrowly predicated on the introspective and *intra*subjective aspects of auto/biographical work and is preoccupied with the notion of self/selves as the organising concept of this narrative form[5].  Indeed, this paper opened with the claim that the `narrative turn' in general, and auto/biographical studies in particular, has reinvigorated critical thinking of the ontology of `the self' and in so doing, has moved to the centre of contemporary sociologies of identity/subjectivity. Such a boast is hardly misplaced when Plummer (2001: 85) talks of `the search for the self' as being the `hallmark' of auto/biographical form. However, my opening assertion was swiftly followed by the qualifying acknowledgement that both academic theorisations and individuals' discursive constructions of different selves necessarily involve an exploration of their connectedness to others both similarly and differentially located in time and space.  In this section, I want to unpack the self/other relations of auto/biographical work as a prelude to thinking about its *intrinsic* intersubjective and collectivising qualities.

The notion of auto/biography as a discursive medium for expressing the interaction of the private worries and public concerns of an individual life is well-rehearsed, and there is a burgeoning field of scholarly analysis of the cultural politics generated by

auto/biographical narratives.  As Plummer notes of contemporary auto/biographical work, especially that produced by marginal, hidden and ordinary voices:

> The autobiographies `from below' … work to create a different sense of autobiographical form, one where consciousness of self becomes more of a collective exploration than just a private one.  The author is somehow located as a member of a class, a gendered group, a generational group, an outcast group.  Indeed, these stories can transcend the traditional isolated `individual' of classic autobiography  … to create a more collective awareness of others (2001: 90).

To be sure, there is no shortage of academic commentary on how auto/biographical accounts promote the search for alliances that can serve as the basis for political and cultural liberation and transformation.  For example, in a highly original work, Pia Lara (1999, drawing on Arendt's notion of `storytelling' and Ricoeur's ideas on mimesis, develops a critical analysis of feminist narrativity as the site of identity construction, recognition and reformulation, and shows how these kinds of `less-rationalistic' social practices and cultural productions come to the fore in the public sphere in localised struggles for justice.  Couser (1997) turns his attention to an emergent sub-genre of life-writing which he calls `autopathography', a term which gives critical visibility to the diverse and compelling accounts of illness and disability that have appeared with increasing frequency over the last few decades.  By historicising `autopathographical narratives' of breast cancer, HIV/AIDS, paralysis and hearing impairment, Couser's study examines their resonance within contemporary liberation movements such as patients' rights campaigns, positive identity politics and the counter-discursive movement against medical models of illness and disability.  A further example is found in Pouchet Paquet's (2002) work on Caribbean auto/biography. The book deals with a wide range of topics within such auto/biography – such as the quest for an independent voice for the colonized

subject; the contested meanings of motherhood; the radicalization of Caribbean intellectuals – and through these tropes, Pouchet Paquet interrogates how writers negotiate the expression of public selves to realise different cultural possibilities for political practice. This performative act, she suggests, results in both a collective and individual identity that serves as a locus of resistance against the corrosive powers of colonialism within the context of post-colonial Caribbean societies.

However, in addition to their insights into the cultural politics and collective potential of auto/biographical practices, these kinds of studies not only complicate what is understood as an auto/biographical text but also expand our knowledge of the contexts within and the means by which `auto/biography' may be produced. In his identification of the moments when the narratives of silenced, outcast, marginal and hidden voices begin to emerge and take hold in the wider socio-political imagination, Plummer notes that:

> The backdrop to all this is the rise of a new series of technologies that are implicated in postmodern life. The old low-tech is being shifted into the new hi-tech. From print and sound recordings, through film and video, on to new digital forms – personal computing, web sites, CD-Roms, e-mail etc.; and ultimately towards lands only dimly sensed – cyberspace, virtual realities, medical scanning, the new genetics. A new world of holography, satellites, cybernetics, fibre-optics, digitalism, and virtuality may start to re-order the forms in which our lives are assembled, displayed and stored (2001: 96).

The transformation of the media at the end of the twentieth century is well-documented and constitutes one of the most important social changes currently facing global societies (Miller, 1993, 1998; Stevenson, 1999; Lull, 2001; Kellner, 1995, 2003). As a condition of possibility for the promotion of self/other relations in

auto/biographical practices, the mediatised, digitalised, hi-tech, information age *may* be viewed with some optimism. Such a view takes comfort in a McLuhanist appreciation of the value and place of the `new' media technologies within the public sphere. While McLuhan's theorisations of the `electronic society' may be regarded as hopelessly optimistic, his ideas on the organic nature and temporal-spatial instantaneity of cultural and digital media – captured by his metaphor of the `global village' – have done much to foster the view of these media as a `total field of interacting events in which all men *(sic)* participate' (1994[1964]: 248). For McLuhan, the technological resources now available not only facilitate active citizenship in the `auto/biographical society', but also transform social relations by bringing entire populations together in a complex, participatory and ritual process. This is echoed by Scannell who insists that technological developments contribute to the `democratization of everyday life' by rendering the world `ordinary, mundane, accessible, knowable, familiar, recognizable, shareable and communicable for whole populations' (1989: 152 cited in Sparks, 1992: 17).

However, this utopianism finds its nemesis in a Baudrillardian perspective which talks of the advent of a `hyperreality' wherein the masses, caught up in a universe of simulation and multi-media massage, seek nothing more than spectacle, fantasy, diversion, entertainment and escape – an experience of pure effect and affect without content or meaning - see, for example, Baudrillard 1983, 1993, 1994. It is the kind of pessimistic stance taken up by Gabler who comments that in an era of highly mediatised cultural forms, we create our own lives as a film in which we become `at once performance artists in, and audiences for, a grand ongoing show' (1998: 4). For Gabler, the practice of life-writing is transformed into an aesthetic process of entertainment acted out for the benefit of readers/audiences, and is reflective of the scripts of the wider media culture, its role models, fashion types, styles and looks. Under these dystopian conditions there is (almost) no prospect for an

auto/biographical politics marked by relations of resistance, coalition and mutuality. Indeed, to all intents and purposes, the harbingers of the `dark side' would appear to have been right all along.

The matter, however, cannot rest there. Borrowing from Kellner's (1994 - see also Best and Kellner, 1991) critique of Baudrillard, the pan-aestheticism of `hyperreality' mistakes a trend for a finality; it exaggerates the extent to which postmodern culture is modelled by processes of simulation; it is a thesis which would be more at home in a work of science fiction; and, above all, it constructs readers (viewers, listeners, consumers) as stupefied, passive, non-discriminating, cultural dopes. On the other hand, though McLuhanism may be overly optimistic, there is a refusal here to turn the readership of auto/biographical texts to stone, and it celebrates the active, intersubjective and inherently political nature of reading practice. Nonetheless, there is no further deconstruction of the `global village' of readers nor any account of how the `ethicality' of auto/biographical work is realised within (and through) the contingency of reading practice. Perhaps, then, all that is required to counter the (alleged) drift to narcissism and self-absorption, is to acknowledge and understand the ways in which ethical relations are forged by, in and through our contingent `readerly' encounters with auto/biographical material. Foucault may (still) be dispensable after all.

## READING AUTO/BIOGRAPHY

(Within auto/biography) …reading remains invisible as a topic for serious theoretical discussion. Reading is instead taken as a pre-theoretical given, a transparent act in relation to a totally active text which is apparently productive of one obvious and incontrovertible reading. What is needed instead is a discussion of reading as an *active* engagement with a text and so as a viewpoint contingent upon the

epistemological and ontological position of a reader and thus of her autobiography, such as has taken place within ethnomethodologically-informed sociology (Stanley, 1992 : 100 *Original emphasis*).

Stanley is an exception to the analytical blindspot which she draws attention to in this passage.  Throughout her book, *The Auto/biographical I*, she explicitly engages with the activity of reading, conceptualising both the practices and the person of the auto/biographical reader(s).  In these pages we are introduced to `active readers, knowledgeable readers' (1992: 116) who bring to the text their own `auto/biographies and the tools, means and knowledges these provide' (*ibid*: 84).  There is a greater sense of a division (and balance) of auto/biographical labour in this perspective; it is not a question of de-centring either the text (or its author) in favour of the reader, so much as recognising how auto/biographical texts facilitate their interaction and serve as socio-discursive prisms or conduits through which ethical relationships between writing selves and reading others may be negotiated and formed.  However, there is no guarantee that such relationships will aspire to bonds of mutuality or coalitions of resistance.  As Stanley rightly points out:

> We may be textually persuaded, cajoled, led and misled; but we can, and we do, also scrutinise and analyse, puzzle and ponder, resist and reject.  Readers, then, form a discriminating audience, one with its own understandings; and it is a fragmented audience … a large number of people who multiply engage in its largely solitary virtues and vices (*ibid*: 131).

This quotation neatly captures the epistemological insights of a broad interdisciplinary literature which talks of the relationship between writers and readers and how this is mediated by particular and socially-contextualised readings of the text. While different theorists have approached the issue in different ways, depending

on the kinds of texts examined - including film, best-selling novels, television drama, newspaper reports, television documentaries, academic ethnographies – they share the view that connections between the writing self and reading other are anchored in a text which reflects readers' `own frame of reference' so that they come to `share the perspective of the text' (Atkinson, 1990: 15). Eco sums this up well: he states, `to make his *(sic)* text communicative, the author has to assume that the ensemble of codes he relies upon is the same as that shared by his possible reader' (1979: 7). Put another way, he argues that narrative strategies `make us fond' by drawing on `the common opinions shared by the majority of readers' (*ibid*: 161); they invite co-operation by appealing to shared values; by deploying a `common frame' and an `intertextual frame' of references and inferences (*ibid*: 20-21); and by mobilising a `patrimony of knowledge' (Eco, 1972 cited in Sparks, 1992: 111). As Atkinson (1990: 2) has argued, `we read, and read into the text based on our own background knowledge and assumptions'; while Freund (1987) suggests that a text has gaps, and in the act of reading, the reader clarifies the ambiguities - `the reader is free to fill in the blanks but is at the same time constrained by the patterns supplied in the text; the text proposes and instructs, and the reader disposes or constructs' (Freund, 1987: 142 cited in Rosenau, 1992: 38). These insights confirm reading practice as an active process which involves a continual search for coherence between the narrative and other dimensions of readers' beliefs, consciousness and values. Where there is no coherence, then readers may adopt either an `oppositional position', and retotalize the narrative within an alternative frame of reference (Hall, 1992: 138), or a `negotiated position' which is `shot through with contradictions' (*ibid*: 137). What is emphasised here is the ideological import of narrative texts, and therefore their implications to the reproduction of existing power relations including, within this, a reinforcement of relations of resistance.

Despite the prominence of these theoretical perspectives within narrative studies and notwithstanding my own use of them elsewhere (Campbell, 2004a, 2004b), I have reservations on their analytical value to questions of `ethicality'.  While readers may be conceptualised as active participants in their connectivity with authors/writers, and the contingency of their socio-political locations is acknowledged, there is no potential within these frameworks for thinking about movements or shifts in readers' originating consciousness and dispositions.  Rather, readers are supposed as pre-formed individuals, always-already disposed to a particular reading; ethical relations appear to be fixed, static and inert with no possibility that readers' ethical positions could (somehow) change and new or different self/other relations be forged.


**AN ETHICS OF BECOMING**

This leads us, then, back into the heart of Foucauldian territory where ethicality is not a matter of subscribing to or being tolerant of a particular authorial value-position, but is a dynamic process of sensibility-formation which starts as a problematisation of ourselves as readers of others' auto/biographical accounts.  For Connolly, tolerance may be an admirable quality, but it is suggestive of a benevolence to others amidst the stability of our own identities; what is required is an `ethos of critical responsiveness' (1999: 62) which involves active work on our current identities in order to modify the terms of our relationship to others.  Such an ethos foregrounds the affective forces of ethical experience; it is an analytic which is less interested in forms of being - that is, *being* persuaded by, resistant to, rejecting and/or tolerant of difference – and more concerned with those visceral and moving encounters which initiate other possibilities for subjectivity and intersubjectivity, an aesthetic response which Connolly refers to as a `movement of becoming' (*ibid*: 57-62).  Connolly suggests that a `politics of becoming' is (even) locatable within the highly polarised debates surrounding capital punishment where there is little scope for a compromise

position which satisfies the different moral standpoints of those who are pro- and those who are anti- the death penalty.  However, the opposing fundamentalisms generated by capital punishment, whether represented as political, moral, cultural or symbolic dichotomies, are also played out on a visceral register of experience and are energised by affective, aesthetic and emotional forces which are as important for our ethical encounters with state-sanctioned execution as are categorical imperatives grounded in morality, law and reason.  Yet, and ironically, this aesthetico-ethical dimension is continually suppressed as if by its very articulation rational-moral perspectives on capital punishment, on either side of the debate, would be lost forever.  At a time when some penal activists suggest that the public is no longer moved by `reasoned' debates on the death penalty (see, for example, Boutellier, 2000; Lilly, 2002), we should embrace the potential for cultivating and enacting an aesthetico-ethical sensibility through alternative media of which auto/biography is but one example.

Consider, for example, the auto/biography of Sister Helen Prejean, *Dead Man Walking* (1994), which records her work with two prisoners on death row at Louisiana State Penitentiary, Angola, LA. This single text stimulated an extensive subsidiary media which included the 1995 production of an Oscar-winning Hollywood film of the same title.  This, in turn, has prompted a heated, interactive and ongoing discussion amongst film-goers posted on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb)[6].  At the same time, a compelling documentary, `Angel on death row', aired as part of PBS's[7] *Frontline* series on 9 April, 1996, was quick to generate viewers' comments leading to the online publication of both the programme scripts and its research materials[8]. This kind of media incites Foucault's sense of danger and curiosity – Hollywood film, online discussions, television documentary, journalistic research, televisual scripts all fall within the shadow of a `hyperreality' which, by virtue of its conceptualisation as a world of simulation and false appearances, is said to pose dangers for ethicality.  But

what are we to make of the response to the `hyperrealised' incarceration and execution of the `factional' character of Matthew Poncelet[9]; it certainly seems to have *moved* the viewers of *Dead Man Walking* and *Frontline's* `Angel on death row'; viewer-discussants note:

This film will *emotionally grab and shake* both those who oppose the death penalty, as well as those in favour of it' (SmileysWorld: IMDb posted 3 October 1999: *Emphasis added*)

At the very least, *Dead Man Walking* makes you *reflect* on why you *feel* the way you do . (Garp, Austin, Texas, US: IMDb posted 12 March 2001: *Emphasis added*).

*Dead Man Walking* drew me away *from the edge* of this dilemma and left me *in the center* … a position I find to be *very uncomfortable*' (*Frontline Feedback*, Robert Jordan, Chicago, Illinois, US: *Emphasis added*).

It (*Dead Man Walking*) is worth seeing if only to get the viewer *to confront his/her thoughts* on death and the death sentence' (Matthew Ignoffo, Eatontown, New Jersey, US: IMDb posted 7 March 2002: *Emphasis added*)

These comments indicate a critical responsiveness marked by an aesthetics of emotionality and bodily experiences – viewers are `grabbed', `shaken' and *feel* `very uncomfortable'.  Moreover, these embodied sensations are not disconnected from reflective processes, but are reported here as prompting an awareness of the contestability of viewers' existing perspectives, not only stimulating a re-imagination of their moral standpoints but also provoking a confrontation with their current school of thought.  This unsettling is stirred by a different kind of encounter with `death', `dying' and the `dead'  than that proposed by political and moral discourse on capital punishment.  Where rational debate concerns itself with the philosophical, judicial

and technical aspects of the death penalty, *Dead Man Walking* encourages viewers to experience `life/death' (`living/dying') as a human drama of corporeal, affective and aesthetic relationships which, according to one viewer, `captures the very soul of the human condition' (Dawn-49, US: IMDb posted 12 June 2002).

In a speech which formed part of a community discussion on the death penalty, Sister Prejean reflected on Tim Robbins' transformation of her book into film; she said:

> … it's not a polemic.  It's a form of art and in art what you do is you bring people to a place and present it to them in a way that *their hearts can respond in a way they never have before*' (Prejean, 1996:*Emphasis added*).

Here, again, is a clear reference to an aesthetic sensibility which makes possible a line of flight away from entrenched beliefs and principled positions.  This is not the same as saying that *Dead Man Walking* prompts some widespread moral conversion, but that it creates an opportunity for ethical reflexivity.  Compare this to the ethical potential of a documentary film released in the same year, *Executions* (1995); directed by David Herman and Arun Kumar, the promotional material for *Executions* described it thus: `This objective documentary on the death penalty and state sponsored killing looks at the social, political and moral impact of these methods of death' (IMDb, accessed 18 March 2008)[10].  There is no indication here that viewers will be `moved' or brought to a `different place', so much as be presented with a series of visual, historical and contemporary `facts' about capital punishment from which they can be expected to form a rational, dispassionate perspective on the issue. Indeed, as one viewer commented, `(t)his is an interesting documentary focusing on the subject of the death penalty and the execution of human beings …. but overall it wasn't disturbing' (Afracious, England: IMDb posted

15 June 2001).  This is certainly very different from the effusive hyperbole of the bill-boarding which launched *Dead Man Walking*.  For example, the DVD (cover) promoted the film as `fast-moving and absorbing … filled with genuine suspense that will leave you awe-struck from beginning to end'; and it quoted from the British film magazine, *Empire*, to claim that `God, death, guilt, hope, truth, right, wrong, Springsteen and brilliant, brilliant acting (is) all crammed into 2 hours'.  At the same time, the TV commercial for *Dead Man Walking* reminded viewers that:

> *Rolling Stone* calls *Dead Man Walking* one of the year's 10 best films … brilliant on every level …. Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn set the screen on fire …. Tim Robbins has directed an extraordinary film' (*Dead Man Walking* DVD [1995]: Special Features/ TV Commercial)

In other words, whereas *Executions* anticipates a soberly, contemplative viewing audience[11], *Dead Man Walking* is promoted as a cinematic commodity, as an artistic *tour de force*, and as an aesthetic event which is there to be experienced rather than cogitated by the film-going public.    However, despite the hyperreality of the Hollywood razzamatazz which surrounds the film, according to its audience, *Dead Man Walking*, without any political grandstanding, tabloid moralising or resort to sensationalism, nonetheless prompts an askesis which has ethical potential – a feat which *Executions* patently failed to achieve.  A viewer-discussant makes the point very elegantly; s/he writes:

> Robbins has successfully captured Sister Prejean's emotional and turbulent journey succinctly, while managing to keep it devoid of any maudlin sentimentality, which makes it not only real, credible and believable, but makes it a poignant and thoroughly emotionally involving experience for the audience …. It is doubtful that this film will change anyone's mind one way or another about the death penalty, but that was

never the intention; what was intended, was to make a thought-provoking, emotionally intense film, which is exactly what Robbins has accomplished with *Dead Man Walking* (JHClues, Salem, Oregon, US: IMDb posted 18 November 2001).

On this view, even when auto/biographical work is explicitly aetheticised as entertainment, it holds out the promise for an ethics of becoming. There may be, then, a persuasive case to be made for embracing the emergence of an auto/biographical society, and good ground for celebrating its (assumed) cultures of narcissism. Rather than regarding such cultures as marking a descent into a self-absorbed `capricious subjectivism' we might instead recognise how these constitute meaningful, shareable and mediated contexts in which *relational* techniques of the self can flourish, thereby opening up the potential for realising a different kind of ethical relation to ourselves and others.

**CONCLUSION**

According to Foucault, his project on the self had actually been inspired by a reading of Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcisism* (1978) – see Martin *et al*, (1988: 4); but while Lasch remained disillusioned by the turn to self in modernity, Foucault's genealogical investigations of the historical continuity of the care and technologies of the self, provided an important counterpoint – or even antidote – to Lasch's pessimistic outlook of an imminent descent into a narcissistic void. In many ways, then, there should have been little need to `rehabilitate' Foucault and defend him from accusations of peddling a solipsistic kind of ethics. Nonetheless, by unpacking some of the core assumptions made about Foucault's aesthetics of existence, and then moving the concept of *askesis* to centre-stage of the Foucauldian analytic, this discussion has reasserted Foucault's emphasis on sensibility-formation as the mainspring of an ethical attitude and thereby reunited the `care of the self' with the

social. Restating the self as a signifier of sociality – or, as Bennett (2007) puts it, a `working surface on the social' - not only challenges prevailing sociological theorisations of the relationship of self and society, but also re-imagines the terms and conditions of ethicality in a number of important ways. Firstly, it unsettles the commonplace counterposition of private and public life, and their relatively unquestioned alignment with, on the one hand, an aesthetic world of desire, corporeal stylization and autocentric indulgence, and on the other, an ethical sphere of collective action, reasoned debate and the pursuit of social justice. From this premise the turn to the self as evidenced in the proliferation of contemporary cultural practices such as body-piercing, dieting, cosmetic surgery, auto/biography, should not be viewed as an inherently `anti-social', individualistic and narcissistic development, but as a condition of possibility for nurturing an *aesthetically*-initiated and *socially*-grounded sensibility to oneself and others.

Secondly, conventional notions which insist on the separation of the aesthetic from the ethico-political (and scientific) realms of human existence, are problematised within an analytic which recognises their dialectical and reflexive interrelationship. Thus, to celebrate and embrace an aesthetics of existence is not to abandon ethics and reason to the wind but is to enable alternative ways of living together to flourish. The aesthetic in this schema does not contaminate or colonize the ethical so much as subject it to scrutiny and qualification; in other words, the aesthetic provides the critical leverage to question our sense of self-identity and to foster a sensibility to our difference from others, thereby encouraging new social and political relations to develop. A third effect of repositioning Foucault's technologies of the self within the centre ground of political and ethical life is their invigorating impact on how (and where) we look to foster socio-cultural relations of mutuality, coalition and alliance. That is, if we accept Foucauldian ethics *qua* ethics, rather than regard them as an incitement to pan-aetheticism, it permits us to jettison wellworn debates on the

relative merits of universality over particularity in ethical principles, in favour of a more imaginative approach to community living and civic direction. So, rather than look to canonical maxims, moral injunctions and legal codes for normative guidance, our ethical citizenship is prompted by curiosity, innovation, refusal and a sense of danger, most especially in terms of a problematisation of our-selves and a questioning of the (self-)identities to which we have become attached. It is precisely this kind of ethos which is encouraged by the `autobiographical society'. Thus, and finally, far from promoting a narcissistic culture, the proliferation of auto/biography contributes to what Foucault describes as `an overabundance of things: fundamental, terrible, wonderful, funny, insignificant, and crucial at the same time' (Foucault, 1994b: 325). In this case we should embrace the emergence of a globalised, and largely aetheticised cultural and digital media which not only permit different technologies of the self to flourish, but which also enable us to `act as intermediaries between this mass of things and this thirst for (ethical) knowledge' (*ibid*: 325).

**NOTES**

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Scottish and Northern Narratives Network Conference, University of Edinburgh, 9 December 2005. I am grateful to conference participants for their helpful comments and feedback on the paper. I am also very grateful to the anonymous reviewers of *Cultural Sociology* for their constructive contributions to this article.

2. This is taken directly from Vintges (2001) article `*Must we burn Foucault?' ethics as art of living: Simone de Beauvoir and Michel Foucault'*. In turn, Vintges refers to, and paraphrases de Beauvoir's essay, *Must we burn de Sade?* (1953) to indicate that her article offers something of an apology for Foucault in the same way that de Beauvoir sought to defend de Sade.

3. Bennett's organising problematic (captured in the title of her article) is framed by a question initially posed by Friedrich Schiller ([1967[1794]: 51) - `how is it, then, that we still remain barbarians?' given the promise of a practical ethics informed by Enlightenment rationality. The co-existence of rational enlightenment and ethical barbarism, for Schiller, suggests that ethics requires more than reason as a guide to conduct. In Bennett's words `(e)thics requires not only rational principles of behaviour but the perceptual refinement to apply them to particular cases and the disposition or will to live them out. For Schiller, *that will is an aesthetic product*, to be cultivated by disciplining and refining one's sensitivity to beauty' (1996: 654-655 *original emphasis*).

4. This essay was first published in *Political Theory*, Volume 21(3): 365-389 (1993).

5. Reynolds' (2001) edited volume on auto/biography in the Arabic literary tradition deals with the problem of defining Arabic auto/biography against a background of Western theorising of the genre. In tracing the history of a `thousand years of Arabic auto/biography', and in summarising its main features, the contributors to this innovative text expose the fallacy of the western origins of auto/biography and the contestability of western notions of the genre's (perceived) generic aspects, such as narrativising processes of individuation, the revelation of personal and private aspects of life, and expressions of inner self.

6. These can be accessed at: www.imdb.com/title/tt0112818/usercomments

7. PBS is a US public affairs television company

8. These can be accessed at: www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/angel/

9. The character of Matthew Poncelet, played by actor Sean Penn, is largely understood to be a composite of the biographies of the first two men Sister Helen Prejean counselled on death row – Elmo Patrick Sonnier and Robert Lee Willie. According to Buchanan (1996), Poncelet captures Sonnier's crime and Willie's character.

10. Details of *Executions* (1995) can be found at: www.IMDb.com/title/tt0150490

11. This does not suggest that the documentary genre cannot also be experienced aesthetically (and ethically).  See, especially, Hawkins' (2001) critical Deleuzian exposition of how far and in what ways contemporary televisual documentary is implicated in the shaping of our ethical sensibilities.

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