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Queens of Hearts: *Dorian*, Princess Diana, and the Sign of the Authentic

Daniel Lea¹

Abstract:

*Contemporary culture is caught in a representational bind: fascinated by - and yet tired of - its tendency towards artifice and involution, whilst simultaneously attracted to - and yet sceptical of - the idea of the authentic. The hermeneutical confusion brought about by this self-identity crisis has given rise to a semiotic indistinction around artificiality and authenticity, leaving the observer trapped not by their bipolarity, but caught within their layers as they interleave. This essay explores the ramifications of this through an examination of the relationship between Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and Will Self's *Dorian: An Imitation* (2002). Identifying the imitative intent of Self's rewrite as problematic, the essay situates the twentieth-century's shift towards an ethic of private authenticity over sincerity as indicative of a significant change in self and social understanding. However the demands and desires of late-capitalism have made it increasingly difficult to isolate what that authenticity might mean, and what credibility can be attached to it. By examining Self's portrayal of Princess Diana's life and death, it is argued that for all its importance as a signifier of value, contemporary authenticity is hopelessly caught within the representational order of the artificial.*

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“At once desperate for authenticity and in love with artifice” is how David Shields describes himself at the start of *Reality Hunger*, his manifesto for the return of the real to twenty-first century culture.² This paradox could comfortably describe much contemporary literary fiction in Britain which displays a fondness for narrative self-consciousness underwritten by a nagging conviction that such circularity amounts to little more than self-congratulatory navel-gazing. In this vein, A.S Byatt’s *The Biographer’s Tale* (2000) satirizes a bourgeois intellectualism that fetishizes the Linguistic revolution as a replacement for the difficult task of trying to understand how a human being’s life might impact on how they think and act. In the early twenty-first century much of the gloss of postmodernism’s deconstructive practice has been worn off by familiarity and not a little contempt, but where that leaves us in terms of innovative modes in the arena of fiction is unclear. The recent popularity of the historical novel (Sarah Waters, *Fingersmith* [2002]; Julian Barnes, *Arthur and George* [2005]; Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall* [2009]; David Mitchell, *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* [2010]), may indicate a turn away from formal and intellectual experimentalism and towards the safer waters of mainstream historicism, but might also be seen as an abrogation of the responsibility of the novelist “to go on to the streets and figure out social reality”.³ Ironically, novelists, like Byatt herself, schooled in the Byzantine looping and deferrals of poststructuralist cultural theory, find themselves somewhat beached by the inescapability of their own literary logic, producing a form of what Jim Collins has called “Lit-Lit” for a class of educated reader smitten by the cultural capital of the worthy contemporary novel with its eyes firmly on the – Booker - prize.⁴

² Shields, 5.

³ Woods.

⁴ Collins.

Will Self is a writer and media personality who both embraces and castigates the paradoxes of contemporary culture, and in his novel *Dorian: An Imitation* (2002) he articulates the current crisis of confidence in representation by tackling exactly the longing for the authentic amongst the artificial that Shields identifies. By translocating Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to the late twentieth century, Self reopens a debate about the intermingling of art and life that attains new dimensions of complexity in the society of the spectacle. Self has often been regarded with a certain degree of scepticism by critics for just the kind of wry, critical knowingness that Byatt deprecates, but in *Dorian*, he offers not only a critique of the very cultural recirculation in which he indulges, but also an unpacking of the signifiatory field that surrounds contemporary versions of the authentic. His conclusion is that as the authentic, the real, the genuine have reclaimed ground in personal and cultural vocabularies in recent decades, so the criteria by which we understand them have shifted alarmingly out of reach. The more we desire authenticity, the less we seem to know how to attain it.

Self sets himself a formidable narratological hurdle in identifying his novel as an imitation, a challenge that would not have been so demanding had he appended "homage" or "pastiche" as a sub-title, or had merely allowed the recognisable resonance of the name "Dorian" to signal the artistry of the rewrite. To imitate an artefact involves the copying, or the production of a representation, of an original, and though this absolutely chimes with Self's understanding of the reflexive retrospectivism of millennial aesthetic practice, it confronts him not only with a number of basic structural limitations, but also with what could be described as the problem of imaginative anachronism. Assuming that *The Picture of Dorian Gray*'s story of obsessive narcissism translates comprehensively to its new context, Self is still faced with the issue of whether it is possible to translocate Wilde's

structure of feeling to an historical environment of different emphases. Imitation suggests sameness, and yet part of the problem with *Dorian: An Imitation* is that it constructs a narrative universe in which the co-ordinates of social belonging, moral responsibility and subjective identification are significantly changed. Clearly, the evolution of social attitudes towards homosexuality and drug-use are written into the novel as indicators of greater moral liberalism and inclusivity, and Self's desire to articulate that which Wilde could only gesture towards underpins the justification for rewriting so closely. However, it will be one contention of this essay that Self's faithfulness to the original text makes plain significant divergences between the subjective and social imaginaries of the two periods under review.

The argument that follows will be based on two interleaving premises: firstly that the consonances and dissonances between the Dorian Gray stories produced by Wilde and Self reveal a significant shift in the understanding of the "true nature" of the self that has occurred over the course of the twentieth century, and, secondly, that the contemporary identification of subjectivity with a personal authenticity sits problematically with the discourse of post-metaphysical philosophy that situates both self and authenticity as abstract signs. In the case of the first premise, Self's decision to imitate Wilde forces him to engage with the imperative of late-nineteenth-century social sincerity, a task tackled in such an awkward manner that it demonstrates the degree to which that notion has become alien to the contemporary idiom. Instead, Self's emphasis falls on the experience of the individual as monad, as integer and as self-fulfilling beyond the social contract. True, *Dorian* dramatizes the intricate relations between individuals, groups, classes and social sets, and does so within a narrative punctuated with the historical landmarks of the late-twentieth century, but the way in which his characters understand and express the complexity of their subjectivity within the social collective is qualitatively different from that displayed by

Wilde's cast. That different engagement with society and others will be identified in this essay with an attitude toward individualism that has dominated Westernized cultures in the second half of the twentieth century, and is summed up by Charles Taylor as the "ethic of authenticity" broadly defined as "the individualism of disengaged rationality, pioneered by Descartes, where the demand is that each person think self-responsibly for him- or herself".⁵

The shift in emphasis between Wilde's concern about social sincerity and Self's understanding of personal authenticity is equally the shift towards a highly technologized, globalized, economically mobile, model of social organisation that de-emphasizes the value of ethical responsibility for others in favour of individualistic self-enabling. Yet, just as sincerity exerts an overbearing moral demand that Wilde detests, so the credo of authenticity is fraught with compromises that Self's characters struggle to accommodate. For, as the second premise of this essay suggests, the ostensible relativism and inclusiveness of the ethic of authenticity is inextricably related to, and disabled by, the ideology of late-capitalism with all its bewilderingly inchoate desires. The order to "be yourself" is not unproblematic where that self might be variously torn between conflicting politics and modes of identity, or where the very notion of subjectivity has been deconstructed. What might authenticity mean in the age of the decentered subject, and how can one excavate something as formless as a stable self from within the kind of semiotic proliferation that has been ushered in by the era of digital communication and mass media? The answers that *Dorian* proffers reveal its distance in spirit from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but also emphasize the difficulties of "finding" oneself within the profusion of self-possibilities that characterize late-capitalist societies. Like the serpent eating its own tail, contemporary

⁵ Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, 25.

authenticity depends upon the ingestion of the conceit of authenticity, a circularity that is performed most spectacularly in the novel by Diana, Princess of Wales. This essay will devote considerable attention to the meta-metaphoricity of Diana, by which I mean the self-conscious inscription by Self of Diana's own self-conscious inscription as "Queen of Hearts", wronged wife and self-determining single mother. As an individual and sign, she functions in the novel as a mirror for changes in the social fabric of Britain in the last decades of the century, and as a catalyst for shifts in the relationship between the private and public spheres. And yet her own narrative of self-discovery, so spectacularly played out in, and through the media, encapsulates the problem of *authentikós* – literally the positing of oneself as a thesis⁶ – for the "post-deconstructive subject".⁷ Diana's life and death may have inspired calls for greater "emotional authenticity" in millennial public life,⁸ but for Self, she was, and remains, a contested site of authentic self-expression.

Authenticity, as it has been conceptualized in the West's Existentialist philosophical tradition, relates to the experience of selfhood as a conscious and ongoing enacting of the bridge between interior and exterior constitution. It is predominantly a post-Enlightenment phenomenon, consonant with the emergence of modern individualism, and reflects what Charles Guignon describes as "the attempt to recover a sense of oneness and wholeness that appears to have been lost with the rise of modernity".⁹ For Jacob Golomb, it "signifies something beyond the domain of objective language" and "defines itself as lacking any definition. It is a pathos of incessant change, as opposed to a passive subordination to one

⁶ In *Reflective Authenticity: Rethinking the Project of Modernity*, Alessandro Ferrara explains: "In Greek *'authentikós'* derives from *'eautón'* and *'theto'* where *'theto'* is etymologically related to *'thesis'*". Thus *'authentic'* refers to individuals who *'posit themselves'* or, more freely, *'set themselves as a thesis'*" (Ferrara, 15).

⁷ Critchley, 51.

⁸ Braidotti.

⁹ Guignon, 51.

particular ethic”.¹⁰ In *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Lionel Trilling proposes an interpretation of authenticity as “the downward movement through all the cultural superstructures to some place where all movement ends, and begins”.¹¹ He additionally claims that authenticity requires a “strenuous moral experience ... [an] exigent conception of the self and of what being true to it consists in, and a less acceptant and genial view of the social circumstances of life”.¹² Authenticity may presuppose an ethical exigency, but in the form that it has been construed since at least the late-nineteenth century, it does not demand – though may include – a specifically moral character. Sincerity, by contrast, is much more stridently associated with the good that stems from matching one’s words to one’s convictions. It is the “congruence between one’s inclination and the prevailing ethos, or a congruence between one’s behaviour and one’s innermost essence”,¹³ is “a moral and not an aesthetic virtue”,¹⁴ and is paradoxical as it “cannot thrive in one’s inner self, but must at least on occasion be outwardly recognizable. To be sincere is not just to tell the truth about oneself willy-nilly, but to *present oneself* sincerely”.¹⁵ By the late-nineteenth century, sincerity had, according to Patricia Ball, added to this external face a quality of moral rigour that recast sincere expression as “divine manifestation, the voice of nature, and as such it is a “measure of worth” and of human stature”:

[the] ... equating of good poetic speech with moral practice in the “common talk of daily life” is a typical illustration of one reason why sincerity came to attain its high place in

¹⁰ Golomb, 7, 11.

¹¹ Trilling, 12.

¹² Trilling, 11.

¹³ Golomb, 11.

¹⁴ Read, 58.

¹⁵ Carman, 229.

Victorian literary estimation: it brought poetry within the safe orbit of the ethic of respectability.¹⁶

Though the restrictiveness of late-Victorian sincerity is undoubtedly a primary target in Wilde's writing, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, what we see emerging is a dialectical opposition between sincerity and a form of authenticity. Declan Kiberd believes that Wilde "saw that in being true to a single self, a sincere man may be false to half a dozen other selves...If all art must contain the essential criticism of its prevailing codes, for Wilde an authentic life must recognize all that is opposed to it".¹⁷ At the centre of the novel is the question of how to express the nature of self as it "really" is. This is evident in Basil Hallward's dedication to artistic naturalism, in Dorian's identification with the portrait and subsequent hedonistic self-obliteration, and in Lord Henry's up-taking of Wilde's judgement that "we are never more true to ourselves than when we are inconsistent".¹⁸ That being true to this inner nature is always potentially in conflict with the social or ideological paradigms of the historical moment, is at the satirical heart of the novel, as Wilde asks how one can be what one is within society if one's mode of being is distinct from that of the hegemonic moral norm. Conformity to an ideal of public conduct in the name of civilization smacks of Nietzsche's Dionysian self's containment by order and reason, and what, for Wilde, is lost is a primitive vitalism that is not just the well-spring of human spirit, but also the site of creativity. In "The Critic as Artist" he writes: "The true critic will ... seek for beauty in every age and in every school, and will never suffer himself to be limited to any settled custom of thought, or stereotyped mode of looking at things. ... Through constant change,

¹⁶ Ball, 4.

¹⁷ Kiberd.

¹⁸ Wilde, "The Critic as Artist", 50.

and through constant change alone, he will find his true unity".¹⁹ Renouncing the singular in favour of the multiple, the conformist in favour of the resistant, and the orderly in favour of the chaotic, Wilde celebrates the potential of misrule, convinced that those - such as Basil Hallward - who cling to the notion of an integrated public/private identity are doomed by their own idealism. He lambasts conspicuous moral rectitude through Lord Henry who understands that, in an age of appearances, one can be true to oneself only by being deeply insincere. Wotton repeatedly argues against a sincere worldview, provocatively claiming that the less sincere an expressed opinion, the more it is likely to be based in truth because it is not coloured by social convention, personal taste or moral persuasion. Liberating the ego from the exigencies of consistency, and revelling in the way that ostentatiously transgressive behaviour appals social decorum, Wotton preaches a credo of self-discovery through self-annihilation. Only by acknowledging sincerity as an arbitrary pose, can it be of any value, thus his brand of self-conscious moral ambiguity and trans-valuation combine to repudiate seriousness and to celebrate paradox. Wotton's insincerity is thus a playful force that liberates a nascent "self-fullness" in a way that strikes a distinctly contemporary chord. Yet for all its focus on proliferation and the decentring of the subject, Wilde's novel elicits a faith in the notion of the core selfhood as a trans-temporal underpinning for the individual, which supports the idea of the emerging significance of authenticity as a mode of situating the subject beyond a moral framework.

Though the terms "authenticity" or "authentic" never appear in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, much of its concern with self-representation is tied to a conception of fixed and determined interiority that is familiar to a contemporary understanding of authenticity

¹⁹ Ibid., 53.

as it applies to the individual.²⁰ There is a foundational belief in an innerness that transcends the immediate moment and coheres mind with body, past with present and experience with sensation. Moreover it is an inhering essence that reveals itself to the gaze of the world.

Henry describes Dorian as “unconscious of what you really are, of what you really might be”, an indication both of the givenness of authentic being and its provisionality – as soon as he declares what Dorian “is” he moderates it to what he “might be”.²¹ The emphasis here is on being *and* becoming with the repetition of “really” cementing a vision of Dorian as fixed in reality but capable of a higher, more authentic state. Despite the seductive intent of Henry’s flattery, his words assume a deeply-embedded sense of selfhood, one whose authenticity is hidden from view for the subject but perceptible to the observer. Dorian is human clay to be moulded into a perfect objective beauty, which, as a consequence, will reveal the truth of his soul. However as soon as he is represented, he loses touch of, and control over the meaning of himself. Dorian is abstracted from the real of his own subjectivity by Basil’s portrait and Wotton’s Pygmalion-esque objectification, and as such, he has no hope of attaining his own sense of stable selfhood. He cannot become conscious of his authentic self - “who he really is” - unless he gives in to Henry’s vision of “what he really might be”.

It is only when Dorian regards the picture with Henry’s words ringing in his ears that he recognizes himself, or rather, recognizes the abstracted self that he has come to associate with himself: “A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognised himself for the first time”.²² He can only come to a consciousness of himself, in other words, through a

²⁰ The shaping of a latent authenticity is further elucidated in Wilde’s essays. In “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” Wilde argues that great artists and thinkers are “real men” (Wilde, “The Soul of man Under Socialism”, 391) because they recognise that self-realisation is the means of perfecting the individual’s consciousness. Similarly, in “The Critic as Artist”, “not doing but being, and not being merely, but becoming” (Wilde, “The Critic as Artist”, 45) is the ultimate goal of life. Such an emergence of self is achievable only through the contemplative life, for “self-culture is the true ideal of man” (Ibid., 47).

²¹ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, 25.

²² Ibid., 27.

transmutation into an aesthetic object; what he sees and recognizes in himself is the illusion of authenticity presented externally. Briefly, and apparently for the first time, Dorian is able to harmonize his interior and exterior dimensions, but, given Henry's interference, the insight that he attains will remain compromised - and inauthentic - unless he can claim self-determination through his actions. These actions become, of course, increasingly incongruent with whom he "really" is as he indulges in the pursuit of sensation and experience for their own sakes. His enthusiastic leap into decadent experientialism results in his adoption of "certain modes of thought that he knew to be really alien to his nature", and it is made clear that his avowal of Henry's philosophy stems less from a concerted effort of self-revelation than from the subtle reframing of morality effected by Wotton.²³ The rejection of sincere speech and the understanding of interior and exterior dimensions of self as morally independent is intended to facilitate Henry's individualistic project of realising "one's nature perfectly – that is what each of us is here for", but the higher morality invoked by this self-transformation requires the kind of capricious insincerity of which Dorian is only temporarily capable.²⁴ Dorian desires the permanent coalescence of outer beauty and inner harmony, but is led to believe that only by turning away from any notion of their unity can he overcome deleterious conformity, and paradoxically, thereby achieve the authenticity that he craves. Renouncing the value of the fixed, the moral, and the acceptable is Henry's way of asserting the irreducibility of the monad, but Dorian's firm conviction in "what he really is" is incompatible with the protean subjectivity required by Wotton's hedonism. Wilde rejects sincerity through deliberate perversity, paradox and inversion because it smacks of intellectual conformism, but he simultaneously constructs a version of self that is

²³ Ibid., 127.

²⁴ Ibid., 20.

striving towards an authentic expression, even though that can only be articulated through self-parody.

The Picture of Dorian Gray evidences a shift towards the “darker imperative of authenticity” which becomes increasingly dominant across the twentieth century, to the point that, when Self recuperates Wilde’s novel, the problem of articulating an authentic experience of self eclipses the idea of sincerity as a means of situating the individual.²⁵ The late-twentieth-century way to understand the self is not through co-ordination with a moral, socially acquiescent sincerity, or even a perverse self-unmasking through insincerity, but through an efficient ordering of the self as monad. Contemporary Western imperatives – whether political, economic, technological, ideological or philosophical – locate individualism as a core ethical value, a form of centripetal reflexivity that Taylor describes as “expressivism”.²⁶ This kind of re-orientation of moral agency away from a responsibility to the social body or a metaphysical authority, and towards the self and its immediate attendants, de-emphasizes sincerity, for a consonance between what one feels privately and says publically is increasingly subordinated to the internal consistency of the self as individual. To express what one genuinely feels may still be a positive indicator of one’s social being,²⁷ but the greater moral value is attached to the contiguity between those feelings and the understanding of the self as a rounded, fully psychologized, self-determining mind/body integer. *Dorian* consequently inverts the sincerity/authenticity model offered by Wilde to suggest that the importance of authenticity in late-capitalism overshadows, without completely effacing, the idea of social sincerity. Rather sincerity has

²⁵ Kiberd.

²⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 475.

²⁷ Sartre would contest even this. In *Being and Nothingness* he contends that: “the essential structure of sincerity does not differ from that of bad faith since the sincere man constitutes himself as what he is *in order not to be it*. ... Total, constant sincerity as a constant effort to adhere to oneself is by nature a constant effort to dissociate oneself from oneself.” (Sartre, 88).

been transformed into a form of sentimentality where saying what one feels is simply a matter of self-performance, absent of any moral dimension. This finds its apotheosis in *Dorian* in Tony Blair's glitzy media-presentation of New Labour, and in the tears that are shed so freely at the funeral of Princess Diana. These displays are, for Self, founded on bad faith as they do not bridge inner feelings and outer expressions, but rather function as clichés of empathic integrity. Whether or not the individuals producing these signs wholeheartedly buy into the genuine nature of their expressions is irrelevant because their very understanding of the (in)sincere is contained within a dominant episteme of authenticity that over-writes its predecessor.

What we witness then in Self's recuperation of Wilde is, I would argue, less the contiguity between the late-nineteenth and late-twentieth centuries, and more their marked differences in public and private imaginaries. As much as Self seeks to convince his reader of the parallels between socio-political decadence, moral relativism and aesthetic morbidity, *Dorian's* problems with imitation suggest his difficulty in marrying Wilde's world-view with that of the millennium. The not insignificant changes that Self chooses to make to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* – notably the refocusing of much of the narrative from the perspective of Wotton, the trans-gendering of Sibyl Vane into Herman, and the addition of an epilogue that frames the main narrative within the view of Dorian – highlight the emphasis-shift towards a novel that Wilde could not have written, but they also introduce concerns with representation and politics that feel peculiarly detached from the original. This opening-out of Wilde's text to novel readings is not, in itself, problematic, but it does trouble the status of the text as an "imitation", even the kind of imitation that might be inferred from its self-ironising intentionality. Indeed, one area in which Self is faithful to Wilde – the condemnation of contemporary artistic form by employing the conventions of

that form - examples the texts' disparity rather than their confluence. Where Wilde deploys the decadent novel as a Trojan horse for his critics, encouraging their detraction in order to reveal the embedded conservatism of their taste, Self attempts a similar sleight-of-hand by utilising tropes of the postmodern novel – pastiche, self-reflexivity, ironic framing, critical self-awareness, ideological scepticism – to critique the aesthetic exhaustion of postmodernism. The problem arises from the fact that postmodernism has always been conscious of its own contingency and entropic tendency – it is always already the literature of exhaustion. Thus, Self's attempt to claim a decadent inheritance is overshadowed by the decadence that attaches itself to the idea of postmodernity. Where Wilde's self-parody works as a perverse statement of intent, a correction to the hidebound institutionalism of his critics, Self's functions as a deliberately wry instantiation of the form which he mocks. The question is whether it is enough merely to draw attention to the circularity of the cultural process, particularly if that process is intimately tied up with the knowledge of its own circularity. The flaw in Self's fidelity to Wilde's deconstructive agenda does not invalidate it as a novelistic experiment, but it does suggest that we cannot read *Dorian* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* using the same hermeneutic parameters – the texts are not doing the same thing.

Where Wilde's text dramatizes the confusion of moral and aesthetic value through the intellectual badinage of privileged bohemians, Self's commentary takes a more broad-based swipe at the social ills of Britain and of the "stinky, inky heart of tentacular London".²⁸ The metropolis of the 1980s and 1990s is a site of dysfunction in the public and private spheres, the distance between the squalid and the ostentatious as minimal in geographical

²⁸ Self, *Dorian*, 178.

proximity as it is marked in financial terms. When Baz visits the AIDS-stricken Henry in hospital the contiguity is painfully apparent:

Everywhere he went was spick and span and therapeutically colour-coded. The interior designers had been summoned when the Royal Fag Hag began to take an interest in the gay plague and came to open the Broderip. Yet just inches away from where Baz strode were ventilation ducts choking on infective fluff and stagnant puddles of mop wipe, each with its own malarial vector.²⁹

In Self's London poverty, destitution, corruption, and hopelessness are merely a head-turn away from the glamour, confidence and prosperity of moneyed respectability. Infective vectors unite both worlds, disregarding the *cordons sanitaire* that social privilege and plutocratic muscle seek to establish, drawing all into a form of collective vulnerability. This insalubrious inter-reliance is most frankly metaphorized by the "conga-line of buggery" that introduces the HIV virus into Dorian's social set through the infected body of the rent-boy Herman. Unsurprisingly a phrase picked up by many of the novel's reviewers as a nod to the sexual explicitness of *Dorian*, the metaphor operates principally as a compression of high and low living that underpins Self's social interdependence and the mutually destructive decadence that refers back to Wilde. For, just as Wilde and the Decadent movement sought the collapse of civilization in order that a more vital, ascetic spirit might rise from the ashes, so Self details and deprecates a catalogue of ailments that characterizes millennial Britain. Rampant social inequality leading to violent unrest; Thatcherism's political marginalization of the welfare state; aesthetic exhaustion and introspection compounded by the

²⁹ Ibid., 75.

commercial sell-out of the avant-garde, philosophical introspection, a mindless celebrity culture fed by the insatiability of supply-driven capitalism – all are targets for Self's satire of contemporary entropy.

At the dark heart of this manifest decadence are the self-interested politics of neo-liberal capitalism. *Dorian* abounds with the ideological imperatives of Reganite/Thatcherite free-market individualism that shifts the responsibility for economic and social betterment away from the State and onto the citizen, whilst enabling, through deregulation, the thriving of a competitive corporate sector. Benefitting the few and favoured, this politics threatens to disenfranchise the many by rendering them infantile post-ideologues, fascinated by the buzz and bright lights of consumerist possibility, but outwith its self-enhancing structures. "How fitting", Self's narrator observes "that Ritalin should have become ... the drug of choice for pacifying those the medico-education establishment deem to have "Attention Deficit Disorder"". ³⁰ Calming the hyperactivity of those excluded from the acquisitive party allows them "to become healthily fixated by the minutiae of our tiny society, with its toy cars and play buildings", without feeling the need to question the inclusiveness of the policies that have brought it into being. ³¹ The hindmost in this free-for-all are taken by the devil of charitable patronage, a double-edged welfare lottery that blends grudging philanthropy with social climbing. At a function for his mother's charity, Dorian observes the tokenistic nature of this new *richesse oblige*:

... she led Dorian into the throng of superannuated debs, professional faggots and off-the-peg suits – a flat company leavened only by a handful of the requisite donkey-jacketed roll-

³⁰ Ibid., 46.

³¹ Ibid., 47.

up smokers (just as a charity event for multiple sclerosis sufferers would have its wheel-chair users, or for sickle-cell anaemia its blacks).³²

The crude identity politics of Self's description here are indicative of the broad-brush functionalism of a society that understands its citizens as economic units – as wealth-makers or drains on the public resource. More importantly, it reminds us that the characters in this novel operate as scripted phenomena, representative parts of a tableau that is contained within the imitative frame of another novel. The overt correspondences between the texts in terms of naming or the tripartite structure constantly bring back to us the knowledge that these characters are being over-written, moulded in the same way that Dorian is shaped by Wotton. It installs a diegesis that is based, on the one hand, on performativity and, on the other, on the Wildean dialectic between art and life. Consider, for instance, the cornucopia of competing signs that revolves around the "picture" of Dorian: Baz Hallward's *Cathode Narcissus*. This piece of conceptual art, consisting of nine video screens displaying progressively intimate images of the naked Dorian, becomes a conduit not only for the story of Dorian's moral degradation and infective decadence, but also for the historical events that punctuate the narrative. On the installation, Dorian and Baz watch the Brixton Riots of April 1981, sipping vodka martinis between vigorous sex sessions, as cocktails of a different variety are dispatched at the police: "On screen, on carpet, in Brixton, in Battersea, on videotape, in reality, men thrashed and bashed about in the violence of abandonment".³³ The erotics of possession and dispossession brought together by the medium of the TV monitor, work to elevate the stuff of life to the status of art - destruction is figured here as a decadent performance – but also to reduce art to the

³² Ibid., 30.

³³ Ibid., 53.

everyday through the use of the TV set for its primary, broadcasting, rather than artistic, function. A similar collision of the banal and the sublime occurs when, at Baz's *vernissage*, Prince Charles and Princess Diana's wedding dominates the nine screens. The "expensive charades"³⁴ involved in the reinvigoration of the British monarchy sits uncomfortably with the stance of bohemian indifference adopted by this In-set, but the important point is that Baz's installation can incorporate and express a variety of signifiatory functions. *Cathode Narcissus* is simultaneously bleeding-edge conceptual art, a means for mass entertainment, a conduit for tradition, and for anti-establishment sentiment, and the vehicle for emphasising the semiotic contingency of a world increasingly trapped within the nexus of mediated simulacra. As the ever pseudo-intellectual Henry remarks: "Everyone who isn't a pseudo-intellectual loves television – it's so much *realer* than reality".³⁵

Cathode Narcissus's principal function in this blurring of life and art is to detail the objectification of the individual in the age of the image, confusing the relationship not just between appearance and reality, but also between the multiple ontological shades of that appearance/reality dichotomy. Where Basil Hallward's portrait of Dorian objectifies him with the aesthetic purpose of revealing the wholeness and temporal inviolability that lies beneath the surface, Baz Hallward's installation piece fractures Dorian across nine screens, dismantling his integrity with an increasingly dehumanising intrusiveness:

The sensation imparted as all nine monitors came to life was of the most intense, carnivorous, predatory voyeurism. The youth was like a fleshly bonbon, or titillating titbit,

³⁴ Ibid., 64.

³⁵ Ibid., 66.

wholly unaware of the ravening mouth of the camera. The ninth monitor displayed only his mobile pink mouth.³⁶

This scopophilic deconstruction iterates a quality of the modern subject as fragmented, disintegrated and vulnerable to the deindividuating gaze. The self is presented as a pattern of contiguous, exteriorized parts that interrelate but lack any kind of internal integrity. In contrast to Basil Hallward's painting which captures Dorian's interiority as a palpable quality, *Cathode Narcissus* suggests only the impalpability of its subject, its failure to transcend its medium to attain an authenticating coalescence. For Self, this is the fate of identity in a culture of proliferation. The West's commitment to efficient, increasingly technologized production in many areas of human endeavour during the twentieth century has led to a cultural expectation of over-productivity in the consuming mind, and of massification in the cultural diffusion of information and entertainment. Television, one amongst an increasing plethora of media, enables a democratic engagement with the surrounding world, but presents such an abundance of choice that it generates what Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin have described as "the aesthetic of the glance" - the conviction that so many competing media interests can only lead to momentary attentiveness, and a consequently fragmentary understanding of the world.³⁷ In the domain of subjectivity, this excessiveness marks an epistemic shift, for the self can no longer be synonymous with its limitation in terms of bodily form, gender expectation, or social mobility, but is marked rather by its potentialities for change, expansion, difference, and multiplicity. As we see with *Cathode Narcissus*, the idea of identity becomes synonymous with a body in parts, each subject to the glance, but failing to cohere into a solid whole.

³⁶ Ibid., 12.

³⁷ Bolter and Grusin, 54.

The problem, as far as Self is concerned, lies in the fact that the contemporary society of the spectacle is incapable of bifurcating the real and the simulacral; instead the two are inextricably co-dependent, their credibility and signification mutually determining. The “art” of Dorian’s portrait in Wilde is straightforwardly discernible from the “life” of the physical presence of Dorian, but in Self, the distinction is not so comfortably a matter of mimetic discrimination. Instead *Dorian* questions whether it is any longer possible to distinguish between degrees of realness and degrees of simulation; the interpretative distinction is not between the binary poles of stable concepts such as reality and appearance, but between their continuously shifting signifying apparatuses. The result is the profuse semiotic interplay in operation in *Dorian’s* relationship with *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which is neither straightforwardly postmodernist counter-historical rewriting, nor post-postmodernist critique of an enervated self-referentiality, but somewhere within the interleaving layers of both. The success or failure of the novel – *qua* novel – may depend on the extent to which one regards Self to be in control of the semiotic multiplicities with which he is playing. Whether the sheer excessiveness of what he is trying to achieve can be contained within a form such as the novel is a moot point, but, to consider the experiment a failure in terms of providing an integrated, satisfying and self-consistent reading experience, might be to acknowledge the perspicacity of Self’s point: contemporary modes of representation and understanding are so inter-reliant that they have become impossible to separate. Within this carnival of signification mayhem, what is needed is a fixing point, a *point de capiton* that can accommodate and stabilize the slipperiness of the signifier across a multitude of ontological possibilities.³⁸ This is where what we might think of as the mediating function of authenticity can be helpful, for though it seems helplessly

³⁸ For a discussion of the *point de capiton* as the fixing agent in a signification code see Žižek, *Sublime Object*, 87.

anachronistic to conceive an absolute and embodied base amongst this chaos, it is clear that the idea of the authentic retains a powerful appeal as a horizon of selfhood, and can pin the recalcitrant signifier within a frame of meaning. In *Dorian*, the possibilities and limitations of this version of the authentic are dramatized in the intertwining narratives of Dorian and Princess Diana.

From early in the novel the two are connected, and though she does not have a directly comparable model in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Diana increasingly comes to resemble the ill-fated actress Sybil Vane, a role which is also played in the early parts of the novel by Herman. The primary narrative and its framing epilogue are bookended by Diana's rise to public attention in 1981 and her untimely death in 1997, a span which is cruelly metaphorized in Henry's contemplation of history as being "savagely concertinaed, like a speeding limousine that's hit a concrete pillar".³⁹ In many ways she becomes the most dominant presence and potent metaphor for contemporary concerns with celebrity, individuation and self-determination. Casual references to her abound: Dorian lives in a flat in Prince of Wales Mansions in Battersea; one of his housemates in New York is an African-American transvestite named "Lady Di"; Henry earnestly seeks to avoid her sympathetic ministrations on the Broderip Ward, and, as we have seen, significant episodes of her life such as her wedding and the 1995 *Panorama* interview, in which she "came out" against the Royal Establishment, are played out on *Cathode Narcissus*. The paths of Diana and Dorian cross at various points and it is clear that we are intended to regard their narratives in parallel, and the constructedness of their personae as comparable. Both are forced to engage with external versions of themselves over which they have no control, both understand their stories through parameters set for them by others and both exemplify the

³⁹ Self, *Dorian*, 64.

problems of being true to oneself in an age where, regardless of the focus on self-determination, dividualism, rather than individualism, is a primary constituent of subjectivity.

Self's opinion of Princess Diana is forthrightly presented in an essay he wrote shortly after her death in September 1997: "If Diana stood for anything it was a miserable Oprah Winfreyisation of public culture, in which egregious tit-beating came to be synonymous with honour and probity".⁴⁰ This summation matches in cynicism of spirit that presented by Wotton who criticizes Dorian's association with the Princess:

He's developed a particular affinity with Thicker Spencer, because like her he's a psychological parvenu. After all, both of them have bona fides aplenty to be themselves in the beau monde, yet they prefer to act. They find acting so much more *real* than reality. ... he understands how her particular act – her grazed heart crying out for a Band-aid, while she shops 'til every last equerry drops – constitutes the very *Zeitgeist* itself. Remember, Dorian can be whatever you want him to be - a punk or a parvenu, a dodgy geezer or a doting courtier, a witty fop or a City yuppie.⁴¹

Both critiques damn Diana for her perceived diva-esque manipulation of popular sentiment, and for epitomising a culture in which private matters are enacted on a public stage, but as Self acknowledges in his essay, the Diana sign far outstrips the incidentals of her conduct: "In truth, she's now more alive than she ever was when breathing; the magnificent elision of techno-death and world celebrity has imprisoned her reality, encapsulated it forever".⁴² Like

⁴⁰ Self, *Feeding Frenzy*, 269.

⁴¹ Self, *Dorian*, 108.

⁴² Self, *Feeding Frenzy*, 270.

Dorian, Diana is the product of a concerted process of imagistic fashioning – she is the sum of the innumerable acts of representation that maintain her in the public imaginary. Like few before her, Diana lived to feed the fantasy of “Diana” in the context of the hypermediated circulation of contemporary culture. Critics - and in the wake of her death, particularly feminist critics - have fallen over themselves to identify her with the politics of a postmodern technological sublime, emphasising how she was disempowered by her simulacral status, torn between the public desire for a figure of sympathetic authority and the rigidity of a paternalistic monarchical traditionalism. For them, Diana was the apotheosis of the contemporary specular sensibility, a fetish for the culture of image consumption and continuous change.⁴³ In an age where the simplification and disambiguation of the celebrity’s social meaning is necessary for their continued prominence, Diana problematized that dynamic by being fragmented across a range of private fantasies and public wish-fulfilments. Elizabeth Wilson identifies her multiplicity of roles:

To begin with she was simply the ingénue, the fairy princess, but she rapidly became mother, crazy, neurotic, wife betrayed, self-obsessed narcissist, glamour star, woman-struggling-for-independence, survivor and latterly, saint, strong woman, and even political interventionist.⁴⁴

Donna Cox believes that “The metatext called “Diana” is a text we write and which then loops back in a rhetorical feedback situation to masquerade as originary to itself. “Her true story” is then no thing but a tissue of telling” [*sic*],⁴⁵ while Rosi Braidotti describes her as

⁴³ See for instance: Attwood; Paglia; Elaine Showalter, *Inventing Herself*.

⁴⁴ Wilson, 117.

⁴⁵ Cox, 325.

“the mediation ... for the expression of desires, aspirations and emotions which exceed the boundaries of what is allowed in politics”.⁴⁶

The alacrity with which feminist critics appropriated her as a model of contemporary female self-statement moving through victimhood to tragedy, indicates the metaphorical pliability of the Diana sign.⁴⁷ She always stands for something rather than simply standing, and her co-option by political interests – as much as her fictional one by Self – reveals her as a locus of illusory public projections rather than as a self-determining, authentic embodiment. In this I would disagree with Jude Davies who believes that Diana went through a process of “finding herself” in the gradual shedding of unwanted symbolic associations, that effectively she only became “the real Diana” once the boundary between person and persona was hopelessly confused.⁴⁸ Instead, the excessiveness of the Diana sign, its multiple political, ideological, racial, cultural and sexual manifestations mean that it is impossible to pinpoint her firmly within a symbolic order - whether or not that be, as feminist critics contend, a patriarchal order. It is too fluid and inchoate. Rather, her sign seems to function as a nexus for interconnected, but distinct, socially symbolic vectors which she both embodies and to which she gives meaning. But it is not as simple as that, for Diana, as semiotic function, is simultaneously present and absent, a paradoxical sign that is both filled with imaginary associations and yet empty of transcendent meaning. For instance, she seems to be a regenerative force in a moment of constitutional exhaustion and political corruption, she seems equally to be a fixing point in a moment of post-imperial social decay, and she seems to be at the empathetic focus for concerns about the dismantling of the caring welfare state under neo-liberal economics. At the same time, she

⁴⁶ Braidotti.

⁴⁷ See in particular: Braidotti; Hey; Showalter, “Storming the Wintry Palace”.

⁴⁸ Davies, 23.

seems to represent the potential for an inclusive Britishness for the socially ex-centric - people of colour, homosexuals, victims everywhere) and she seems to represent a fixing point for the gender debates of late century which seek to revivify feminist and leftist anti-Establishment practices. However, for all the symbolic fecundity of her sign, she eludes all specification because she exceeds all those areas; she cannot be determined in terms of any specific cause because she is so symbolically polymorphous. The hyperreal construction of Diana crosses the frames of all these areas in the same way that Henry Wotton crosses the frames of the novel, leaking into other frames of reference. José Yebra provides a useful reading of this permeability through the lens of the neo-baroque which “uses the irregular, the distorted and the excessive so as to involve the reader aesthetically, emotionally and even physically” in the complex interlayering of realities in the text.⁴⁹

With the sepulchral voice of Wotton echoing through Dorian’s Epilogue, *Self* confounds the anticipated distinction between primary text and frame and dissolves the boundary that separates their hermeneutic domains. Effectively Wotton cannot be contained by his text and spills across its border in an excess of malevolent cynicism. The same is true, though in a different mood, of Diana, whose metaphorical surplus is too large to be contained by one individual. In fact, in writing this essay, it has been difficult to restrict my discussion to the relevance of Diana to *Self*’s text without addressing the extraneous matter of her life and death as I perceived it as her contemporary. This could well be a fault of my critical position, but it could equally be symptomatic of the suggestive links between art and life that have been adumbrated in this essay, and to which none of us are immune in an age of mass mediation. This is because Diana is not a self-construction – or a “self-made individual” as

⁴⁹ Yebra, 20.

Davies calls her⁵⁰ - but a collective wish-fulfilment, a sliding signifier. In an age of the simulacrum this ontological multiplicity is unsurprising and it is undoubtedly one that Diana learned to utilize, but it takes on a different valence with her desire – post-divorce and post-*Panorama* - to move away from her many faces and speak with only one. Once she does this, she moves into a signifying terrain that is determinedly redemptive. Her search for a point of self-fixity, of authentic self-determination entails her within a new narrative arc of tragedy whose denouement draws comparisons with that of Wilde's Sibyl Vane.

In relation to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Rachel Bowlby has argued that once an individual enters the order of representation it is futile to think of her/him as having a fixed or stable identity. Instead the aestheticized object becomes something more or less than its original, "open to any and every kind of verbal or visual portrayal without there being any original nature which the picture might be said to misrepresent."⁵¹ The objectification involved in the process of representation disrupts the relationship between the performed and any prior authenticity as in the case of Sybil Vane whose beauty derives -at least for Dorian) solely from her ability to be other than she is. Sibyl's ability to transform herself on stage, to produce herself as another, results in what she might consider her own authentic self being consumed by the process of representing a coherent interiority. Sibyl's appeal for Dorian is exactly this "illusion of a concealed identity", but she finds an authenticity behind the sham, believing that her feelings for Dorian reveal the hollowness of her stage performances and the inflated emotions that she enacts.⁵² Her error is to frame that authenticity within another fiction which casts Dorian in the role of Prince Charming. Unlike the other main characters who are beguiled by their own cleverness, Sibyl's ingenuousness

⁵⁰ Ibid., 20.

⁵¹ Bowlby, 179.

⁵² Ibid., 180.

blinds her to the intermingling of art and life, and between posture and sincerity, and it is ultimately the shattering of that illusion that leads to her suicide – she dies because she comes to believe that “she has found a fixed identity beyond her various theatrical parts.”⁵³

The parallels with Diana are clear, even down to the illusory desirability of her Prince Charming. Like Sibyl, the Diana sign is a product of the roles that she performs and once she enters the representational frame, she is transformed into an aesthetic product without the ability to direct the reading of herself as an individual. Within the public sphere, her authentic selfhood is relevant only as a fiction that intersects with the desires of those that create and consume her, and she is trapped within the same dialectic of life/art that disempowers Sibyl. Her marriage is understood as a fairy-tale and her divorce, alienation from the Royal Family and violent death, are discursive inevitabilities for the tragic heroine. For her public she is the epitome of the authentic in her role as the fairy-tale, virgin princess, the superstar celebrity, the adoring mother and latterly the independent woman seeking validation for her own self. In the early stages of public notoriety her authenticity emerges from a complicated dialectical relationship with the monarchy in which she is granted status and tradition from her family background and her marriage into the Establishment. In *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, Slavoj Žižek argues that the Royal Family represents a form of non-alienated fullness that commands a charisma that is lacking in the rest of us because of our subjection to the social contract.⁵⁴ As part of the Family, Diana is endowed with a form of vicarious authenticity, and yet at the same time, her resistance to the practices of the monarchy, and her ex-centric position within it, grant her the position of outsider and rebel, and from this rebellion emerges the sense that she is

⁵³ Ibid., 191.

⁵⁴ Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do*, xxxvi; This charisma corresponds well to the aura which obtains to the authentic object in Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" and inheres in the object's "unique existence at the place where it happens to be." Benjamin, 214.

the authentic one and the Royal Family are identified as emotionally sterile and inauthentic. In her post-divorce role, she articulates a similar complicated dual symbolism wherein she is authentic in the sense that she is “like us”, a woman seeking to make her way in the world, and yet, she is fundamentally inauthentic because her lifestyle is nothing like “ours”. So the movement towards an authentic form of self-expression on the one hand is matched by a deauthenticating movement on the other. Her “authenticity” – as it constructed narratively from the outside - is closely tied to a profoundly inauthentic positioning within the social imaginary. Thus Diana is at once a symbol of authenticity and inauthenticity and is unable to escape its paradox because both are created and sustained by the media and by the image. Diana then cannot be isolated as either authentic or inauthentic, she is a constant fusion of the two, but in that combination she articulates the difficulty of being - and seen to be being - in the age of the simulacrum.

Diana’s death brought our current complicated relationship with authenticity viscerally into the public sphere, and creates no less of a traumatic rupture in *Dorian*. The primary narrative concludes with Dorian’s suicide and Henry’s death from AIDS, but is succeeded by the Epilogue in which it is revealed that the story has been fabricated by Henry as an act of revenge against his protégé. Outside Henry’s frame, Dorian is a successful entrepreneur in the arts and new media industry, a philanthropist and a member of the “Cool Britannia” glitterati – in short, a Blairite parvenu. His social conscience chimes with a shift in the mood of the narrative towards optimism and national rebirth:

There was a definite vibe about Britain in the air. It seemed that at long last the world spirit of stylishness – so long absent from London – had decided to return. ... Street fashion synergized with pop music, pop music energized politics, politics draped about its suited

shoulders the humanitarian mantle of the Princess, and the cartoon antics of conceptual artists galvanized everybody. So what if the whole giddy rondo had an air of the *fin de siècle* about it? Because it *was* the end of the twentieth century, and after a hundred years of willed decline, there was a feeling abroad in the land that things could only get better.⁵⁵

Deliberately echoing the rhetoric of New Labour politics in the lead-up to the 1997 general election - such as in the appropriation of D:Ream's 1994 pop anthem *Things Can Only Get Better* - this passage appears to be written within the ingenuous style of the moment which emphasized the liberation of a reborn national sensibility. If Wotton's narrative represents the decadence of a washed up aestheticism and political cynicism, then that which is focalised through Dorian represents the openness of newness and authenticity.⁵⁶ And where, for Henry, Diana is the parasitic representative of an institutional stagnancy, for Dorian she is the harbinger of an ethically and socially responsible Establishment:

... she was pushing her personal crusade in the most radical of directions. In January she was in Angola clearing landmines with the Halo Trust, and making it absolutely clear that she had no intention of allowing royal protocol to get in the way of her humanitarian work, or her personal life.⁵⁷

Diana's saintly humanitarianism is comparable with the sentimentalisation of the public sphere that Self suggests is being offered by Blair and consensus politics at century's end.

⁵⁵ Self, *Dorian*, 266-7.

⁵⁶ Norman Fairclough identifies a sense of the authentic as fundamental to the political project of New Labour during this period: "...sustaining the power of the enigma depends upon a continuing sense of the authenticity of Blair, the "normal person", a continuing trust in Blair as a person". Fairclough, 118.

⁵⁷ Self, *Dorian*, 266.

Though the tone here is ostensibly guileless, it must be read within the context of historical events - the death of Diana and the unravelling of the Blair revolution⁵⁸ - and within the framework of the narrative more broadly. Just as Wotton's narrative is framed by Dorian's, so Dorian's is framed by historical events, meaning that the Epilogue should not be read with any greater sense of reliability than that which precedes it. New Labour's use of sentimental hyperbole as political rhetoric succeeded partly because of the perceived distance between the public and private domains that had been wrought by decreasing sympathy with the introspection of an exhausted Tory government, but it succeeded principally because it smacked of sincerity. The political charisma that attached itself to Blair reflected the same kinds of collective hopes and needs for something meaningful that Diana epitomized, but like her, he was also caught within a similar hyperreal distancing from anything solid.

Dorian's Epilogue is set around the events following Diana's death in August 1997, a moment of both crisis and opportunity for the new political administration, and a moment to test the profundity of the mood swing towards authenticity in public life. For all the mythological resonances that Elaine Showalter and Rosi Briadotti – among many other critics - might want to read into Diana's death, its inevitability is summed up for Self by a nominal irony: "She had to die ... because her name was Di."⁵⁹ The simplicity of this self-fulfilling prophecy points us once again to the colonisation of the Diana sign by a ravenous and voyeuristic public driven by a media cult of personality. Diana is understood not as a psychologically complex individual but as a series of messages and collectively shared

⁵⁸ The idealism that surrounded the New Labour project received a series of blows from the motor-racing entrepreneur Bernie Ecclestone donation scandal of 1997, the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan and 2003 war with Iraq, and though these are clearly not within the world-view of the narrative, they will almost certainly be within the frame of historical reference for many of the novel's readers. Self's broader point that the optimism of 1997 was quickly burnt out remains apposite.

⁵⁹ Self, *Dorian*, 274.

narratives whose trajectories and conclusions are commonly understood. Diana has to die because the narrative of the oppressed woman tragically deprived of a life of self-determination seemingly at the moment of attaining it demands it. Equally she has to die because the mother of the heir to the throne could not be seen to be consorting with an Egyptian Muslim, or she has to die because she was too beautiful/saintly/angelic to live, or because, like James Dean or Marilyn Monroe, the flicker of talent is easily burnt out. Self's point is that however polyvalent the Diana sign, it is pre-inscribed within culture not within the individual herself. Diana's death is her ultimate performance and the ideal opportunity for those who have consumed her to become part of her narrative and their fantasy of belonging, wholeness and authenticity. *Dorian* ends near the floral tributes outside Kensington Palace, more excessive and unrestrained signification that was to be inflated still further by the scenes of mourning on the day of Diana's funeral.⁶⁰ For Thomas de Zengotita this grief was both genuine and performative:

Di's mourners were truly grieving *and* they were performing. Immersed in a world continuously represented from every angle, they understood Di's death as an opportunity to play a significant role in it, to represent themselves at levels of prominence usually reserved for the celebrated. But they already knew how to *be* representational.⁶¹

This immersion in mediation has profound implications for the understanding of authenticity that I have been putting forward in this essay for it implies that, just as there is no longer any distinguishable distance between the simulacrum and the real, so there is no longer a clear line between the authentic and the inauthentic. As de Zengotita points out,

⁶⁰ Time and again in the reportage concerning the public response to Diana's death there is an emphasis on the sheer quantity of commemorative offering reinforcing a sense of the unsettling excess and unboundedness that the event provoked. See as an example Jack.

⁶¹ De Zengotita, 10.

the pain of Diana's mourners was genuine and sincere in the sense that it emerged from a deep-seated empathetic identification with its object, and coincided with personal stories of loss, sadness, incompleteness or loneliness. But at the same time, however heartfelt, the grief had what Julian Barnes called a "look-at-me" quality about it that suggests either a self-conscious willingness to be part of a public event, or an unself-conscious confusion of the interaction between public and private spheres.⁶² It is this latter explanation that manifests in Wotton's acerbic whisper: "this is one of those public events that confirms that history is nothing more than the confused wet dream of a humanity yoked to its own adolescent erotic fantasies."⁶³ Whether this blurring of self and other is compatible with an idea of monadic authenticity is debatable, but certainly within the philosophical tradition of existential authenticity its reliance on the validation of the social would discredit it. However the idea of the authentic that emerges through *Dorian* should not perhaps be judged as following within this tradition for its predicate is not the stable, centralized ego, but the fractured, incoherent postmodern subject. For this subject the distinction between being and becoming is hopelessly confused as is the difference between sincere speech and performative mimicry.

Without a blueprint for what the authentic might resemble, it might be argued that the term itself becomes anachronistic and an insupportable metaphor for contemporary being. To dismiss authenticity as an outdated metanarrative of self would, however, be to ignore its potency as a fantasy of delimitation and completion in a culture of increasingly globalized surplus, excess and capitalist proliferation. The excessiveness of the postmodern sign necessitates a counterbalancing regimen of order and boundary-setting to familiarize the sublime within the order of private selfhood. Diana's search for an authentic voice

⁶² Julian Barnes quoted in Jack.

⁶³ Self, *Dorian*, 274.

functions for Self as a fixing point for public fears of incomprehensible profusion and as an exemplary contemporary narrative of the difficulties of self-coherence. Yet it is flawed because of her failure to recognize that authenticity can no longer be isolated from inauthenticity, just as life can no longer be isolated from art. Diana's attempt to authenticate herself involves the shucking off of a charismatic skin of Establishment privilege that protects her, and the embracing of an, albeit inflated, ordinariness. But this process seeks to deny her status as a construction of the media, of the economy of celebrity and of public fantasy. Diana as such does not exist, she is only the performance and so the attempt to be authentic becomes nothing more than another performance. Like Sibyl Vane, Diana begins to believe in herself as more than her performances and, once she does this, is equally doomed. She has to die because she does not exist outside the sign of Di. Self's point is that authenticity in the millennial period can only be negotiated successfully through the recognition of the foundational inauthenticity of signs. Believing in the fixity and meaning of anything within a culture of mass communication is fruitless, but believing in the perverse authenticity of inauthenticity is possible. It is a suitably Wildean paradox and is comparable with the conviction in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that the only way to be sincere is to be as insincere as possible. Embracing the flux of signs and recognising their instability as their potentially liberating aspect emerges from Self's rewrite as the only successful means of situating oneself in a climate of decadent excess. Yet the tenacious durability of the idea of the fixed authentic in contemporary culture reveals its continuing relevance, just as the mourning that went with Diana's death, in all its over-performativity, was more a mourning for the idea of something fixed, something meaningful and something authentic than it was for an actual person.

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