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Blommaert, Jan; Varis, Piia

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Culture as accent

by

Jan Blommaert & Piia Varis

j.blommaert@uvt.nl

p.k.varis@uvt.nl

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Introduction

Let us open with a mundane but telling example. Figure 1 shows an advertisement that was part of a campaign a couple of years ago. The well-known beer brand Carlsberg here advertises a new bottle.



Figure 1: probably the best bottle in the world

Isn't this interesting: a massive worldwide advertisement campaign is launched about the new shape of a beer bottle. The beer itself – what most people would perceive as the commodity to be purchased – remains unaltered; what changes is the packaging, the container in which the beer is sold. What is advertised and marketed here is a detail of the whole commodity, a non-essential aspect of it. Or is it?

We see in our present ways of life how often the things that are construed and presented as relevant or crucial are in actual fact details, hardly fundamental aspects of something bigger and more encompassing. Thus, this paper intends to draw attention to the very small proportion of cultural material that seems to matter in many aspects of everyday life: the fact that in a world which otherwise revolves around strong tendencies towards uniformity, small – very small – differences acquire the status of fundamental aspects of being. Identities and senses of 'being oneself' are based on and grounded in miniscule deviations from standard formats and scripts that organize most of what this 'being oneself' is actually about. This pattern, in which culture increasingly appears as an 'accent', an inflection of standard codes and norms, is part of consumer culture. In that sense, it is old – remember Marcuse's one-dimensional man (1964) and Bourdieu's remarkably stable class-structuring patterns of cultural distinction (1984). But the increased speed and intensity that characterizes the present

economy of cultural forms and that finds its expressions in the widespread intensive use of online social media makes these patterns more visible and less escapable as objects of reflection.

This paper has limited ambitions. We intend to provide a rough outline of the two forces we observe and we see as defining this pattern of culture-as-accent: a strong tendency towards uniformity and homogeneity on the one hand, and the inflation of details as metonymic marks of the total person on the other. Both forces co-occur in a dialectic in which the very forces of homogenization are always 'footnoted', so to speak, by strong and outspoken tendencies towards inflating and overvaluing details. In fact, much of contemporary cultural life can perhaps best be described as 'uniformity-with-a-minor-difference', and consumer capitalism plays into both apparently contradictory forces. The clearest examples of these patterns can thus be found in advertisements, and most of the illustrations we shall use in this paper are taken from that domain.

The regimented society

Our times are not different from most of Modernity – an era characterized by a tension between individualism and society, between an ideology of individual achievement and accomplishment, and the homogenizing pressures of an increasingly integrated society (see Fromm 1941 for an excellent discussion; also Entwistle 2000: 114-117, drawing on Simmel 1971). Consumer capitalism places itself right in the nexus of this tension, emphasizing individual choice while at the same time aiming at mass consumption of similar products. Remember that Marcuse saw this feature as defining consumer capitalism: the paradox that we seem to believe that we are all unique individuals when we all wear the same garments, eat the same food and listen to the same music. This exploitation of an ideological false consciousness was, for Marcuse, the reason to see consumer capitalism as a form of totalitarianism. It was also Marcuse who identified the behavioral and social outcome of this: the fact that people's consumption practices become the key to their social life. It is on the basis of shared consumption – owning or admiring similar commodities – that people form social groups. Identities are shaped by consumer behavior, and Bourdieu's *Distinction* provided powerful empirical arguments for this.

Marcuse's thesis has been under fire for decades because of the totalizing and less than nuanced nature of his analysis (as well as, politically, the assumptions he used). Yet, the way our societies have of late developed may offer opportunities to return to the essence of the argument.

Marcuse identified as false consciousness the fact that people, in order to participate in the totalitarian consumption modes, offer themselves to exploitation. The money required to purchase cars, refrigerators and television sets was earned by working longer and harder – by enabling the very producers of consumer commodities, in other words, to maximize profits by maximizing workers' exploitation. This opportunity for false consciousness (i.e. for the 'ideological lie' at the heart of the system) was predicated on a fully integrated society in which commodities circulated with speed and intensity, and in which messages and images about such commodities – advertisement – appeared as the fuel driving this mode of intense circulation. People can only project

particular ideas of identity onto, say, ownership of a BMW, when these ideas have been in circulation and have socially been enregistered, when they have become part of the common set of meaning-giving resources in a society. It is only, to adopt Bourdieu's terminology for a moment, when a field has been shaped that people can take positions in that field. Concretely: we can only see our purchase of a BMW as an act of identity when other people see it in similar terms. We can then convert the fundamentally unfree relationship that is at the core of this transaction (someone paying a determined amount of money as a prerequisite for acquiring a commodity, in this case a BMW car) into something else: 'choice', the practice of selecting from within a huge range of alternatives, by a free and unconstrained individual. Choice has become the concept that embodies the ideological lie identified by Marcuse. It is in the ideological construction of 'choice' that we convert an unfree structure of market transaction into a practice that is the pinnacle of freedom: buying something after a process of selection, in which we compare and assess immaterial features of the commodities on offer – their 'mythologies' in the sense of Roland Barthes (1957). It is in this process, too, that we convert consumption from a transaction between two parties into an act that bespeaks just the consumer's identity, into something that is about 'me' and 'who I am', not about the seller's bank account (cf. Cronin's [2000] 'compulsory individuality').

There is no doubt that our era differs from preceding ones in terms of the speed and intensity of the circulation of messages and images on almost any aspect of life, online as well as 'offline', effective as well as aspirational. The internet has become a vast forum for the marketing of commodities, culture and selves. It has shaped (and this process is not finished) a degree of integration to our societies probably unparalleled in history. And with this increasing integration comes a range of social and cultural phenomena perhaps not new in substance but surely in degree, scope and intensity. As to scope: many of these phenomena are now effectively global and have become part of the general sociocultural scripts of populations in almost every part of the world. There is no need at this point to elaborate; a booming literature is documenting this process (e.g. Appadurai 1996; Jenkins 2006; Varis & Wang 2011).

This increased integration shapes and reshapes a plethora of fields: any aspect of human life can now be organized into structured and ordered mini-systems, which we called elsewhere 'micro-hegemonies' (Blommaert & Varis 2011). That is, miniscule aspects of life can be shaped now as targets for ordering practices related to commodification, and all of these fields are now subject to 'how to' discourses, to forms of regimentation and submission to ideals, strategic objectives and targets, and to infinitely detailed patterns of 'management' (i.e. homogenizing discipline) and accounting practices. In that sense, what we currently witness on the internet is an infinitely fractal reproduction of the sociocultural domains sketched in Bourdieu's *Distinction*, a degree of elaboration and detail which is, in principle as well as in actual fact, infinite. The Foucaultian tension between 'normal' and 'abnormal', absorbed into elaborate practices of 'care of the self', is quite inescapable as a point of reference here (Foucault 1988, 2003).

These fields now cover every aspect of human life, and for every aspect we see the appearance of micro-hegemonic norms and standards: the body, food, art, work, mobility, dress, the mind, education, name it. Figure 2 provides a self-evident illustration of this: the way in which a female body is defined in terms of an ideal (or at least 'better') 'goal weight'. Figure 3 instantly connects this standard of a slim, fit and healthy female body to consumption – healthy food habits. In this illustration we see how aspects of human life – aspects which many people would understand as belonging to the private sphere – are intertwined with consumption behavior.

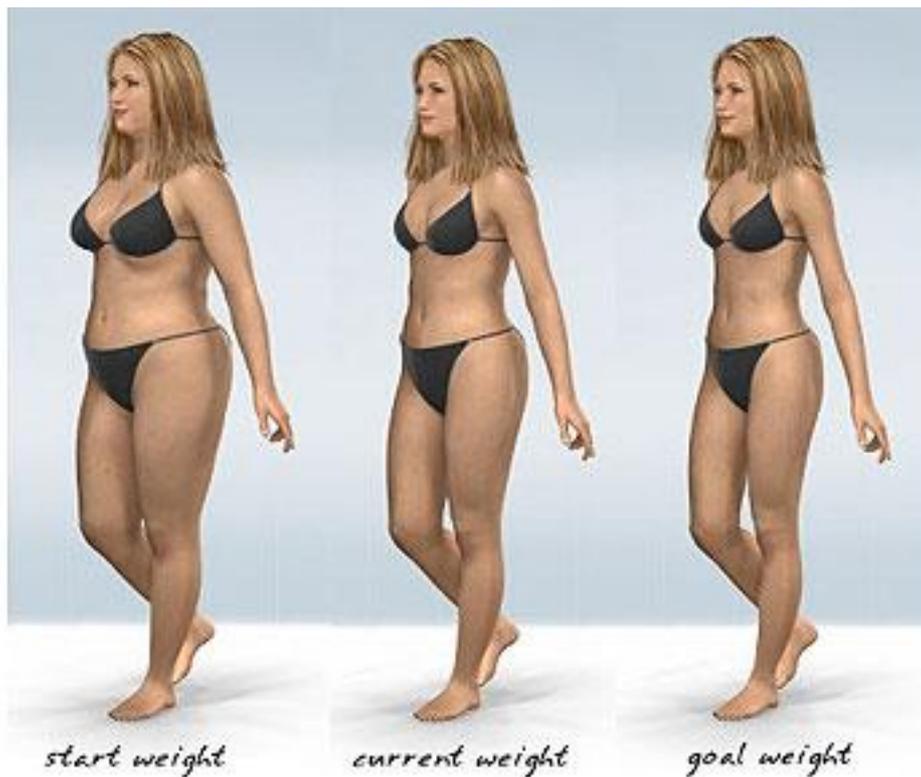


Figure 2: goal weight



Figure 3: healthy eating

Barthes, in another influential book, sketched the difference between ‘clothes’ and ‘fashion’ as grounded not in objective features of the objects themselves, but in their subjective ‘adjectives’, so to speak, in the mythological attributes that *particular* clothes acquired through elaborate discourses on quality, style and class distinction; such discourses were developed and circulated in the ‘fashion’ magazines, and they determined the commodity price of the garments (Barthes 1983). We now see that ‘fashion’, defined in those terms, has extended into an immense terrain of social and cultural life and that, in each of these now fashionable domains, we witness the emergence and consolidation of complexes of instruction and prescription, management and monitoring, identity effects – and all of this deeply interwoven with commodification. Healthy food can be purchased and demands investments in terms of ‘choice’; physical beauty and fitness can also be purchased, and while all of this used to be a rather ‘organic’ matter closely tied to one’s general lifestyle – fitness and physical prowess for instance being associated with hard physical labor, as in Zola’s *Bête Humaine* – all of these things have now become segmented and detached items subject to a normative regime and driven by consumption patterns. We have moved from one lifestyle to an infinite range of lifestyles, all of which are now objects of discursive and semiotic elaboration and all of which can now be seen as elementary aspects of the self.¹

We thus witness an ordered and subjected self remarkably at odds with the ideologies of freedom that surround it, a self that needs to establish and maintain order over a distributed complex of micro-selves, each of which can define how

¹ See Blommaert (2010: 47ff) for an illustration of ‘American accent’ being sold over the internet. It is an example of the infinite detailing of commodification we observe here.

others perceive, understand and evaluate us.² For each new segment of social and cultural life that becomes detached and organized as a space of discipline and order, becomes in the same move a space of social evaluation, something about which others can pass hard and uncompromising judgments. Such judgments are fundamentally rooted in recognizability: I recognize this or that aspect of behaviour as being indexical of, say, elegance, intelligence and sophistication, or of poor taste, weakness of character or judgment, boorishness or 'wannabe'-ship. And I can recognize this because – pace Bourdieu – I share the codes and conventions of this field with others. In semiotic terms, I recognize things because of the relative degree of uniformity they display in relation to a particular (usually ideal, i.e. imagined) standard. Thus, recognizability is a key feature of how we organize the many aspects of social and cultural life; we will strive towards maximum recognizability in most of what we do and our worst anxieties are often about not being recognized as that which we aspire to be. Recognizability also has to do with *degrees of doing*: in our endeavours to be someone or something, we can be judged as complete failures (e.g. as 'trashy' when trying to be 'classy') or failures to a degree (hence 'wannabes' – people who *almost* get the micro-management right, but not quite so) – also depending on the context of evaluation, and the evaluator.

Consider Figure 4, and observe especially the almost instant recognizability of the complex of semiotic features we can label – i.e. recognize – as 'business culture', 'managerial style', inscribed in dress, make-up, mood (smiling faces, i.e. optimism and congeniality), the organization of bodies in space, and the orientation towards objects such as laptops and documents.

² Thus, every technological innovation creates in essence a free and unscripted space, but becomes in practice a space filled in no time by prescriptions and norms. The social media are case in point. While they are ideologically often seen as a space for individual exploration and articulation, an avalanche of books on 'how to be a star on Facebook' have appeared, replete with detailed descriptions of how much to write, how often, and to whom. See e.g. Deckers & Lacy (2010) for an example of the micro-practices entailed in 'self-branding' online.



Figure 4: Management team

Recognizability is about getting all the details right, about composing a jigsaw of features that are in line with the normative expectations that generate reconizability. Such arrangements are intricate and put pressure on the resources people have at their disposal; they are compelling, and not only in dominant sociocultural strata, as we can see from Figure 5: make-up guidelines for a Gothic woman. Here we can see how even 'deviant', i.e. subcultural identities operate on the basis of compelling guidelines and instructions. Subcultures are as normative as mainstream ones, and deviating from norms always amounts to trading one set of norms for another. Rejections of cultural scripts involve complex and demanding scripts themselves, often in response to the 'Why?' question that employing certain cultural scripts and consequently ignoring others elicit from our fellow human beings (hence, e.g. 'Why are you not on Facebook?').



Figure 5: Gothic make-up guidelines

As said, globalization has turned these patterns of recognizability – of semiotic homogeneity, in other words – into worldwide scripts for social and cultural life. Patterns of uniformity acquire recognizability across borders, driven as they are by a consumption capitalism that looks for market expansion for the same products. Conformity is a market ideal; it is also turning into a social and cultural ideal. The internet with its global reach and increasing availability strongly contributes to this, and we participate en masse on online platforms that are supposedly about self-actualization and the freedom to connect, yet run by companies that are making a lot of money out of our identity work. Thus, we have “standardized presences on sites like Facebook” (Lanier 2010: 16): sites that, while getting rich on advertising money, provide strict cultural scripts and templates for self-representation which can lead to, in efforts to conform, “self-policing to the point of trying to achieve a precorrected self” (Turkle 2011: 258).

All of this sounds perhaps as pessimistic as Marcuse’s old statements, and to some degree it is – as Appadurai (1996: 7) puts it, “where there is consumption there is pleasure, and where there is pleasure there is agency. Freedom, on the other hand, is a rather more elusive commodity.” But there is another side to the coin, and simplistic cultural defeatism is not a feasible approach.

The inflation of details

While we see the tremendous pressures towards conformity as the key to many contemporary aspects of life, we also witness how these processes of homogenization inevitably contain a small space for ‘uniqueness’. And this small space is a space of details – the space in which while most of our behaviour is

fundamentally in line with the micro-hegemonies that regulate it. In this space we do place some accents, small deviations we call characteristics of our own uniqueness. These deviations can be, and usually are, extremely small – they can even be invisible to most people; see the small tattoo on the woman’s body in Figure 6. The tattoo would be visible only when the body is uncovered – its default invisibility here is the whole point.

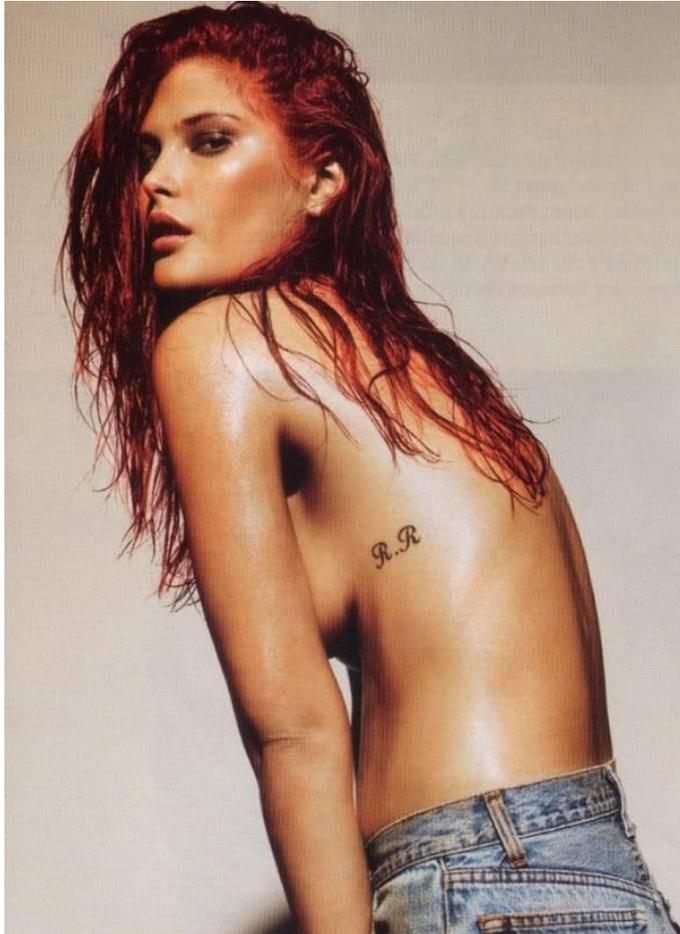


Figure 6: an invisible tattoo

Note also, in Figure 7, how extremely small differences appear to invoke a broad and deep complex of differences in ‘style’ and thence, in ‘personality’. The three suits worn here are fundamentally overwhelmingly similar. Differences in color, cut, and attributes (e.g. the watch chain) determine the ways in which we project larger complexes of distinction onto the small differences. We are witnessing here the fundamental semiotic mechanism at work: details are metonymically inflated so as to stand for something far bigger and more profound, a difference in ‘personality’, i.e. in the script I offer to others as the way in which they should read and recognize me.



Figure 7: three different suits

'Choice', now, is located in the nano-politics of these details. As said, the system of consumer capitalism drifts strongly towards conformity. Goods can only yield maximum profits when they can be standardized and sold to huge numbers of customers. So what we see is that our actual range of 'choice' is severely restricted: we can choose between small differences, we move within a narrow bandwidth of choice. All cars are in essence very similar, and their key features and characteristics are entirely predictable. Within this overwhelming similarity of objects, we distinguish between brands, models, colors, options and gadgets and believe such choices are fundamental. We believe they reflect our most essential personality features, we believe that others will also recognize us in those terms, and we know that such choices will have effects on the price of the commodity we purchase. In actual fact, whenever we make such intricate choices, we make them within a very narrow range of differences, none of which are in themselves fundamental, but all of which have been made to be seen as fundamental by means of the mythologization described by Barthes discussing the 'new Citroën'.

Producers play into this pattern, by continuously suggesting and emphasizing that the choice for a particular detail over others both reflects who you are and creates you in that way. Your 'accent', so to speak, thereby becomes the totality of your personality, and every possible choice you make in consumption is likely to trigger these metonymic associative attributions. Figures 8 and 9 provide illustrations for this.

In Figure 8 we see the actor John Travolta in an advertisement by the luxury watch brand Breitling. The message in the advertisement is that, while Travolta is universally known as an actor, this is just his 'career'; in actual fact, he is a

pilot, and this more adventurous (and again, invisible) identity of his is projected onto the Breitling watch. Breitling indexes who Travolta *really* is.

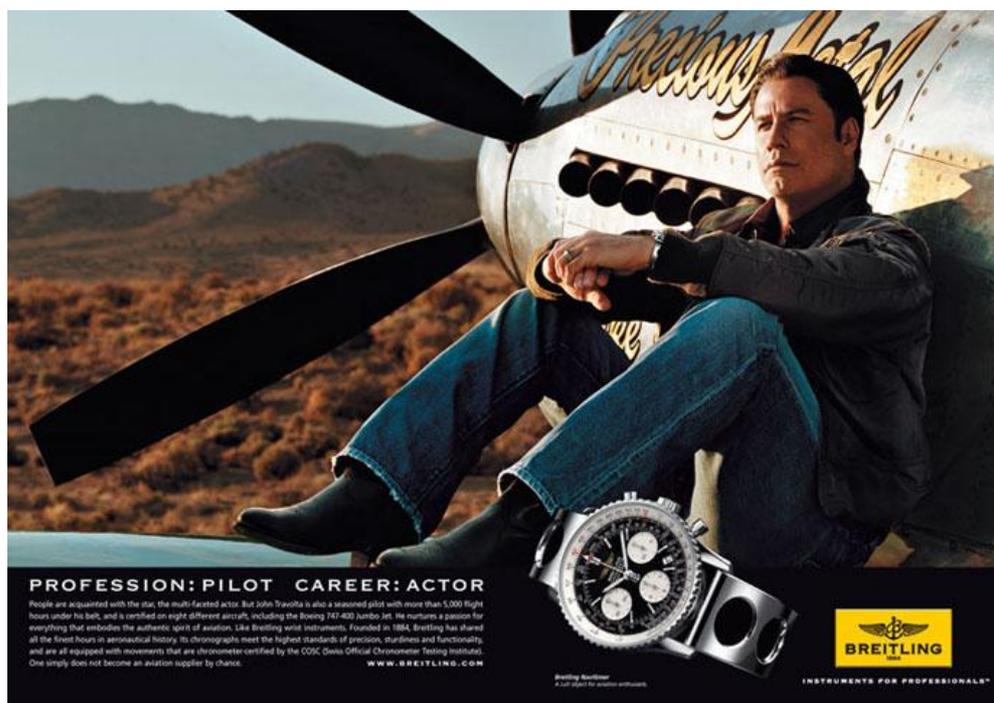


Figure 8: the real John Travolta

And Figure 9 shows us ‘the Bentley man’: an older and manifestly affluent man – tailored suit, classic haircut, and the Chesterfield sofa – who tells the rest of the world to sod off – the middle finger. The Bentley, that’s *me*, is the message. Again, this is not a ‘me’ people would often see (since I’m a distinguished gentleman I probably don’t show my middle finger as a routine), but that is the point: this is my *true self*, the self most people don’t usually see. In a classic metaphor, the true self is hidden, invisible and only perceivable to some – and on the basis of details that should be read in a particular way. The hidden tattoo reflects the true personality of the woman in Figure 6, the chain watch that of a person who wears that particular suit; the Breitling watch is the index towards Travolta’s true personality, and the Bentley car reveals that the man behind the wheel is someone who does what he likes and does not care about what others think of him.

All of those small signals need to be read as indicative of the whole personality. Anyone who observes advertisements every once in a while will not fail to pick this up. While every commodity is in itself mundane and trivial, advertisements produce the ‘adjectives’ that make some objects stand out and become ‘distinguished’ and distinguishing for those who purchase them. In a world of conformity, even such details – the stuff that makes us unique, that creates our ‘accent’ – are offered along lines of conformity and submission.

At the same time, however, we do see agency here. The consumer is not just someone who consumes – passively absorbs and unintentionally reproduces the commodity’s indexicals – but someone who *produces* a specific and ordered self through these acts of reproduction. At this point, we have to leave the imagery of

the 'cultural junkie' so often present in culture critique, of masses put to sleep by silly television programs and consumer habits. Someone who wears a Nike T-shirt, with the brand visible to all, not just submits to the order imposed by Nike, the producer. S/he also consciously produces him/herself in a particular identity format. Of late this dialectic understanding of such processes have been captured under the neologism 'prosumer' – a consumer who at the same time produces something (say, a YouTube film or a Facebook entry; see Leppänen & Häkkinen 2012). The 'prosumer' may be present across the whole spectre of consumer society, in fact drive that whole system by its dialectic of consuming and producing; and the more compelling the rules of consumer culture become, the more we will see the productive side of this oppression – it will, each time, create someone in a particular format of recognizability. There is, thus creativity in this process as we actively 'work on our accents'. The creativity is seriously constrained, but it is there nevertheless (cf Blommaert 2005, chapter 5).



Figure 9: the Bentley man.

Conclusions

There are numerous stories about the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, especially about the astonishment and inarticulateness of East-German citizens when they entered West-German supermarkets for the first time. When confronted with shelves containing dozens of brands of shampoo, they just did not know what to choose and asked more familiar customers what the differences in price between shampoo A and shampoo B reflected. Was shampoo B better? Did the bottle of B contain more shampoo than that of A? Were the cheaper ones harmful? And why were larger bottles sometimes cheaper than smaller ones? It took West-Germans a lot of thinking before they could answer such – altogether rather obvious – questions.

The East-Germans showed us something quite important: that in consumer culture, details are the true objects of marketing. It is the suggestion that products do not differ superficially, but that these superficial differences are in fact fundamental ones – so fundamental that a choice for or against them would reveal our true selves, both to ourselves and to others. Consequently, we surround ourselves with elaborate discourses on the importance of details, and have now turned our whole life into a rhetorical complex in which we rationalize our choices and preferences for particular details. We are now held accountable for every choice we make in life, and the worst possible answer when someone asks why we have chosen this commodity over another is ‘I don’t know’. Since every choice is seen as possibly defining our true selves because it always can be seen as derived from what we are ‘deep down, we need to explain and rationalize all of our choices. Social media become a landscape full of accounting practices, in which we construct elaborate and infinitely detailed life-projects, dispersed over a myriad of aspects of behavior and life. Each of these aspects, we have seen, is subject to standards, to normative expectations. Yet, we continue to see them as fundamental of our total being, as reflective of our true, unique selves, of our authenticity.

The overall picture we get from this is that of culture as an accent. Most of what we do in organizing our lives is oriented towards conformity to others. This is a compelling thing, because we need this level of conformity in order to be recognizable by others, in order to make sense to them. Culture, after all, is that which provides meaning in human societies. But at the same time, we continuously create ‘accents’ in relation to the standards we have to submit to: we construct very small spaces of uniqueness, of things that we believe we do not share with others. I also wear a suit but with a different necktie; and I wear a Breitling watch which, to some, will tell that I’m in fact and deep down a non-suit person, someone who loves the outdoor, a rugged man of action. Armed with these paraphernalia, we enter the daily social arena in search of recognition, both as someone who fits a broad category, and as someone who deviates from it. It is because of these deviations that others will perhaps find me more interesting than most, a more layered and mysterious character, someone creative and inventive – so creative and inventive that I create ‘my own style’ by means of a unique combination of features, all of which can be read metonymically in relation to social categories, and all of which will provoke judgments by others.

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