Authenticity in Culture, Self, and Society

Edited by

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List of Figures
Notes on Contributors
Acknowledgements

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Chapter 15
Emotional Performances as Dramas of Authenticity
E. Doyle McCarthy

The self has a history and a social history and that of the contemporary emotivist self is only intelligible as the end product of a long and complex set of developments.

Alasdair MacIntyre (1983:31)

Authenticity, as I will argue in this chapter, is best grasped within the context of a distinct modern culture of emotion—principally Romantic in its origins and development—where feelings and emotions speak to us about who we are, telling us the most vital things about ourselves. Authenticity, in this sense, is a particular language of the self, an intensely sentimental (i.e., suffused with emotion) type of discourse; it is a way of speaking about who I am, my identity, which in its modern manifestation is an intense experience (and pursuit) of myself as I truly am. In what follows, as I develop these ideas about authenticity today and its continuity with its emotional and sentimental past, I examine how authenticity has been changed and intensified by contemporary media culture and how in a thoroughly media-saturated world the pursuit of authenticity—and the dramatization of the real vs. the fake, the natural vs. fabricated, the “real article” vs. the phony—has become a cultural preoccupation. Indeed, “popular culture is obsessed with authenticity and awash with artificiality,” as Mukerji (2007:1) has convincingly argued and this “obsession” is played out in a number of highly visible and intensely emotional cultural practices, from the world of sports, leisure, and entertainment to those of religion and politics.

A good deal of my argument about the importance and the intensity of our pursuits of the real and the authentic concerns the special place of emotions in our contemporary culture. Emotions have become special objects of attention and elaboration for modern subjects. Most especially, emotions are integral to who and what the modern self is. Feelings and emotions are keys for unlocking who I am, my authenticity, how I perceive and how I discover my “real self.” As Charles Taylor and others have shown us, this was not always the case (Taylor 1989; also see Bell 1996; Illouz 2007; Reddy 2001; Trilling 1971). Rather, the conjunction of emotion and identity is a feature of a distinct modern emotional culture, an everyday understanding, a vernacular speech-form, “the tendency to represent emotion as the foundation and authentication of experiences of self” (Barbalet 1998:171-72; also see Baumeister 1986, Chap.11; Lupton 1998). In Reddy’s (2001:315) account of our Western “commonsense conceptions of self,”
emotion has become the self's "constitutive feature [...] Like thought, memory, intention, or language, emotion is something the self has by virtue of being a self and without which it would not be a self." It is precisely this conception of emotion as something the self has that I wish to examine as peculiar to modern identity and its emotional culture, a dominant view of thought and feeling as "possessions of the individual" (Taylor 1989:Part II), thinking and feeling are "interiorized," they are mine as is personhood itself. But by having emotions (and "being emotional") I also mean that "emotions" are some of the most important ways that modern persons search for and discover their authenticity: their sense of who they really are. Feeling deeply and intensely alive—these are moments and experiences that say to us, "This is me! This is who I really am!" (Erikson 1968:19).

A Modern Culture of Emotion

The belief that the organic is the chief criterion of what is authentic in art and life continues ... to have great force with us ... the machine ... is felt to be imimical to the authenticity of experience and being.

Lionel Trilling (1971:127)

I wish to begin with a brief recounting of authenticity's history to frame my study of today's culture of emotion.1 Authenticity, as an idea and set of practices, is something peculiar to modern culture. Born in the late-eighteenth century, authenticity developed alongside of individualism, particularly the notion that the human person, as in Kant's ethical theory, is an autonomous agent directing its own actions by its own will; such agents can engage in moral self-governance. To be an authentic individual is to be a master of oneself and one's actions, a process that entails both the capability and honesty to live a life attuned to one's inner truths, to live an "authentic life." While at home in the confines of modern individualism, authenticity thrived in the waves and tremors of romanticism, its eighteenth century progenitor. For it is to the voice within one's self and to the sentiments of one's being that the authentic person is attuned, both ideas tied to the upheaval in literature and the arts known as Romanticism. Authenticity is a self-determining freedom (cf. Rousseau), a listening to one's inner voice and urges. Each of these—the pursuit of freedom and an ear attuned to one's inner self—has its own distinct way of being in the world (cf. Herder), what it means to be me and to live according to that unique structure of mind and sentiment that is mine alone.

1 By "culture of emotion" or "emotional culture" I mean popular standards and practices about emotions, the ideas and understandings that ordinary people draw from to understand their feelings and emotions—a term identified with pioneering works in the sociology of emotions by Gordon (1981) and Stearns and Stearns (1986).
Authenticity means to feel something with honesty, integrity, and vitality and to express in one's life the truth of one's personal insights and discoveries.²

In the late-nineteenth century, portrayed as a struggle against the conventions of society, authenticity became a frequent theme of modern literature and art. Authenticity was seen as a search for personal coherence and integrity in the face of a civilization that had become an alienating force, at once mechanized and petrified through the imposition of instrumental reason in every facet of life, and a place dominated by objects and the transforming force of money, an energy that was seen to change everything into something it was not. A related theme of this period was that humankind itself had been changed, an idea clearly expressed by Marx who argued that all human relations had been changed by the material and productive forces of capitalism. In works of social philosophy of the same period (e.g. Marx, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche), humankind was believed to have lost its way, the world was found to have been emptied of meaning and human lives devoid of passion and intensity. Consequently, in works of literature of the late-nineteenth century, authenticity is represented as a heroic struggle against the (inauthentic) forces of bourgeois society. Flaubert's Emma Bovary is, perhaps, the earliest portrait of a conventional and sentimental woman who is the epitome of inauthenticity (Trilling 1971:100).

During the middle to late-twentieth century ideas of authenticity changed dramatically. It is then that we begin to see authenticity as shallow self-deception—Adorno's ([1964] 2007) "jargon of authenticity" or Lasch's (1978) "culture of narcissism"—a surrender to the dictates of popular culture, mass psychology, and their promises of pleasure and self-actualization. Authenticity-as-jargon, today's "psychotabble," is a kind of authenticity worn on one's sleeve or in one's buttonhole; it listens not to itself but to the dictates of a material civilization held in place by its therapeutic culture of self-aggrandizement (Ilouz 2008; Imber 2004). But whether authenticity is viewed as an escape from the confines of a material civilization or as a kind of selling-out or material entrapment, the discourse of authenticity throughout its relatively brief history takes as its problem the pursuit of inner truth and meaningfulness in a social world of lies, deceits, and fabrications. Authenticity is always a type of self-knowledge, especially a self-knowledge that allows us to disentangle the true from the false self.

My work in emotion studies has been directed toward the most recent phase of modern emotional history, "late modernity," a time when emotions have become powerful cultural objects in their own right, parts of everyday discourse, objects of our heightened self-reflexivity, paramount features of our encounter with the world, with others, and with ourselves (McCarthy 1989, 1994, 2002, 2007). This has led me to the study of a number of "cultural practices," collective displays of emotion in different social and institutional sites. Conceived as "cultural

practices," culture is something—many things, really—observable and material. Culture is done, as much as it is thought and felt. But my principal interest here is in emotional cultures today and thus how these practices can be used as resources for identifying emotional cultures. In other words, authenticity will be explored within this larger "cultural package," as integral to today's culture of emotion.

To be sure "the bearers of emotion," as Barbalet writes, "are always individual persons who experience themselves as being or possessing a self ... the sense of what is meant by emotion derives from experiences of the self" (1998:187). But what emotions mean not only derives from experiences of the self, it also derives from my identity: who I really am (whatever that "really" refers to), how the self is construed, what it believes itself to be, how it is connected (or not connected) to other selves, whether or not it believes in its own individuality or whether it believes that its individuality is a fiction, whether it can listen to its heart, and so on. All of these aspects of identity as well as others are closely related to what I mean here by "emotional culture."

Emotional cultural practices exemplify something relatively new on the social terrain, a topic of special interest to sociologists as well as behavioral historians. Our lives today are distinguished by a distinctive and intense emotionality and a number of culturally significant "emotional pursuits" and an unprecedented demonstration of emotionality—change in the way we today display our pleasures and enjoyments, our frenzies of fun and feeling. For example, in leisure and sports, the rise of risk-taking activities (called "extreme games") and the pursuit of intense experiences like those described by climbers of Mount Everest like Jon Krakauer (1997) and Goren Kropp (1997); the new sites and forms of memorializing individual deaths and collective disasters, reflecting the popularity of memorializing in American culture today; the rise of media "spectacles"—extravaganzas of technology, entertainment, sports, and politics from the Superbowl and "reality" TV shows to New Year's media celebrations and TV shows like American Idol. What interests me particularly about these cultural practices are the very public displays of emotional behavior surrounding them and, in some cases, the emotional displays they evoke in their audiences; in important respects, they are emotional dramas of intense feeling, perhaps a display of intensity. Indeed we have come to place a special value on our feelings and on knowing our feelings; how the self—in its late modern manifestations—has come to be commonly understood as the feeling or emotional self; how we have become, in Irving Howe's (1967:31) memorable phrase, persons "entranced with depths," our own; how, in a relatively short span of time, a new social type was born, one who claimed to have and to live an "emotional life."

Information and entertainment media have in particular become one aspect of everyday life that is integral to many of the emotional pursuits I describe here.

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3 The concept of practice is from cultural studies and is my overarching theory. For a discussion of the significance of this term in cultural studies see McCarthy (1996) and the now-classic statement on this by Stuart Hall (1980).
Emotional Performances as Dramas of Authenticity

Viable and material interest here is used as resources will be explored of emotion. Always individual self... the sense of self (1998:187). But self, it also derives to, how the self (or not connected) ality or whether it is heart, and so by related to what is

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providing a new “torrent of images and sounds” to the world of our everyday lives, one that shares a new and distinct set of feelings and sensations, “a relentless pace, a pattern of interruption, a pressure toward unseriousness, a readiness for sensation, an anticipation of the next new thing” (Gitlin 2002:7). Contemporary everyday life is played out against this background—this flow of images and sensations—produced by television, internet, radio, but also portable electronics like car radios and CD players, iPods, and cell phones that allow for us to be plugged in almost constantly to an environment of images, messages, voices, and sounds to stimulate and entertain us.

Some of these collective practices have emerged out of new forms of media-based social identities where “participants” and “audiences” are inextricably part of the practice or event. For example, in the pursuit of “extreme games” in leisure and competitive sports websites like Evereste news.com keep audiences and journalists informed of current and ongoing events on current climbs and climbers. Leading climbers write blogs or bestselling books and become media personalities, like Jon Krakauer, the author of Into Thin Air (1997). Similarly, when Tori Murden, the competitive rower, crossed the Atlantic Ocean on the American Pearl, her website posted frequent reports while her “onlookers” sent messages of emotional support.

Or, take the collective and highly emotional responses of individuals and groups to the heroics of firefighters—such as when six firefighters in Worcester, Massachusetts gave their lives to search a burning building for homeless people. This event, discussed widely on the Internet, and the public displays that followed upon the event (US President Clinton and other dignitaries joined 30,000 firefighters from around the world in a 3-mile funeral procession) enabled firefighters worldwide to form “communities.” to “gather” online, to assemble, to march and to be viewed (and to view themselves) if not in living color then in cyberspace. Information and entertainment media are vital to the formation of these cultural heroes, these “risk-takers,” and the powerful collective emotions they evoke; emotional media dramas express and articulate the meaning of these current-day heroes to the public and to participants. There are many examples of the firefighter hero and the media dramas and iconography that surround them from the Oklahoma City Memorial to 9/11.

To construe these activities as cultural practices means, among other things, that they can be used as resources for identifying today’s emotional cultures. Authenticity, then, is understood here as part of this distinctly senesce, dramatic, and media-based “cultural package,” as are the emotions. And while we share a deep and lasting comradeship with our Romantic predecessors, late modern culture moves us, along with our capacity for strong feelings and emotions, out into the world, onto a stage where we have become actors “seeking identification with [our] own experiences and understandings from our audiences” (Alexander, Giesen, and Mast 2006:2). We travel to monuments and memorials to “remember” events we never witnessed (Weiseltier 2002:38); we pursue spectator sports in unprecedented numbers; we love the excitement of parades, rock concerts, and
"mega-events," large-scale commercial and sports events that are dramatic and have mass appeal and international significance, like the Olympics and Expos (Roche 2000).

In some cases, these activities demand the skills of a trained actor to render an authentic performance, to be someone in touch with our deepest feelings, participants in a real life drama. The media facilitate this process, bringing us closer to something real and important "as it really happens," no matter that this sense of the real is mass produced, as is the sense of being "up close and personal" with what and whom we watch. Put differently, playing out our feelings and trying on identities (popular idioms) have taken a decidedly dramatic and performative direction. Media—especially radio, television, Internet, and movies—in both real life and fiction—"create the characters that people civil society and establish what might be called its communicative boundaries with noncivil domains" (Alexander 2006:75). They provide a distinct cognitive and emotional "media logic" (Altheide and Snow 1979) that shapes the contours of our lives. And because of this, the divide between fiction and reality has become somewhat more blurred and life has become more like a movie (Gabler 1998; Gergen 1991). Stated in decidedly academic terms, "The symbolic forms of fictional media weave the binary codes of civil society into broad narratives and popular narratives" (Alexander 2006:75).

To illustrate in more depth some of these claims, I will turn briefly to the case of memorialization to explore today's changing faces of the emotional culture of authenticity.

Museums, Monuments, and Memorials

It is now commonplace to take notice of the popularity of memorialization in American culture ... With the Vietnam Veterans Memorial as a model, individuals did not hesitate to shape the meaning of a memorial through their own actions and energies.

Edward T. Linenthal (2001:133-34)

One of the very first signs that "emotions" had taken on a new form—surprising, in the ways that it announced itself and by what it said about honoring the dead—were the new and very public displays of grief and mourning that began to appear on my own streets and neighborhoods in New York as well as on the nightly news. These shrines to mark the deaths of both strangers and friends, very public figures as well as those close to us began to appear across America in the late 1970s, although one of the first expressions of this kind took place in Dallas, Texas, after the assassination of John Kennedy in 1962 where in the aftermath of the assassination, mounds of flowers, candles, wreaths, and mementos were left at the site. The assassination site also became one of the first memorial museums in the US. The Six exhibition focus

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the US. The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza contains a permanent historical
exhibition focused on the impact of Kennedy’s death on the nation and the world.
For about three decades now, there has been a surge of academic and scholarly
interest in the museum, monument, and memorial as cultural phenomena, just
as there has been a parallel development—popular and political—in building
monuments and memorials. Today, memorializing is even described as possessing
an “intensity” (Huyssen 1995:253) that points to the range of engagements with
the process (scholarly, popular, journalistic, political) and to the extraordinary
rise in memorials and in new forms of memorializing. Take, for example, the
sheer proliferation of memorials and their popularity: Holocaust Memorials and
Museums are now estimated in the thousands worldwide and visitors to these
memorials are now estimated in the millions (Young 1993:x). In Washington, DC,
we have witnessed the most active period of building monuments in a century:
the Washington Mall alone includes the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the Korean
Memorial, the FDR Memorial, and the World War II Memorial. In fact, in 2000,
US government planners unveiled 102 possible new sites for memorials and
museums in Washington. Since its dedication in 1982, the Vietnam Memorial—by
far, the most popular memorial in the country—has been visited by at least 50
million people and has consistently drawn visitors; despite the fact that “there
is no liturgical calendar of rites there, nor is there a prescribed routine or custom
that the acts of remembrance must follow; but the commemoration is regular, and
everyday people go there to remember ...” (Butterfield 2003:32). The Oklahoma
City Memorial, dedicated in April 2000, received 340,000 visitors in its first
five months (Linenthal 2001:231).

The architectural term applied to both these memorials is “minimalist,” the
unofficial language of modernist art since mid-twentieth century, but only recently
used for monuments and memorials: Lin’s Vietnam Memorial, Peter Eisenman’s
Holocaust Memorial in Berlin (a field of plain concrete pillars like headstones),
Oklahoma City’s grid of chairs. These memorials are not only important signifiers
of the individual lives lost, they commemorate ordinary people, something that
memorials did not do until the recent decades. In fact, as highly individualized
Cultural forms, they represent a type of “anti-memorial” (Kimmelman 2002),
something sentimental and populist. In one critic’s words, this is an art form with
an “emotional intensity” and one that allows, even welcomes, the popular and
emotional and individual gestures of its visitors: at the Vietnam Memorial people
go to read, touch the names, leave flowers and photos—“mementos are one of the
great mysteries of the Wall” (Ayres 1992).
Both the Vietnam and Oklahoma City memorials—in their minimalist
muteness—allow (invite, really) for an abundance of individual and popular
expressions at the sites, expressions like those at local and instant sites of loss and
mourning on highways and on neighborhood streets. At the Vietnam Memorial
visitors have left things—ranging from flowers, photos, letters, medals, even a
Harley-Davidson motorcycle—that there is an entire warehouse to preserve them.
Individual names, often traced by visitors, are also personally and emotionally
significant; the names are touched lovingly, often with emotional gestures that are visible to onlookers.

For some, the emotional and personal responses of visitors—the aggrieved—are a spectacle, more moving than the wall itself. Yet the wall itself, its polished marble reflecting us back to ourselves, can also be seen as an evoker of personal sentiments (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991:403); the names function as the objects of a highly individualized (collective) ritual. The chairs at Oklahoma City are like these names: “The bronze back and frames of the chairs themselves were dipped individually, to remind [us] that these were people. No two chairs are alike” (Rosenblatt 2000:28). Of the many emotionally wrenching objects at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, one easily recalls the signs of individuals lost: the empty shoes of the dead; the hall of photographs; the identification cards we are handed as we enter the exhibit; “this card tells the story of a real person who lived during the Holocaust,” a person we carry with us through the exhibit.

Museums and memorials have been designed to be experiential, transformative of those who visit them. Edward Linenthal has stated that they are designed so that “the memory of the event will be as transforming as the event itself” (Rosenblatt 2000:29). They are places of “civic transformation”; one is expected to come away changed (and there are many testimonies of this occurring for those who visit these memorials); they are sites where we discover meanings as well as aspects of our identities. In Linenthal’s words, “memorials are a product of who we are right now. We are a people negotiating our identities [...]”. In part, we are doing this by creating and feeling the power of memorials” (Rosenblatt 2000:30).

These new memorial sites are consequential, for they situate and frame the emotional acts described here. They are designed and arranged as settings for the masses who visit them, directing their movements—down a grassy slope to read the wall of 58,195 names, inside a steel elevator like those in the death camps, into hallways displaying life-sized photos of victims, into small movie theaters to watch films of disastrous events or to watch and listen to the stories of those who witnessed them directly. Not only do museums and memorials like these function as public stages on which to assemble, to remember, to mourn, or to undergo a cultural education about “our times,” but in doing these things, they also point to something new on our social landscape: they operate as new moral spaces that borrow heavily from the familiar world of media—photos, films, TV, and recorded sound. And like this media culture we inhabit, we attend these sites as media events: we gather there as spectator-participants seeking meaningful experiences, whether memorializing the victims of the Holocaust or of the attack at New York’s World Trade Center or the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City. It is as if these new public sites—symbols themselves—draw us to themselves to remember something we “witnessed.” They also represent new “arenas of action” that combine public and private attitudes, feelings, and dispositions. These sites “beckon new types of social performances [...] new collective configurations” (Cerulo 1997:397). Public assemblies at these sites neither draw from nor strengthen common sentiments and beliefs. Yet, they are remarkably intense, enveloping spectra in a deeply personal and common experience.
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Acts of Emotional Identification

Some of the emotional cultural practices described here are closely linked to
processes of identification, a concept borrowed from both cultural studies
and psychoanalysis. Identification—attachments and belongings—is constructed
around commonalities imagined, felt, recognized, asserted, or imposed.
Identification engages ideas and images about one’s own or a group’s solidarity
and allegiance—its loss, its achievement—yet never one of these, as “identification”
in modern dress is fraught with indeterminacy; identification points to a desire for,
indeed, a fantasy of incorporation (Hall 1996:3). Identification suggests that some
of these collective happenings—gath etings like demonstrations in public spaces,
but also some entertainment events like rock concerts—are dram us of finding
and losing, of seeking forms of self-validation and authenticity through emphatic
experiences. Yet for us moderns, identification (as narrated by Freud, Marx,
Durkheim) is either “too much” or “too little” (Hall 1996:2-3). For it conjures up
the modern fear of being engulfed by others, while lonely in our autonomy. For
we have no bonds that are unbreakable, no final attachments, we are desperate to
relate, yet wary of the state of “being related,” as Zygmunt Bauman writes about
our “liquidity” (2005:viii).

Like all signifying practices, identifications are both “strategic” and
“positional”; they entail “discursive work, the binding and making of symbolic
boundaries” (Hall 1996:3). So conceived, identities today are “points of temporary
attachment,” ephemeral and fleeting like emotions themselves and, like some
popular and local shrines assembled to commemorate a less intensely felt, they
can be quickly abandoned (cf. Holstein and Gubrium 2000).

A theory of identification can also be used to explore the new identities and
attachments produced by mass media, those deeply (but fleeting) felt attachments
to people we never met and whom we do not know in any immediate sense
(Calhoun 1991; Meyrowitz, 1985). Identification can assist us in understanding
the many new forums that publics seek out to express their sympathy and grief: sites
of airplane crashes, house burnings where children died (Fernandez 2007).

Another concept useful for the interpretation of these materials is that of
emotives (Reddy 2001). Emotives are emotional expressions that describe the
process by which emotions are thought about, managed, and shaped by social
actors as they seek to express how and what they feel in the terms of the culture
they share and produce. Emotives are instruments for directly changing, building,
hiding, and intensifying emotions (Reddy 2001:105), operating on our emotions
in unexpected ways. For, only as people articulate their feelings can they “know”
what they feel, reflect on this knowledge, and feel yet more (Rosenwein 2002).
The idea of emotives points to a kind of freedom of persons to navigate the culture and styles of emotion imposed by a society and by hierarchies of class and literacy. Emotional expressions, then, do more than shape what we feel to conform to perceived norms; emotives are also self-altering capacities—what we can say about what we feel, what we think about our feelings—for these sayings and these thoughts enable us to navigate in the complex worlds we inhabit.

Returning to the case studies presented earlier, we are now in a better position to ask questions, and find possible answers about the significance of the public displays of emotion. One obvious interpretive avenue is that of people's expressive capacities, relative to the cultures they are navigating. In my studies, what people themselves make of the feelings they are having and pursuing as spectator-participants in the growing number of public stages and forums for collective action and emotion. When this is done, many of those who grieve and mourn admit an inability to understand their own feelings when public figures die, "feeling like a member of my family has passed away," one man said. A woman, speaking to a New York Times reporter said that "she found she was feeling sadder about the Kennedy plane crash than she did about the fatal car crash of her sister back in 1949 (Goldberg 1999:A21). Visitors to the Vietnam shrine tell us that they came to feel something (they needed to come here to feel their grief, to feel solace), to bring "closure" to the death of a friend or loved one. One woman reported that she found more solace after her brother's death in Iraq at the site of a local war memorial than she found at his funeral and burial ceremony."

The idea of emotives returns us to the centerpiece of the psychoanalytic project—personal life itself—and to the idea that cultures, no matter how powerful, exist relative to something personal, inchoate, imaginary, emotional, experiential (Zaretsky 2004). In fact, Freudian analysis requires—in the face of our emotions and conflicts—that we give articulation to our inner depths; it is precisely in that articulation that we regain our freedom and our self-possession, ideas compatible with the theory of emotives.

**Conclusion**

There is something very important about the dramatic and public settings of the memorials I described and to the mediated quality to these and other collective actions and social performances. These settings of public actions suggest a new form of "agency"—a self-conscious, collective agency whereby social actors (when you ask them) attest to a conscious sense of the moral good of acting with others to pursue and to secure that good (victims’ families seeking to authorize a public memorial, bereaved widows of fallen soldiers, mothers against drunk driving, mourners in the connection between social spaces, new art (Cerulo 1997:397), communication provoking conditions and unimagined objects promise of feeling"

Alexander and as dramas of "authentic emotional social performance built into the rhythm of public venues in "seeking identifiable audiences" (Alexan us to this possibility or watched so many experience" (Willis social sciences drawn audience as the social actor: Schechner 2003; Th Charles Taylor’s "normative notions broader yet denser drama signify. Sin "society" develops, whose lives occur horizontally, develop "direct-access soci reflection of various on in our increasingly social"

People conceive even immortal up and handing
And though the quasi-legendary other allegiance

These modes of "in our forebears—are as part of and pa
Persons to navigate the hierarchies of class and hierarchy that we feel to conform to—what we can say these sayings and these habits.

Now in a better position of the public of people’s expressivity studies, what people pursuing as spectator-forums for collective rife and mourn admit gures die, “feeling like A woman, speaking to eling sadder about the h of her sister back in ell us that they came to feel solace), to bring reported that she found a local war memorial of the psychoanalytic matter how powerful, emotional, experiential e face of our emotions; it is precisely in that sion, ideas compatible

Emotional Performances as Dramas of Authenticity

... drive, mourners in processions of firefighters. When media effectively sever the connection between ourselves and physical places (Meyrowitz 1985), new social spaces, new arenas of action arise, as do “new types of social performances” (Cerulo 1997:397), and new identities and identifications. Technologies of communication provide not only a “torrent” of images and sensations, but they also provide conditions for our knowledge of distant and unknown things, previously unimagined objects and others that effectively “saturate our way of life with a promise of feeling” (Gittin 2002:6).

Alexander and his colleagues (2006) describe such social performances as dramas of “authenticity,” referring to the growing number of intense and emotional social performances today and to the fact that increasingly dramas are built into the rhythms of our everyday lives, where social actors across a range of public venues implicitly orient themselves and their actions on a public stage, “seeking identification with their experiences and understandings from their audiences” (Alexander and Mast 2006:2). Years ago, Raymond Williams alerted us to this possibility, pointing out that as a society, we have never “acted so much or watched so many others acting [...]. What we have now is drama as habitual experience” (Williams 1989:3-5). The long tradition of performance theory in the social sciences draws from this habitual experience, making mass media and the audience as the social arena where the meaning of a performance is created and where social actors “encounter their identities” (Giesen 2006; cf. Gross 1986; Schechner 2003; Turner 1988).

Charles Taylor’s (2004; 2007) concept of the “social imaginary”—the deep normative notions and images that underlie these expectations—offers an even broader yet denser account of the cultural and personal schemes that these social dramas signify. Since the nineteenth century, he argues, a new way of construing “society” develops, a collectivity of “individuals” existing simultaneously, persons whose lives occur in (secular) time: “society” (“We the people [... ”] existing horizontally, developing and changing through sequences of events. In today’s “direct-access society,” each of us is “immediate to the whole” (2004:158). The rise of various modern social forms and movements draws from this modern revolution in our social imaginary; today the images of “direct access” are increasingly socially diffused (2004:159-160):

People conceive themselves as participating directly in a nationwide (sometimes even international) discussion [...]. We see ourselves in spaces of fashion [...], taking up and handing on styles [...], as part of the worldwide audience of media stars. And though these spaces are in their own sense hierarchical—they center on quasi-legendary figures—they offer all participants unmediated by any of their other allegiances or belongings.

These modes of “imagined direct access” are “egalitarian” and more of us—unlike our forebears—are free from the mediation of authorities. We imagine ourselves as part of and participants in vast communities of nation, social movement,
humankind. Society itself has become construed as a “field of common agency.” This modern social imaginary expands the repertory of our collective actions and creates new social spaces to act on and within as our own: urban centers and parks, theaters and museums, mass gatherings to hear political candidates, funerals of celebrities, but even places like television studios where fans and onlookers show up in increasing numbers. They hold out an “immense appeal” (Taylor 2004:157-61), for they are sites that contain, in some cases, the promise of shared emotion, and in others, the sense of participating in something that is happening now—“It’s so ‘now’!” The television news version is, “Breaking News.”

When “real people” describe themselves in these public settings, their speech sometimes reveals that these themes are true, particularly the sense of something real and emotional and even life-affirming happening to them in these public places, suggesting that “authenticity” has become a vital cultural code used and pursued by social actors in an age of artifice, drama, and manipulation. So it is that visitors to memorials engage in public acts with others, becoming part of the montage they visit, participants in a “spectacle of suffering,” members of an “imagined bereaved community” (Linenthal 2001:2-3). Collective acts like these operate as signs of a new phase of modern subjectivity, a new “social imaginary.” This new way of construing self and society seeks to overcome—to “eclipse”—distance and separation between subject and object, to overcome the separation of the viewer and the object experienced.5 Late modernity and its media culture disrupt the order of things, the primacy of outside reality as there and ourselves as distanced onlookers. It rearranges space (foreground and background) and beckons spectators to engage as participants in emotional dramas of affirmation and discovery.

Acknowledgements


5 “Eclipse of distance” is a theme elaborated by Daniel Bell in his Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism (1996). Regardless of their very different intents, it is a theme that resonates with Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in the collection Illuminations (1969: 223): “Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range.”
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