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Modern Myth and Masculine Character: Revealing the fit 'self' in MTV's
I Used to Be Fat

by

Stephen Rose

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
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ABSTRACT

Through an analysis of MTV's television show *I Used to Be Fat*, this paper looks at reality television and the weight-loss format in particular, as expressions of the coming into being of the modern subject within the contemporary culture of self-revelation. Through the cultural myth of fast transformation by overcoming the body, heroic narratives depict subjects renouncing their fat bodies in order to produce themselves anew. Drawing on Michel Foucault's late work on Christian technologies of the self, this paper asserts the continuity of ascetic ethical practices in the representation of modern fitness. This analysis draws on Julia Kristeva's figure of the abject in order to provide a missing gender component to Foucault's articulation of self-renunciation. Expanding Foucault's panoptic metaphor to a contemporary culture characterized by self-revelation, this paper depicts the continuities of ascetic transformation discourse as represented in *I Used to Be Fat*.

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Introduction

“See that girl?” says the narrator, as a montage of everyday moments appear on-screen. “She has a 4.0, got accepted into her dream college, and has a really close family and great friends.” Then smiling shots fade like a fall from grace and she reappears standing in front of a long mirror with a solemn gaze staring back at the folds of her fat body. “Her family eats all the wrong food.” A close-up on a plate of ribs cuts to a plate of bare bones. “...and although she doesn’t like the way she looks, she doesn’t know how to break the family cycle.” The fisheye lens closely follows a potato chip up her stomach as she brings it to her mouth. The camera then transports the viewer through a strenuous series of workout scenes characterized by a serious face of laser-focused will. “Before she goes to college, she wants to transform her life.” Fat feet step onto a scale. “She wants to lose 90 pounds.” There is another strenuous series, this time with motivating injunctions from a personal-trainer appealing to the power of the mind over the body. “This summer she will become the woman she’s always wanted to be... How do I know?... because that girl is me.” (Introduction to Episode 7, Kirsten, emphasis added).

This is an opening scene from MTV’s reality television show, *I Used to Be Fat*. Each episode depicts one high-school graduate as they transform their lives by losing weight in the period of one summer before they move away from home to begin their postsecondary studies. Throughout the course of an episode, subjects engage in both self-renunciation and self-production. This process involves producing oneself anew through codes of masculinity, renouncing the feminine through continuing religious ideals, and

revealing oneself to an audience through this mediated performance on reality television. In order to analyze this process as a contemporary version of conversion through self-revelation as manifested in *I Used to Be Fat*, I draw on Michel Foucault's (1979) idea of the modern subject of surveillance combined with his description of Christian confession. Adding a missing gendered component to Foucault's articulation of confession and self-renunciation, I draw on Julia Kristeva's (1982) notion of the abject in order to illustrate how fat is coded as an abject feminine substance that must be overcome by masculine character. In order to consider the practice of self-production in this television show as an endeavor characterized by the work of enacting masculine ideals, I draw on Emmanuel Kant's (1784) description of the enlightenment, and Weber's (1905) modernist description of the Protestant work ethic. By drawing on these authors, I claim that reality television, and the weight-loss format in particular, are expressions of the coming into being of the modern subject through continuing religious and enlightenment ideals. These ideals are manifest in modern mythic narrative where acquisition of masculine character signifies mature subject formation in the context of a contemporary culture of self-revelation.

The emergence of reality television in the last decade, weight loss shows in particular, speaks to the intensification of personal revelation in contemporary culture. In the construction of selves, the processes in this genre deeply resonate with modern subject formation, particularly based on Foucault's (1979) idea of panopticism – for him, this is a central component of modern subjection, resulting in subjectification. According to Foucault's panoptic model of surveillance, disciplined subjects are formed by self-surveillance through the imagined presence of a watchful gaze of an other. In the

contemporary context of reality television, specifically weight-loss shows, subjects combine the act of self-surveillance with the act of confession in order to form their “fit” selves by renouncing their former “fat” selves through the imagined gaze of a viewer audience.

Revealing one’s fat body to the camera, along with verbalizing one’s past misdeeds or present temptations, marks an important act in the fight against threatening fat. Christian asceticism, as articulated by Foucault (1981/1982) in his description of the Christian confession, also shapes representations of contemporary fitness practices. Foucault states that confession is, “the objectification of the self in a true discourse” (p. 333). Subjects of *I Used to Be Fat* undergo a contemporary form of confession which takes on the form of submitting their fat bodies to the gaze of large-scale audiences/ a generalized other which has taken on the role of God. This act of revealing one’s sins is an initial step in the conversion process where self-renunciation takes place.

Although Foucault’s description of the modern subject frames this analysis, his discussions of disciplined self-surveillance and confession are incomplete since they exclude an important gendered component which is central to depictions of fat in *I Used to Be Fat*. My analysis of self-renunciation through confession is enhanced by focusing on gendered aspects of religious ideals as they manifest in the fight against fat. In accordance with Julia Kristeva’s (1982) psychoanalytic model of the cultural suppression of the feminine, the fight against abject fat ultimately marks a flight from the feminine manifested in the assertion of independence from the mother, or acquisition of strength from the father. *I Used to Be Fat* marks the body as central to expressing identity by coding fat as an abject substance. As Julia Kristeva (1982) states, the abject substance is

that which threatens the identity of the subject and therefore must be excluded in order to maintain the borders of the ego. Abjection is particularly linked with the maternal figure. As portrayed in *I Used to Be Fat*, part of a subject's success is measured by their ability to assert autonomy from the maternal figure and enter into the phallic order of language. Through the language of confession and work on the body through the use of 'will' and restraint, subjects of *I Used to Be Fat* initiate the process of identity formation in alignment with the paternal figure.

Kristeva (1982) states the representation of Christian sin is rooted in "nothing other than feminine temptation" (p. 126). The practice of confession, according to Kristeva, "does nothing else but weigh down discourse with sin" (p. 130). This links the presence of feminine temptation to the need to confess. After describing Anthony the Abbot's call to confess in the form of written accounts of daily acts and feelings, Kristeva characterizes the foundation of Christian asceticism in the following way: "the speech addressed to the other ushers in judgment, shame, and fear... An enunciation that amounts to a denunciation." (p. 130). For the denunciation of the flesh/feminine to occur, the confessor depends on the presence of a judging other. In pre-modern times, God via the priest or the king filled the place of this Other.

While half of this analysis focuses on self-renunciation through the denunciation of the flesh, another important gendered component exists in the process of self-production: the acquisition of autonomous masculine character. As Foucault (1984) states, "the constitution of the self as an autonomous subject... is rooted in the Enlightenment" (p. 6). Although subjects have the autonomy to end the process, those who choose to continue are depicted as acquiring the will to apply themselves to the

disciplined practice of physical fitness: “The Enlightenment which discovered the liberties also invented the disciplines” (Foucault, 1979, p. 222). In the work of cultivating the enlightenment ideal of masculine character, subjects enact the virtues of will and restraint against the threat of abject fat. The practice of “working-out” and representations of restraint in physical fitness are shaped by discourses of the Protestant work ethic as articulated by Max Weber (1905) in his description of modern asceticism. The Protestant ethic, as applied to the secular ethic of modern utilitarianism, casts out fat which signifies the selfish passions of the body and holds no value for the common-good in the system of production founded on efficiency and reason.

In *I Used to Be Fat*, subjects are narratively depicted as coming into mature being through a montage of dramatic scenes characterized by confession, intense displays of will-power, quarrels with a parent, the constant threat of temptation, the assertion of independence by moving away, and the display of autonomy upon a return home. The narrative structure positions the mother figure as a threat that must be overcome in order for progress to resume, and the father figure as that which provides the motivation to attain complete conversion to a fit self. This narrative is ritually mediated by intermittent weighing-in. The scale marks the progress of the subject toward autonomy characterized by the acquisition of masculine character while still maintaining heterosexual desire. The montage surrounding the moment of conversion is often an emotionally charged *mise en scène* characterized by confronting a parental tension. The ability to move away marks the assertion of independence. When the subject returns home, this autonomy is celebrated in a final display of the body decorated by makeup and/or stylish clothing. A final grey-scale flashback montage contrasts this new fit ‘self’ to a fat subject struggling

to free itself from the constraints of fat. The ideals present in this subjective transformation toward maturity resemble the ideals present in Kant's (1784) description of the enlightenment as a cultural 'coming-of-age' marked by the courage to freely use one's individual reason.

The modern assertion of independence marks a 'coming-of-age' where self-sufficiency is characterized by free use of one's reason for the purpose of sovereign control over one's body. The process of transformation from "girl" to "woman" and "guy" to "man," is characterized by the enlightenment ideals of masculine character. The contemporary fight to mold one's character in accordance with enlightenment ideals takes on religious characteristics of restraint, confession, and the ritual abjection of fat. Throughout the process, subjects form their fit 'selves' through on-screen body-work characterized by the conventions of reality television and the narrative tropes in *I Used to Be Fat*.

Self-Revelation and Mythic Narrative

I Used to Be Fat can be situated within the contemporary phenomenon of weight-loss reality television. This genre includes the following: *Celebrity Fit Club*, *Last 10 Pounds*, *The Biggest Loser*, *Extreme Makeover: Weight-loss Edition*, and *Village on a Diet*. In each of these shows, subjects put their fat bodies on display, engage in self-renunciation through confession, and undergo strenuous self-production for the purpose of losing as much fat as possible. Reality television and the weight-loss format in particular, are expressions of the coming into being of the modern subject within the contemporary culture of self-revelation. In Western culture, characterized by pervasive technologies of surveillance, reality TV offers the subject the opportunity to produce

oneself anew through the gaze of an audience. The narrative layout of subjective formation in this genre draws on mythic narratives of heroic transformation through hard work and the attainment of salvation through the assertion of control over the passions of the body. Throughout this analysis, I analyze modern narratives of transformation as they are manifest in *I Used to Be Fat* by drawing on continuing pre-modern religious themes in the discourse of transformation.

When considering the genre for its film characteristics, reality television may be thought of in terms of an assemblage genre consisting of the combination of themes from other preceding genres. As Bignell (2005) argues:

Reality TV shares features with documentary, as a factual genre based on observation of non-actors. It also has links with access programmes featuring ‘ordinary’ people, with game shows where there are prizes and tests, and with soap opera where there are continuing storylines, exhaustive press coverage and stereotyped or melodramatic characterizations (p. 172).

I Used to Be Fat embodies the characteristics of television dramas where melodramatic characterizations of “ordinary” people lead the viewer into the intimate confessions of the subject and a dramatic view of their emotionally charged struggle with a parental figure. Their confessions resemble Bignell’s description of reality television which, “like talk shows and some kinds of television drama, relies on personal confession and the centrality of the body and sexuality as the key to the expression of identity.” This form of identity expression in reality television manifests in depictions of weight-loss where the centrality of the scale represents the body’s confession. In *I Used to Be Fat*, the ritualized

weigh-in not only bookends the start and finish of the program, but also serves as a marker of achievement throughout each episode. This reoccurring confession, so long as there is a consistently decreasing number on the scale, represents progress toward a new identity within the realm of normalized bodyweight, free from the constraint of fat. The act of confession is central to the process of self-renunciation.

In order to expand the notion of generic self-revelation beyond the idea of self-renunciation, I will discuss the second component of conversion, self-production, and its applicability to the reality genre. In reference to self-production, Biressi (2005) states that reality TV is a therapeutic medium through which subjects engage in identity production and secure their ontological status through being seen: “The media have... become the last authority for self-perception, the ‘reality test’ of the social persona... I am seen, therefore I am” (Frohne, 2002, p. 262). As argued by Biressi, the act of securing one’s subjective “ontological status” requires a narcissistic fixation on one’s identity formation through the imagined gaze of the other/ audience of reality television. In *I Used to Be Fat*, intense workouts allow subjects to seek earthy salvation by displaying a work ethic characterized by the masculine characteristics of will and restraint similar to Weber’s (1908) description of Protestant work ethic – rather than putting oneself on display before the eyes of God, the eyes of man now recognize one’s significance. The contemporary cultural phenomenon of needing to secure one’s subjective status through putting oneself on display, manifest particularly in reality television, may be viewed as a narcissistic symptom of advanced technological society:

To understand narcissism, as a contemporary malaise rather than pathology, is to understand the desire to consolidate a sense of one’s self in a culture seemingly

devoid of meaning and of objects and relations providing self-affirmation.

Consequently, identity is affirmed through the consolatory mirror image afforded by the ubiquitous presence of the media in our lives (Biressi, 2005, p. 261).

Buchanan (2001), when describing the contemporary popularity of reality television, states that our secret narcissistic fear is that of not being watched. Buchanan relates this need to be watched to the reality TV genre by describing it as a contemporary form of Foucault's panopticism. Foucault's (1979) panoptic metaphor of the internalization of power through the perceived gaze can be applied to a contemporary context of self-surveillance where subjects present themselves to the panoptic gaze of the audience at one moment within televisual discourse.

Through confession and displaying the body in the act of intense body-work, subjects of *I Used to Be Fat* gain a 'fit' identity signaling their entrance into a state of autonomy and maturity. In contrast to gaining maturity for the purpose of entering into Kant's (1784) dream of an enlightened public sphere, subjects of *I Used to Be Fat* gain a mature fit identity to secure their ontological status by entering into the pervasive culture of the camera. In this, as Biressi states, "new economy of attention," the ghost of Kant's enlightenment dream of 'coming-of-age' manifests itself in the proper entrance into mediated reality and embracing its omnipresence.

In order to understand the importance of culturally celebrated narratives – such as the above case of achieving a state of maturity – it is useful to provide greater depth and context to Bignell's (2005) characterization of the reality genre as an assemblage. Corner (2001) describes the contemporary state of television as a "post-documentary" setting

where earlier forms of sober naturalism in the factual documentary genre are being replaced by new forms of representational play. These new forms consist of fictional formats where there is a larger focus on entertainment value and dramatic narratives. Reality television can be seen as a contemporary convergence of the two types of representation.

Expanding the idea of 'fiction' to the cultural realm of 'myth', Ibrahim (2007) characterizes the reality genre, particularly shows based on transformation, as a blend between the factual and the mythic. Ibrahim states:

“The highly technological world of television inexorably manufactures a magical space in which the boundaries between reality and fantasy are constantly transgressed and where fact and fiction fuse into various permutations to combine our primitive fears and our endless anxieties about the constructed world which lie beyond our control” (p. 46).

This description resembles Kristeva's (1982) discussion of the abject as a central element in the constitution of cultures through 'myth' and 'ritual', by the ritual suppression of the feminine. Fat is positioned as a threat which provokes contemporary western anxieties. The cultural fantasy of full control over this anxiety manifests in weight-loss television where subjects assert control over the abject bodily substance.

Applying the term 'ritual' to the act of television viewing, Silverstone (1994) recognizes the act of regularly sitting down to watch a favorite television show as a ritualistic activity based on a culturally celebrated myth. Myth, as described by Silverstone, is that which binds together a culture through space and time by providing a

narrative structure of its fundamental aspects of existence. The mythic space of weight-loss television provides the opportunity for viewers to escape from the monotony of everyday life and, for a period of thirty minutes, to project their fantasies of fast transformation, specifically drastic weight-loss, onto the televisual screen where a heroic subject asserts her or his will-power by conquering the passions of the body.

Joseph Campbell (2004), in his structuralist account of “monomyth,” characterizes the archtypical “hero” as the character who sets out on a journey into the unknown, encounters struggles (“women as temptress” archetype, being the most relevant in this case), and returns to everyday life with newly acquired wisdom: “The hero, therefore, is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms” (1949, p.18). In *I Used to Be Fat*, the journey toward exceeding limitations for the purpose of achieving normalcy establishes a valued endpoint where fat must be overcome.

Gergen (1997) emphasizes the importance of narrative in the construction of moral identities in line with cultural values. Drawing on Gergen’s criteria for constructing intelligible contemporary narratives, I analyze *I Used to be Fat* for its content and narrative structure. The criteria drawn upon are the following components: the establishment of a valuable endpoint, stability of identity, ordering of events, and causal linkages. I analyze the freedom from fat as an established endpoint consisting of a process of subjective formation. This formation occurs through a common narrative trope within each episode consisting of causal linkages between the events of parental conflicts and physical progress.

Expanding on concept of ‘narrative analysis’, I draw on Riessman and Kohler’s

(2005) description of ‘performative analysis’. This type of analysis considers the spoken words and the physical gestures of the subject as a narrative performance enacted throughout various scenes; therefore, “doing” identity is central. Since this is a constructivist approach, I avoid positing the existence of universal structures (psychic or social) while considering the discursive performance of mythic transformation in the reality television show *I Used to Be Fat*.

I take the weight-loss reality genre as a lens to explore the contemporary culture of self-revelation. I specifically look at the representation of gendered character traits and parental relations in a narrative analysis of Season one of *I Used to Be Fat*. I particularly analyze the representation of fat, coded as an abject substance blocking subjective formation, and its link to the threat of a maternal figure associated with temptation and consumption. In contrast to the feminine, I also examine representations of the paternal, coded as a force facilitating production, and its associations with masculine ‘will’ and ‘restraint’.

Each of the nine episodes in the first season consists of one subject’s transformation characterized by a common narrative structure: confession, intense first workout, struggle with a parent, conversion, the move to college, and the return home. The self-hood of each participant is traced along the course of each episode as they go from a state of being constrained by fat, to a state of freedom from fat where independence comes in the ability to internalize the paternal ‘will’, overcome maternal threats, and display the mature autonomy of maintaining the weight-loss while away from their trainer and away from home. Referring to the narrative layout above, the act of confession, a central component to self-renunciation, characterizes the beginning of each

episode.

Confessions

“Western man has become a confessing animal” (Foucault, 1978, p. 59)

In the introduction and opening scenes, subjects of *I Used to Be Fat* are depicted carrying out everyday activities in the private spaces of their homes. Like an all-seeing eye of god, the camera provides the audience with a voyeuristic view of sinful behaviors. As if the camera was not there, close-ups catch the crunch of a chip and wide-angle lenses emphasize the bulging flesh and somber faces.

After a montage of everyday sinful moments early in the episode, the viewer is transported to a private space – usually the subject’s bedroom – where, standing in front of a mirror, the teenagers confess the disgust they see in the half-naked image of themselves. This display not only reveals the fat bodies of the subjects to the camera, but also emphasizes their gaze upon themselves. This marks a sort of separation from the body where the confessor appears to be confessing to themselves through the objectification of their fat.. At this stage, self-renunciation comes in the form of confessing one’s personal body-loathing. The camera alternates between a close-up shot of their bulging stomach and their distressed face as they confess:

“I hate my stomach... why can’t I have a nice one” (Gabrielle, Episode One), “So disgusting... I want to look in the mirror and see something that is pretty, beautiful, confident, and strong (Mackenzie, Episode Four), “I see someone who isn't who I am inside” (Jordan, Episode Five), “I don't want people to see me like this; I want them to see the fun-loving girl that I really am” (Kirsten, Episode

Seven), “I stand here and the truth is just staring me in the face... nothing about my body do I like” (*Tanner, Episode Eight*).

The mirror provides the hermeneutic aid through which the “truth” of the problem is realized by the subject. The “truth” reveals the body as an obstacle to the self, blocking its “inner” potential. The bulging fat construes a ‘self’ in disarray and opposed to an ideal inner self. This image resembles the Lacanian misrecognition in the mirror stage which characterizes the ongoing desire to attain a bodily ideal. In the mirror stage, the ideal ‘I’ is the misrecognition of one’s self as a complete and autonomous body, in contrast to one’s experiences of the body as fragmented and in pieces. In the mirror scenes of *I Used to Be Fat*, subjects have internalized the characteristics of an ideal ‘I’ and do not identify with the mirror-images of their fat bodies. If one’s self-concept as “fun-loving” is blocked from being recognized by the threatening substance of abject fat, this prevents recognition in the mirror-image. The inner ideal ‘I’ cannot come to be the truth and subsequently cannot be revealed.

The inner body, with the hidden secrets of its “fun-loving” nature must be revealed through its ability to openly offer itself to the gaze of the camera. In episode five, after being weighed, Jordan states, “It’s like I’m wearing a coat and I just need to unzip the coat and let the real Jordan come out.” This metaphor codes fat as that which prevents the subjects “inner” essential identity from being revealed. These discourses of an essential self are established in opposition to the threatening abject substance of fat. Referring to Christian practice, which includes the act of confession, Foucault (1993) states:

In the Christian technologies of the self, the problem is to discover what is hidden inside the self; the self is like a text or like a book that we have to decipher, and not something which has to be constructed by the superposition (p. 210).

This act of revealing one's inner "true" self is precisely the aim of confession. However, before this truth can be revealed, the sins of the flesh must be put on display "by showing the sinner as he is in his reality – dirty, defiled, sullied" (Foucault, 1993, 214).

Unruly abject fat bursts forth as if it is trying to escape; disorder characterizes the bodies of these high-school graduates. The embodied speaking subject of the mirror scene, in conjunction with the previous visual depiction of unrestrained desire, has taken the first step toward salvation – in the same way many alcoholics take their first step toward rehabilitation: "We admitted we were powerless over ~~alcohol~~ [food] – that our lives had become unmanageable" (Step 1, Original Alcoholics Anonymous 12 Step Program). Like Weber's (1905) description of the spirit of capitalism, salvation is cut off from its heavenly roots and is now sought in the rewards of material existence: shedding the fat.

Another component to the confession process involves the discriminating eye of the trainer. Trainer and subject enter the kitchen, the place of temptation where the act of revealing, condemning, and throwing away tempting fatty foods takes place. In episode 5, Jordan's trainer characterizes Jordan's relationship with food as a destructive romance when he states, "what I need you to do is detach yourself from your romance with these foods." After finding a container of peanut-butter, the trainer condemns it by naming its unhealthy ingredients, and throws it straight into the trash. The trainer who raids the

fridge and cupboards is depicted as possessing an authoritative gaze of a specialist who can decipher the good from the bad in order to uncover the lurking evil from the dangerous realm of the kitchen – a place traditionally associated with the maternal figure.

Lastly, the body's confession through the scale marks ritualized points at the beginning of, and throughout each episode. The scale, saturated in associations with contemporary struggles with weight-loss, is a technology invested with feelings of fear, triumph, inferiority, frustration, obsession, embarrassment, failure, and success. In order to determine the body's material progress, the trainer places a scale on the floor to measure the extent to which it has been overtaken by fat: this is the ritual practice of the "weigh-in." In the contemporary format of weight-loss reality television, the digital scale holds our suspense during the 'weighing-in' ritual by breaking for commercials at the final moment of the weigh-in. Before the number is revealed, the camera fixes on the scale for about three to five seconds as the scale calculates the weight of the body. This form of building suspense marks the ritualized importance of the weigh-in.

Kristeva (1982) states that the role of religion is the ritual purification of the abject. Religious themes characterize the ritual purification of the fat body. The weigh-in ritual – usually occurring four times each episode – ritualizes the state of progress where weight signifies the presence of abject fat. The body, rendered passive, is made to confess. The abject substance is filtered through the calculating machine rendering it into pure numbers.

The scale inflicts confession on the level of the body. Since the body is not 'subject', it cannot speak; therefore, through this technology of calculation, the body is made to confess. As Progner (2002) states:

They remove subjectivity from the body and make it confess as a passive object. Fitness-testing, weigh-scales, and computerized exercise equipment circumvent any filtering of the 'truth' through a subject's power of speech, robbing it of voice, and go right to the body disciplined as an object, devoid of any power of self-expression and forced to reveal itself in the codes of exercise science (pp. 204-205).

The body's confession marks the 'truth' of the problem. This is the extent to which its passions have taken over the body. In contrast to the lumbering fat torsos in news reports of rising rates of obesity, the weight-loss reality genre enacts its 'mythic' component by mobilizing the scale in conjunction with heroic narratives of transformation by depicting subjects who are rescued from unrestrained desire, subjected to the technologies of proper reason – in the codes of exercise science – and converted to a subjectivity that is free from the unholy passions.

The confession assemblage is composed of the camera, the mirror, the trainer, and the scale. Each has a specific role in extracting and interpreting the 'truth' of the subject's desires which involves turning desires into discourse. Confession represents an initial break within the subject who has made the decision to seek salvation in fitness. This subjective break is linked to the body's confession. In episode one, Gabriella steps onto the scale, the trainer says, "It all changes from here... first day of the rest of your life, right now." Revealing one's fat body to the camera, along with verbalizing one's past misdeeds or present temptations, marks an important act of self-renunciation in the fight against fat. Although self-renunciation is initially enacted through confession, subjects

continue this renunciation through the initial stages of excruciating “workouts.”

Penance and the Abjection of Fat

“The acts by which he punishes himself must be indissociable from the acts by which he reveals himself. The punishment of oneself and the voluntary expression of oneself are bound together” (Foucault, 1993, p. 214).

“I abject myself within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish myself.”(Kristeva, 1982, p. 3).

Warning us of a growing slender ideal, Susan Bordo (1997) states, “Fat is the devil, and we are continually beating him – ‘eliminating’ our stomachs, ‘busting’ our thighs, ‘taming’ our tummies – pummeling and purging our bodies, attempting to make them into something other than flesh” (p. 113). In *I Used to Be Fat*, the first workout shares some of the characteristics of Christian exomolosis, as described by Foucault (1988) when he states:

“Penitence of sin doesn't have as its target the establishing of an identity but serves instead to mark the refusal of the self, the breaking away from self: Ego non sum, ego. This formula is at the heart of publicatio sui. It represents a break with one's past identity. These ostentatious gestures have the function of showing the truth of the state of being the sinner (p. 43).

In the case of the television show, subjects are represented as renouncing their “old selves.” But this renunciation is not complete in itself; it must be combined with the movement toward a new self. This is the blend of Christian practice and scientific search for truth. The old corpulent self must be renounced through grueling practice in order to find the true, happier, fit self.

In a section entitled “Willpower” in episode one, Gabriella and her trainer begin the first ‘workout’. “Going to blast those calories” says the trainer. After skipping, hurdle running, and boxing, Gabriella repeatedly insists that she is going to die. Insisting that she needs a break, the trainer reinforces the value of hard work. Although her appeals to death may be taken as mere hyperbole, the first workouts of each episode represent a subjective death through the embodied realization of one’s corpulent state of being. This first workout is represented as the most intense. Years of sedentary living reveal themselves in these initial moments of agony. Inflicting pain throughout one’s body, sweat, tears, and vomit are expelled in the name of fitness.

In episode two, the trainer prefaces Marci’s first workout by saying, “this first workout is designed to really make her realize how out of shape she is.” After using the elliptical machine she becomes anxious and like a young child, her high pitched voice pleads for mercy. She begins to tear up as she paces into another room. The camera transports the viewer inside the washroom where we see her quivering legs as she kneels inside the stall, hunched over a toilet crying. The trainer comes in and tells her to get up or he will leave and she can “stay fat.” In a dramatic display, the penitent is revealed in all her shame. When the trainer gives Marci an ultimatum, she chooses to continue. Crying and constantly complaining, she grudgingly completes the workout. Although a new subject has yet to be formed, the willingness to engage in the intense body-work signifies a decisive break from the lazy subject depicted in the beginning.

In Episode three, Dominick walks into a gym for the first time with his trainer. She encourages him through various high intensity cardio exercises. Dominick sits down and says “I think I am going to throw up.”

“Good... this is what it feels like” responds the trainer. Dark music sets in and Dominick interrupts his trainer and says again,

“I think I’m going to throw up.”

The trainer responds by telling him to go throw up and looks at her watch as she tells him to get back out there after. As he walks to the garbage, she sternly says, “This is what happens Dominick. When you go so long without exercising, without being active...” he leans on the garbage, “what’s wrong... what’s wrong.”

“I’m going to puke,” says Dominick. The ominous music continues as the camera captures a close-up of his face inside the garbage-can. The music is overlaid with a gag, followed by a gushing flow ending in a splatter. The camera remains focused on Dominick as he kneels before the garbage- can breathing heavy.

The vomit, expelled by the practice of hard work, symbolizes the expulsion of a sedentary self. “This is what happens...” says the trainer, as if he were receiving a punishment for his past. The graphic gushing displays the abject fluid as it bursts forth. Kneeling over, face inside the garbage-can, the display of the penitent and his will to continue is simultaneously the moment of self-expulsion and the beginning of a new self-formation. Abject vomit plays a symbolic role in the establishment of the subject. As Julia Kristeva (1982) writes:

I expel *myself*, I spit *myself out*, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish *myself*. That detail, perhaps an insignificant one, but one that they ferret out, emphasize, evaluate, that trifle turns me inside out, guts sprawling; it is thus that *they* see that "I" am in the process of becoming an other

at the expense of my own death, During that course in which "I" become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit (p. 3).

Kristeva characterizes the abject as that which is “opposed to ‘I’”; a substance which threatens borders and as a result, threatens the subject. “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order” states Kristeva. The corpulent self, plagued by bodily desire, bursting with unruly fat disrupts the order in a system where “The highest means to asceticism,” states Weber (1905) is, “the religious valuation of restless, continuous, systematic work...” (p. 90). The Protestant ethic, translated into the secular ethic of modern utilitarianism, casts out threatening fat which signifies the passions of the body that threaten a system of production founded on efficiency and reason.

The ethos of intense hard work on the body for the purpose of fitness – the salvation from fat – results in the abjection of vomit. “Opposed to ‘I’,” vomit and fat are coded as toxic substances expelled in the name of fitness. The fit self is established in opposition to this abject material. As the title *I Used to Be Fat* states, the current fit ‘I’ is recognized in opposition to a fat body in the past.

In Episode Six, Daria’s trainer pushes her through jumping squats, pushups, and a boxing drill as she repeatedly tells her to increase the intensity while insisting on the value of hard work. During the boxing drill Daria’s eyes widen, she covers her mouth and darts away. As she bends over the garbage-can, projectile vomit sprays from her mouth. The trainer sends her to go put some water on her face. In an impromptu pseudoscientific explanation the trainer explains: “Puke happens... sometimes the body is trying to relieve

itself of all the toxins that's in it, but you get up and you keep moving." A close-up shot depicts Daria with her head down holding back her tears as the trainer reassures her "This is about you... this is about changing your life."

The initial stage of bodily purification is displayed in the pulverization of the body to the point of abjection. This is the image of a penitent marked by the agony of the first workout.

Temptation and Self-Production

"No longer can the hero rest in innocence with the goddess of the flesh; for she is become the queen of sin" (Campbell, 2004, p. 111)

Throughout the course of an episode, subjects engage in both self-renunciation and self-production. Although the previous sections have looked at renunciation, the process of conversion involves producing oneself anew through the codes of masculinity, continuing religious ideals, and through the presentation of this mediated performance to an audience. The task of self-production characterizes the experience of modernity; as Berman (1988) states, "to be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are" (p. 15). The task of production, in Weber's (1905) Protestant ethic is associated with restraint. This restraint is dialectically opposed to the passions which characterize the impulses and consumption. Although both production and consumption are necessarily intertwined in the experience of modernity, self-production is threatened if overcome by unrestrained consumption.

By coding production as masculine and consumption as feminine, in each episode, self-production is either facilitated by the paternal figure or threatened by the maternal figure. This involves the figure of the problematic mother which must be confronted and conquered, in contrasted with the figure of the motivational father who acts as a positive influence. In episode one, we learn Gabriella's mother often left cookies out on the table as a test to her will-power. Throughout the episode, her mother is unsupportive of her daughter's "selfishness" and thinks her life should not revolve around losing weight. Later we are transported to a restaurant where Gabriella withstands "temptation" when her girlfriends order forbidden foods. She tells her friends she has done a lot of growing up and she is taking back control from her mother.

Like Lacan's (2001) mirror stage, separation from the mother marks the beginning of ego development. Body-image fragmentation comes in the form of disjunction between one's inner self-concept and its concealment by excess flesh – as seen in the confession of the mirror scene. After the ego renunciation of confession and penance, the conversion marks the process of ego formation characterized by independence from a controlling mother.

In episode three, Dominick's Italian mother shows her love through providing food. His mother "calls all the shots" and part of Dominick's goal is to assert his independence from her. This does not come easy when Dominick tells his mother he is going to move out of the house to go to a college of his own choice, rather than the closer one she had chosen for him. In a dramatic scene, Dominick's grandmother expresses her anger and says he is "just a kid."

Using the psychoanalytic metaphor of the parent/ child relationship, Susan Bordo (1986) states the idea of control over the body (or the feminine/ mother) can be rooted in “The Cartesian Masculization of Thought”:

Now, a clear and distinct sense of the boundaries of the self has become the ideal; the lingering of infantile subjectivism has become the impediment to solid judgment. The state of childhood, moreover, can be revoked through a deliberate and methodical reversal of all the prejudices of childhood, and one can begin anew with reason as one's only parent. This is precisely what the Meditations [of Descartes] attempt to do (p. 449).

Following Bordo’s critique, masculinity is associated with ‘reason’, which is the tool for escaping a state of childhood. This cultural ‘coming-of-age’ in the advent of the enlightenment becomes the methodical attainment of masculine character of reason and a clear sense of boundaries in order to escape the immaturity. Through the abjection of the mother, or winning her over with the phallic law of utilitarian consumption, control is maintained over the threat of unrestrained consumption for personal pleasure. This utilitarianism is often manifested in the role of food.

At the beginning of episode three, Dominick’s trainer pulls package after package of pasta out from the depths of the cupboard, throwing each into a garbage bag. His mother stands by unsettled. Upon noticing the mother’s lack of support, the trainer gives a speech exemplifying the utilitarian purpose of food. The trainer states, “when I was a kid, my mom bought things because they were healthy. She didn't care if I was happy about it.” Although the trainer and the trainer’s mother are both women, they embody the masculine character that asserts control over the body and its pleasures. Dominick’s

mother then tears up and states that she realizes her attempt to make her son happy has backfired because he is now unhappy with his body. The food which was once used as a maternal display of care has been transformed into a threatening substance that must be dispelled. Dominick and his mother are then each handed an item which they themselves throw into the trash. The embodied practice of rejecting this substance disarms the mother, preventing her from continuing to be a source of food temptation.

In episode two, Marci is presented as being “coddled” by her mother who is divorced from her father. A father figure is not present, but her mother is presented as going through a drive-through to get whatever fast-food Marci desires. In the beginning Marci is depicted as often sleeping in late and throwing temper tantrums during workouts. The trainer, wearing army-style boot-camp attire, while using a megaphone during workouts, presents the “tough love” Marci lacks. The trainer also encourages her mother to display more toughness. This is something her mother feels will be difficult, but she is willing to go along. The trainer fills the role of the missing paternal figure by subjecting her to the discipline required to cultivate a mature character.

A similar problem can be seen in episode six, where Daria’s single mother displays a lack of support by buying unhealthy foods and expecting Daria to take care of her brother and help with chores around the house. When Daria signs up for dance classes, her mother thinks she is being too selfish for caring for herself more than her duties at home. The lack of male influence leaves Daria vulnerable to her mother’s temptations which are coupled with the gendered expectation of caring for others.

The mother is positioned as the enabler of fat who must be overcome. The masculine person of enlightenment, who exhibits the characteristics of ‘reason’ and

'will', is in constant battle with the feminine which marks unrestrained consumption. As Kant (1784) suggests, the enlightened subject's ethical duty is founded on the free use of one's reason. This marks a decisive break from an immature "life under tutelage," says Kant, from which one must "work himself out." This struggle with one's self for the attainment of autonomy characterizes the close relationship between 'work' and 'reason' also found in Weber's (1905) 'Protestant ethic'.

Within the work of gaining independence, the father figure in each episode is represented either in opposition to the feminine figure, or becomes a central figure in the episode as an enabler of progress. In episode eight, Tanner is tossed around in a power struggle between his girlfriend and his father. His girlfriend has caused him to indulge in fast food, live a sedentary lifestyle, and distance himself from the positive influence of his father's wrestling club. His father is constantly depicted expressing his disapproval toward Tanner's girlfriend. When she breaks up with him, after a temporary lapse Tanner begins making significant progress. This is short-lived since they get back together and Tanner begins skipping workouts and is depicted enjoying pop and chips with his girlfriend.

Against the will of his father, episode eight ends with Tanner moving in with his girlfriend who is consistently holding him back from losing weight. The father, in a private meeting with the trainer, expresses the fact that he thinks his son is lazy and immature; the trainer agrees. His father says that Tanner needs to "become a man" by learning "adversity." Three months later, Tanner is met by the trainer in his own home. Appearing to have gained weight, Tanner is initially untruthful of his turn to fast-food. The trainer finds junk-food in the kitchen and finds a videogame system in the living-

room. Tanner defends his lifestyle and still believes he is doing nothing wrong. Disappointed, the trainer leaves the house and the episode ends with Tanner's girlfriend comforting him on the couch. This is the image of failing to come of age, marked by the presence of the female temptress, and the lack of internalization of the father's will.

Episodes centered on the figure of the father have a very different dynamic compared to the previously discussed episodes where the threatening mother/ feminine are highly represented. In episode four, Mackenzie's father becomes the central motivational figure in her life. Wanting her to attract a husband, he insists on the importance of losing weight in order to attain this goal. Going along with this goal, she eventually expresses that it is too much pressure. After a meeting with the older brothers, her father partakes in one of her workouts. In this section, titled "motivation," he challenges her to see if she can do 100lbs on the chest-press machine and exercises along-side her. Although her father set a highly gendered goal, the goal can be attained by subjugating the feminine compulsion to excess through exercise of masculine will.

In Episode seven, Kirsten's biggest problem is herself. To counteract her "negative self-talk," her father plays a central role in preparing healthy foods and provides her with motivation throughout the episode. During a scene at the gym, he stands beside her treadmill, yelling at her to push harder. Her trainer stands on the other side of the treadmill providing her with encouragement. Kristen is depicted jogging between the two central masculine figures eyes winced. We hear every strained breath as if she is reaching for more air as her father barks at her like a drill sergeant, "hate me later" he says. When she misses her goal of the "ten-minute-mile," – a goal she has had since the beginning – the trainer asks how she is feeling. Confessing that she is mad, the

trainer asks who she is mad at; “Myself,” she responds. The intensity of this *mise en scène* depicts the firm masculine figures on either side of the subject who is striving to attain glory, but ultimately falls short of internalizing the masculine ‘will’ and falling back into a miserable state of self-loathing.

Like Kathleen Stewart’s (2007) description of contemporary workout regimes, the figure of individual agency is prioritized over cultural influences that contribute to the problem of fat:

“The figure of a beefed-up agency becomes a breeding ground for all kinds of strategies of complaint, self-destruction, flight, reinvention, redemption, and experimentation. As if everything rests on agency’s shoulders. But there’s always more to it than that” (p. 62).

Throughout episode seven, appeals to mind/ body dualism are prevalent. The trainer states phrases such as, “it’s all mental...” and “you’re strong enough inside, make the body follow!” These motivational tactics resemble the Cartesian insistence on mental control over a cumbersome body. The previous treadmill scene depicts Kirsten nearly missing her goal through failing to fully internalize the will of the father. This is reinforced by the next scene where Kirsten weighs herself as her father stands by witnessing her frustration at her plateauing progress. In another scene where they are playing basketball, her father reinforces the value of belief in one’s self and commitment to hard work. “You’ll succeed at anything you put yourself into,” says her father. This is a moment of conversion marked by bright music as the camera follows the basketball from her hands as she shoots it straight through the hoop. In the scene directly following this private moment with the father, Kirsten finally meets her goal of the “ten-minute-

mile.” The montage of scenes surrounding this moment of conversion places Kirsten’s father at the pivotal position of providing the motivation to complete her goal. This series of scenes forms a coherent narrative structure that directly links the paternal motivation to the moment of conversion.

In Episode five, the figure of the father is manifested by the trainer. Jordan’s alcoholic single mother often left him alone as a child, which made him “turn to food for comfort.” The complete lack of a parental figure is filled by an ultra-masculine trainer who develops a close relationship with him and goes to his graduation when his mother cannot be there. They quickly develop a ‘bro relationship’ characterized by a special flex called “Boom!” – The name of the flex is also the title of one of the sections of the episode. As a mark of success near the end of the episode, the trainer goes with Jordan to get a tattoo. Like the pain he withstood in the process of losing weight, withstanding the pain of a tattoo marks mastery over the body. Without the interference of a maternal figure, the hyper-masculine trainer supplies Jordan with an immense level of drive energy that allows him undergo the most drastic transformation of the series. This episode represents the heightened level of bodily mastery in the presence intense phallic energy.

The symbolic repression of the feminine not only gives meaning to masculine ideals of will and restraint, but is represented as facilitating the formation of the subject in the process of his or her self-formation. In *I Used to Be Fat*, the suppression of the mother’s negative influence is overcome by a phallic energy of the trainer (male or female) who either substitutes for a missing father figure or works in combination with the father of the subject. Referring to the struggle between mother and child, Kristeva (1982) states:

...the symbolic light that a third party, eventually the father, can contribute helps the future subject, the more so if it happens to be endowed with a robust supply of drive energy, in pursuing a reluctant struggle against what, having been the mother, will turn into an abject. (p. 13)

The feminine is positioned as a threat to paternal law. Transgression of the law threatens boundaries between the fit and the unfit, leanness and fatness, good and evil. The abjection of the mother secures the identity of the subject who is pursuing the autonomy of fitness. In the episodes focusing on the maternal figure, the temptress/ unsupportive mother is made repulsive by the trainer who has established the boundaries of acceptable behavior. This repulsion is intensified when the mother becomes unbearable to the point where progress comes to a screeching halt. Approaching the mother with the phallic energy of the trainer works to disarm the threat by winning over the mother to the side of the law. Through this separation from the maternal bodily temptations and disruptions, the subject may continue the process of self-production.

Established as a speaking subject, verbalization remains central throughout the process. A subject concealing one's thoughts or emotions is not tolerated in the realm of the law where confession is upheld. In episode six, when Daria's mother puts too much pressure on her to privilege duties around the house over her physical fitness, she begins to "turn to food." Lurking evil is quickly sensed by Daria's trainer who insists she is hiding something. Although the subject may refuse to confess, the scale – in the objective discourse of modern science – reveals the "truth" of the matter.

Even with the technology of the scale, the subject must speak truth or risk falling back to being engulfed by abject fat. A common theme consists of the intimate treadmill

moment where the subject reveals intimate details about his/her life. On the treadmill, the body as object is forced to exercise while the subject actively confesses. Perhaps the most dramatic treadmill confession moment occurs in episode six where Daria's trainer accuses her of hidden secrets. At this point an escalating yelling match explodes into a burst of tears. Daria's trainer gives her five more minutes on the treadmill as she walks away. After this time away, Daria confesses to cheating on her diet. This dramatic *mise en scène* links the technology of the treadmill to the extraction of stubbornly concealed secrets.

This scene depicting the treadmill outburst directly precludes the scene where the trainer confronts Daria's mother. Her mother is disarmed by the phallic energy of the female trainer. This marks Daria's moment of conversion. She quickly resumes progress and her mother is depicted participating in one of the workouts. The montage surrounding this moment of conversion directly links the narrative of a struggle with her mother to her conversion. The following series of scenes after the conversion depict short segments of intense workouts with voice overlays of Daria explaining how she has regained motivation and is seeing results.

Other treadmill confessions are less dramatic, but are still important moments where the trainer discovers something important about the subject. In episode four, when the trainer asks Mackenzie about her dating life – a very sensitive topic for her – she reveals that weight is holding her back from having a boyfriend. In the treadmill moment in episode five, Jordan reveals to the trainer his hard upbringing with an alcoholic mother, and that he turned to food because of this. These treadmill confessions mark important insights into the main issues faced by the subject, but more importantly it

marks an open willingness to confess ones past issues, present sins, or futures goals. Through confession, subjects not only reveal sins or the sake of salvation, as heavily depicted in the opening scenes. They also enter into the symbolic order of language that constructs a sense of lacking an ideal fit self. This sense of lack works to drive the subject toward the goal of the ideal fit self.

Reluctance to enter into the phallic order of language characterizes the central issue in episode nine. The subject, separate from the mother must enter into language and therefore enter into the law of the symbolic order. In episode nine, the death of Kelly's father left her closed off to expressing emotion. The trainer constantly insists that Kelly should show more emotion when he pushes her during workouts. Not only will she not show sadness, but she will not reveal frustration or anger while training. A turning point in this episode occurs in a moment while playing volleyball. Kelly rolls her eyes, walks away and begins to cry. From this moment forth she opens up to her family for the first time, finds new optimism, and attains her goals. Here, conversion occurs when the truth speaking subject separates from the maternal figure and adopts the qualities of the paternal figure. After her conversion, Kelly states that her father – who had placed great importance on being fit – would be proud of her. Through open confession of one's personal issues and hidden emotions and relentless power of the will over the body in the fitness work of salvation from fat, the autonomous subject emerges in all its glory.

Salvation and Normalized Autonomy

“The hero is the man of self-achieved submission... there is nothing we can do, except be crucified—and resurrected; dismembered totally, and then reborn”(Campbell, 2004, p.15).

After submission to the gaze of the camera, the fit ‘self’ is revealed in its newly acquired masculine character. Free from the constraints of maternal ties, similar to Kant’s (1784) enlightenment subject that is free from the tutelage of unreason, the subject takes full control over their body and their life. The representation of independence is most boldly stated in the trope of ‘the move’ to college. The summer comes to a close and a final weigh-in marks the “moment of truth.” Having lost a significant amount of weight, moving away from home to go to college marks a decisive break from childhood toward “womanhood” or “manhood.”

In the ultimate test of autonomy, subjects are depicted coming home from college after three months. In this time, the independent work they put into their bodies is revealed in a final display of transformation. Family members gather around and greet the young adult in a dramatic scene filled with surprise and tears of happiness. The subject’s new thin appearance signifies mature character, with the courage to freely use one’s reason and the will to work hard for the attainment of salvation in the name of fitness. In each episode, this image of glory is contrasted with a montage of flashback scenes, marked by a dreary grey tint, depicting abject fat bursting forth from bulging stomachs or intense physical exertion in a cumbersome fat body.

Subjects of *I Used to Be Fat* now embody masculine character – characterized by enlightenment ideals of mature personage. Although the fit males and females both embody masculine character, heteronormative gendered representations persist. For female subjects, this depiction of heterosexual desire is an attempt to “tame the beast” (Coles, 1999). In *Feminine Charms and Outrageous arms* Fen Coles describes the heterosexualization of the female bodybuilder. The figure of the female bodybuilder is

queer in the sense that she breaks the boundaries of the traditional female body by acquiring a figure that resembles the ideal image of a masculine body. In order to “tame the beast,” a female bodybuilder’s muscle is dressed up with the feminine charms of brightly coloured string bikinis and heterosexual sex-signs such as breast implants. In this same way, *I Used to Be Fat* displays aspects of normalized femininity for female subjects which signify the acquisition of proper sexuality amid the masculinization of character.

In episode two, “a new Marci” is revealed at the boutique where she finally finds a dress that fits her properly. In the last scene she is depicted wearing a revealing Halloween costume talking to a male at the club. In Episode four, Mackenzie is shown talking to her friends about her success. One friend says she wants to hook her up with a cute guy, while another says, “you’re going to be a make-out whore.” In episode one, Gabriella says “I stopped being lazy about going to the gym, now I have to stop being lazy about my looks.” She then gets a new haircut at a day-spa and says “shed the old Gabriella and get a new one.” In the final scene she is depicted, happier than ever, handing over her title as homecoming queen. This idea of shedding the old self can be compared to Jordan’s metaphor of unzipping the coat of his fat self to find his fit self. At the end of this episode, the salvation of masculine character in combination with heterosexual desire is depicted as Jordan states that he now has a girlfriend, and they are filmed walking away arm in arm as the episode comes to an end.

Conclusion

In *I Used to Be Fat*, subjects undergo self-formation depicted as a narrative of attaining maturity. Through confession, sin is identified and made repulsive through the mirror image of the self in disarray, covered and constrained by fat. Through the work of

penance, self-renunciation occurs at the moment of establishing a new self. Conflict arises when a maternal figure gets in the way of progress. Abjecting the maternal, converting the mother onto the side of the law, or internalizing the phallic energy of the father marks the point where progress can resume. Upon attaining independence, subjects are tested by their time away from home. Upon return, celebrations are contrasted with a montage of past moments characterized by bulging fat, strife, and displays of iron will.

In a culture characterized by the pervasive presence of the camera, mediated identities will most likely continue to flourish. In the context of on-screen body-work, reality television is a contemporary genre where subjects can put themselves on display through acts of confession in order to attain the salvation of physical fitness. Self-formation through submission to the gaze of the 'Other' has historically taken on many forms. From the penitent, to the panoptic prisoner, to the popular television show, practices of the self have morphed rather than undergone decisive discontinuities. Making oneself seen is not only a technique of self-production, in the contemporary culture of self-revelation it is a mode of insuring one's subjective existence.

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