

Book Review

**Hans-Georg Moeller
and Paul J. D'Ambrosio,
*You and Your Profile:
Identity After Authenticity*¹**

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The story of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida's prohibition on photographs presents an interesting paradox of narcissism. Until 1969, Derrida prohibited photographs of himself from spreading to the public. His reasons, as he states in the eponymous documentary *Derrida*,² were not limited to political or theoretical principles, he was also afflicted by the narcissistic horror of letting people see his image in a photograph. Derrida's pre-1969 prohibition on photographs presents a paradox of caring not just simply for his self-image, but also for how his image is presented in his absence or possible interdiction of his image. While Derrida did not live long enough to witness the ubiquitous proliferation of self-promotion and image curation offered by the internet today, we likewise face a similar curation paradox of our images in the general circulation of ourselves as *identities*. As academics, we painstakingly curate our profile and publication statistics such as rankings and *h-index* scores like over-eager stockbrokers waiting for the prices of our assets to increase. Moreover, our respective institutions are pushing their faculty to produce more publications to increase their worldwide ranking. This is not an isolated case for academics since we are systemically evoked not only to play our various roles in society but to also *present* ourselves as *playing* our part. From being a relative, a father, a mother, a sibling, a citizen, or a person who identifies with a certain political ideology, we are constantly curating what we think ought to be *seen* regarding our identities.

Moeller and D'Ambrosio's *You and Your Profile* presents an insightful analysis of the conditions of *Proficiency* that shaped the way we care about

¹ New York: Columbia University Press, 2021, 300pp.

² Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman, *Derrida*, Jane Doe Films, 2002, Zeitgeist Films, 85 minutes.

being seen using contemporary and anecdotal examples ranging from the maintenance of a “super host” status in Airbnb, the *Black Mirror* episode “Nose Dive,” Climate Gate, Jussie Smollet, Taylor Swift, Donald Trump, American Idol, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, and many more. Moeller and D’Ambrosio utilize Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory, specifically, the use of second-order observations. Moeller and D’Ambrosio offers a non-normative reading of current events and anecdotes giving their readers a glimpse of how second-order observations take place not only contemporary ubiquity of the internet but also before the age of social media. This book was a salient expansion of Moeller’s essay “On second-order observation and genuine pretending,”³ where Moeller explains that second-order observations are a strictly descriptive and diagnostic tool used to identify societal discontents.⁴ These discontents ought to be seen, not as a pathological phenomenon, but rather as a “constitutive element of emerging social structures.”⁵ Moeller and D’Ambrosio’s *You and Your Profile* injects the concept of “prolificity,”⁶ as a description of how identity is built on perceptions of how one is *seen*. In other words, prolificity is the condition of curating an image that is dependent on what the public expects to see and at the same time how one wants to be *seen*.

You and your profile revolves around this paradox of identity as Moeller and D’Ambrosio investigate the role of Sincerity and authenticity in prolificity. Sincerity, as Moeller and D’Ambrosio explain, requires the commitment of identity towards a role,⁷ while authenticity is the constant recognition and validation of identities by others.⁸ Moeller and D’Ambrosio note that historically, identity was usually rooted in the roles assigned by “sincerity regimes,” a mother is expected to behave as a mother insofar as it is the societal expectation attributed to a mother. Roles provided a definite expectation for identities and while it provided a guide to identities on which roles they should play, it also presented an oversimplification of an identity. Surely a mother or a father is an identity that can be associated with anyone,

³ See Hans-Georg, Moeller, “On second-order observation and genuine pretending: Coming to terms with society,” in *Thesis Eleven*, 143, no. 1 (2017), 28–43, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513617740968>>. See also Hans-Georg Moeller and Paul D’Ambrosio, “Sincerity, authenticity and prolificity: Notes on the problem, a vocabulary and a history of identity,” in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 45, no. 5 (2018), 1–22, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453718799801>>.

⁴ Hans-Georg Moeller and Paul J. D’Ambrosio, *You and Your Profile: Identity After Authenticity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 29.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Moeller And D’ambrosio credit this neologism to David Stark. Moeller and D’Ambrosio, *You and Your Profile*, 263.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

however, one's identity is not entirely limited to being simply a mother or a father.

In the chapter on sincerity, Moeller and D'Ambrosio discuss the implication of Zuckerberg's declaration that having two identities is a lack of integrity.⁹ Moeller and D'Ambrosio demonstrate the impossibility of this imperative insofar as roles are manifold, intersecting, and not necessarily compartmentalized as far as identities are concerned. A teenager might play the role of a model student in school, but at the same time, be one of the "cool kids" who drinks and smokes with his friends. The complexity of roles is further demonstrated by Moeller and D'Ambrosio when they mention Zuckerberg's persona from a private person to a bold and ruthless entrepreneur.¹⁰

The shift from sincerity regimes to authenticity was marked by modernity's social mobility.¹¹ Modernity marked the regime of choices, multiplicity, and flexibility. Identity in modernity presented the necessity of validation and recognition. One is true to his or her identity by how one is *seen* by others. Hence, an activist protesting capitalism while using his or her iPhone to post on Instagram has questionable authenticity in as much as a God-fearing Filipino Catholic husband is insincere when he is discovered with multiple illegitimate families and paramours.

Proficiency for Moeller and D'Ambrosio is the condition that supersedes both the regime of sincerity and authenticity. Proficiency is the heightened awareness of the paradox of sincerity and authenticity. While Moeller and D'Ambrosio acknowledge that proficiency has always been there,¹² the relationship it has with the regimes of authenticity and sincerity has become more amplified in the age of social media. Proficiency is the neologism that best depicts our need to grapple with the paradox of authenticity and sincerity. We know that we must genuinely appear sincere in the roles that we take, while at the same time, taking note of the multiplicity of roles that we must play, and we must do it while under the scrutiny of the general public. Moeller and D'Ambrosio mention the YouTube channels featuring the *Boho Beautiful*¹³ brand burnout as a condition of maintaining their profiles. An apt example on my end presents the issue of Youtuber *8-bit Guy* and the backlash he faced when the general public discovered his private life. *8-bit Guy*, David Murray, is a hobbyist interested in retrocomputing and old technologies. Murray had a following in the retrocomputing scene, particularly in old computers and Apple products. The general public

⁹ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹² *Ibid.*, 112.

¹³ *Ibid.*

assumed that Murray had certain political persuasions that are in line with his retrocomputing hobby. This, however, was proven otherwise when he performed an incorrect disassembly procedure of a rare IBM 7496 that he loaned.¹⁴ Viewers and followers quickly investigated Murray's other activities and were shocked to find that he was also a 2nd Amendment supporter.¹⁵ While the Vice article mentions that Murray never really attempted to hide his political beliefs and affiliation, Murray mentions in the interview that "If I could go back I just wouldn't have done the video at all"¹⁶

This paradox of sincerity and authenticity is further undergirded by the condition of surveillance and transparency. Our condition of proficity is constantly under surveillance by technologies that place us under public scrutiny. The demand for transparency follows as a condition of becoming a subject of the public gaze. While Murray or the *8-bit Guy* was sincere in his identity as a retrocomputing enthusiast and a 2nd Amendment supporter, his social validation for his authenticity did not match the general public's expectation of his identity. Such is the condition of proficity, that we not only need to keep up with the demands for sincerity, but we also must keep up with the feedback loop as a validation of our social identity.

The second to the last chapter of Moeller and D'Ambrosio discusses the issue of sanity in the landscape of proficity. The chapter begins with the mention of Zhuang Zi's story of Hundun and the generosity of the emperors of Hu and Shu. Having treated the Hu and Shu with kindness and generosity, Hun Tun, because of his lack of orifices, was bequeathed by Hu and Shu seven holes, a hole each day, for seven days. Moeller and D'Ambrosio note that this story is an allegorical warning of how we should subject ourselves to the "regimes of identity formation."¹⁷ Moeller and D'Ambrosio further add:

If the modern Hundun were rewritten today to fit the conditions of proficity, it would need modification. Today, no one is expected to simply accept a given identity profile. Profiles need to be actively curated. They require care and creativity. You need to be invested in them. A Hundun of today would need to "do it yourself": go to the hardware store, get a drill, and start boring.¹⁸

¹⁴ Samantha Cole, "Youtuber Milkshake Ducked After Incorrectly Disassembling Vintage Computer," *Vice*, October 2, 2020, <<https://www.vice.com/en/article/889zga/8-bit-guy-ibm-7496-executive-workstation-computer-reset>>. (Accessed on February 3, 2023).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Moeller and D'Ambrosio, *You and Your Profile*, 230.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 232.

If I may add, it is not simply a matter of *DIY'ing* the holes, one must consult the holy oracles of YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram algorithms while consulting sages of Reddit for the correct number of holes. This vision of proflicity evokes a mesh-like monstrosity of an identity. Yet in the hustle and bustle of our entanglement in the age of social media, one wonders if this has always been our existing condition in society. Moeller and D'Ambrosio offer a contemplative solution, as opposed to a radical one-size-fits-all solution. Genuine pretending, as Moeller and D'Ambrosio state, is a "mode of human existence that gives rise to the formation of identity and society."¹⁹ Sanity is achieved when we recognize that identity is "fluid, temporary, and contingent."²⁰ Under this condition, proflicity is not ought to be understood as a social pathology of some sort, rather, it is a social structure that we need to understand and contend with. Rather than committing ourselves to its imposing gaze or shunning it as a social malady, we should learn how to utilise it like the wind on a sailboat. It might be blowing in a certain direction, but the boat moves from it in its intended course.

At this juncture in the book, I find Moeller and D'Ambrosio's ambiguity to be not only profound but also productive. They have avoided (whether intentionally or unintentionally) providing a prescriptive resolution of the condition of proflicity while at the same time, illuminating an actionable stance that readers can make of their own volition. I am reminded of a similar conclusion from Jaron Lanier's *Ten Arguments For Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*.²¹ While the title Lanier prescribes the deletion of your social media account, it does not necessarily conclude with the wholesale abandonment of social media, rather it challenges the reader to experiment and be a *cat*.²² Likewise, Moeller and D'Ambrosio's ambiguous example of genuine pretending in the case of the *naked scribe*²³ offers a better critique of current social structures in the age of social media platforms as opposed to crying foul against neoliberalism.

Readers engaged in the discourse of analyzing social media behaviors using sociological and philosophical concepts will find *You and your profile* a lucid and sober account refreshing in a time where revolutionary and radical thinking has dominated the academic and intellectual landscape. Perhaps this lucidity and sober analysis are what makes *You and your profile* both revolutionary and radical. I leave this ambiguity to future readers to decide.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 239.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 240.

²¹ See Jaron Lanier, *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2018).

²² *Ibid.*, 160.

²³ Moeller And D'Ambrosio, *You and Your Profile*, 240.

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