3.1 Reflexive Subjectivities and Their Differences

Although it may fittingly serve to illustrate human experience in modern mediatized Western societies, the human medium of course is not alone. The reporter or writer is certainly not the only type of human subject affected by technical media's spatializing or compartmentalizing forces. Rather, human subjects, who can function as human media themselves as well, affirm themselves in ways similar to reporters. Therefore, it is in texts that rub up against the journalistic genre of the profile,[1] which have particular human beings as their main subjects, that writers consider the reflexive (and hence contingent) formation of their own subjectivity as human media by way of examinations of other, different human media.

For instance, if reporters react to technological developments that bolster the reproduction of human experience with increased displays of self-reflection, this might also apply to other human subjects. And, conversely, if such displays of self-reflection illustrate the uncertainties and possibilities of self-creation in contemporary societies, this could also apply to the professional roles of writers or reporters. In contrast to the texts on human communing then, the three texts analyzed are concerned with issues of specific subjectivities rather than human interaction.

Still, they exhibit the same sensibility of human subjectivity's existential contingent reality that challenges technology's semblance of immediacy, reproduction and possible commodification. Rather than highlight the ways in which human communing is mediated by getting individual subjects to coordinate, they examine the possibilities and limits of individual subjects to mediate themselves. Consequently, rather than the possibilities of human interaction apparent in the analyzed case studies of reportage concerned with ex-

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1   An extensive analysis of the profile as journalistic genre is, i.e. Joseph and Keeble, *Profile Pieces: Journalism and the "Human Interest" Bias.*

periences of community, writers foreground the possibilities of intrapersonal action. That is, they inspect the uncertainties and thus possibilities of human self-making particularly in the ways in which this reflexive making of subjectivity is affected by the mediating functions that the portrayed humans can attain. It is no coincidence then, that the writers of these texts are more pressingly concerned with their own roles as human media than in the texts on communing.

The three texts analyzed in this chapter, then, all emphasize the contingencies in the self-affirmation of human media and an interplay that is marked by difference. In these texts, writers emphasize their own mediating capacities while observing the distinct mediating possibilities of other human subjects. Thus, they identify and promote the very human aspects of subjective knowledge more generally as rooted in the capacity for self-reflection. In "Buddha Boy", for instance, George Saunders examines his own functioning as a human medium while inspecting the possibility of a fasting teenage bodhisattva's radical individuality. In "Getting Down to What is Really Real", John Jeremiah Sullivan pitches the self-aware characters of a reality TV show against the commercialization of TV and his own public performance. In "Delusion is the Thing With Feathers", Mac McClelland investigates the possibilities and pitfalls of two self-sacrificing male ornithologists against the backdrop of her difference in gender and sex that very much shapes her experience.

In these instances the affirmation of human subjectivity and this affirmation's conjunction with individual human agency and power is crucial. More basically, this affirmation manifests the complex crystallization of existential questions pertaining to issues of human subjectivity that integrate both material and symbolic acts of making.

It is this integration or entanglement of material and symbolic action of individuals in social contexts that makes for the complexity and intrigue of the human subject as basic theme of these texts. According to Peter Zima, a subject is a: "dialogical being whose development depends on its interaction with others and with alterity in general."[2] Every subject's nature is transitory, and linguistically and culturally formed, and as such, highly contingent.[3] Furthermore, a subject is typically only considered a subject if it is conscious of itself.[4]

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2   Zima, *Subjectivity and Identity: Between Modernity and Postmodernity*, 51.

3   Zima, 6.

4   Zima, 15.

Especially with to the self-affirmation of human media against technical media such as the computer, then, this self-awareness is a crucial characteristic that might singularly mark a human medium.

Importantly, this marker is existential as the capacity for self-reflection extends to the many ways of subjective self-making. This critically enhances the very complexity of a human subject further and requires some unpacking. In Zima's theoretical conception following Paul Ricoeur, the individual subject is: "a dynamic, dialogical synthesis of individuality and subjectivity."[5] Whereas individuality refers to the very basic social physicality of a human's body among others and, as such, a mere potential, subjectivity is this potential's realization in action, speech, or thought. Consequently, individuality and subjectivity presuppose one another in the formation of a dynamic dialectic.[6]

Of particular interest for this study, however, are the ways in which individual subjects—including then writers themselves—form their identities as they think, feel, act and speak and thus realize their individualities. Essentially, then, subjectivity can be considered: "as a dynamic synthesis of individuality and identity, for only somebody who has *acquired* a psychic, social and linguistic identity is recognized by others as a feeling, speaking and acting subject."[7] Thus, while human subjects in modern Western societies like the U.S. might experience freedom and a sense of agency in these processes of self-formation, they are also necessarily constricted by, for instance, bodily preconditions, social norms, material circumstances or their surroundings. The subjectivities expressed in these texts—again including the writers themselves—then, could be viewed as manifestations of contemporary subjects who: "construct identity as a tenuous and fragmentary structure that is inherently social and therefore subject to the political conflicts of its cultural location."[8]

Still, the very social and reflexive character of their acts of construction takes center stage in all three texts. In the reportage of George Saunders, the central conflict is one of belief in the possibilities of self-making. John Jeremiah Sullivan describes how mediatization affects the very awareness of the subjective making of identity that turns into performance. And in Mac McClelland's reportage the writer brushes up against the limits of a specifically masculine ideal of identity construction.

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5   Zima, 15.
6   Zima, 15–17.
7   Zima, 17.
8   Malpas, *The Postmodern*, 73.

Such conscious instances of identity constructions must be viewed in light of the comparably recent pressures of globalization. In the 1990s, social scientists such as Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck or Scott Lash posited that in the accelerated, connected Western societies that leave no time to rest the individual makes his or her own identity inevitably in such reflexive ways.[9] Reflexivity means that the individual's construction of identity is continually created in dialogical exchanges with oneself, others, and the world.[10] It is thus integral to how such acts of construction have necessarily social aspects while, at the same time, they also inevitably are individual projects. This conflict of reflexivity has long been at the heart of identity construction. In pre-modern times however, it simply did not amount to a problem. Rather, then, according to Giddens or Beck, the unsettling forces of globalization and mediatization, importantly including a disembedding of identity construction from situations of physical co-presence, have radicalized reflexivity. Thus, reflexivity has turned from an incidental to the constitutive part of identity construction.[11] This also decisively affects our experience of society. For Giddens, for instance, self and society are thus interrelated for the first time in human history.[12] Furthermore, change is experienced as conforming neither to human expectations nor to control.[13] For Ulrich Beck, this amounts to a shift to a risk society in which the self attains a new quality that acknowledges that control is impossible.[14]

That reflexivity takes on this prime position in texts concerned with postmodern identity construction, then, is no coincidence. These acts of (self-) construction can be interpreted as bold acts of self-affirmation and hence repudiations of the stable, monadic, and bourgeois idea of modern subjectivity.[15] As such, furthermore, they can also be read as analyses of contemporary social realities. Different postmodern scholars have emphasized that the increasingly dominant role of (media) technology in postmodern societies has affected the ways in which humans recognize themselves as humans and more freely turn against social or even physical constraints on their own identity construction.

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9   Lemert, "A history of identity", 32–33.
10   Chaffee, "Reflexive identities", 119–120.
11   Chaffee, 121.
12   Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 32
13   Giddens, 28.
14   Chaffee, 125.
15   Malpas, 73.

Thinkers such as Jean-François Lyotard or Gianni Vattimo have presented optimistic theories of postmodern subjectivity that go beyond pointing out the constructed character of subjectivity. Lyotard identifies a potential in human subjectivity to be transformed and surprised by possibilities that systems of reason based on technology cannot. Viewed from Lyotard's perspective, the different gaps—which he calls no-man's land, the unrepresentable, or the sublime—would thus correspond to these possibilities, expose them as fundamentally human, and employ them as a force of resistance against capitalist and technological limitation.[16]

For Gianni Vattimo, the postmodern decisively refers to a: "society of generalized communication... of the mass media."[17] This environment of mediatization creates complexity and chaos and makes human emancipation possible in precisely this way.[18] Vattimo credits the emergence of media technology to the public dissemination of an unprecedented diversity of worldviews, which make it difficult to speak of reality in the singular. The postmodern subject, thus, experiences reality in a state of continual disorientation or oscillation that makes it aware of its own contingency of being enacted in dialogue and presents: "an opportunity of a new way of being (finally, perhaps) human."[19]

However, it is important to bear in mind that such exercises of reflexive freedom are always contingent upon existing material dispositions and structures of power. These structures—as will partly be shown in the final cluster of analyses of reportage on violence—are themselves reflexive and can be negotiated in ways that are less appreciative of free individual self-making. Furthermore, reflexive self-making is also subject to emotional and unconscious processes that cannot always be explained in logical analyses.[20]

The three texts analyzed all acknowledge such opportunities and limitations in different ways. They detail specific possibilities and limits of self-conscious individual identity formation in human interactions which are in turn affected by religion, media technology, and gender—all in unique and different, but similar ways as they juxtapose the contingent subjectivities of the writers and the other humans they interact with. Thus, these descriptions mirror

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16   Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*; Malpas, *The Postmodern*, 76–77.
17   Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 1.
18   Vattimo, 4.
19   Vattimo, 11.
20   Chaffee, 127–128.

the writers' own constructed subjectivities as specific human media and comment upon the contingent character of subjective knowledge more generally. Taken together, they make a case for fundamental human sameness in fundamental co-existence and difference.