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Being and Appearing: Human Interfaces in the Digital Age

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INTRODUCTION

Persons present themselves to the world. The relation between appearance and being is constrained in various ways. The ongoing virtualization disrupts existing mechanisms serving to keep appearance in alignment with being, increases interpretative uncertainty, and threatens to destroy the very distinction; giving us cause to reconsider our notions of identity.

PART 1: APPEARANCE AND BEING

Personal Presentation

Persons present themselves to the world. It is usually taken for granted that persons have a personal identity that distinguishes them from other persons, and that it is this identity that persons want to convey to others by presentations of themselves—and that, conversely, it is this identity they want to find out about other persons. Nonetheless, persons typically strive to present an edited version of themselves that deviates from their "true" identity [1].

Some of the conceivable aspects or constituents of personal identity are: a person's name, age, gender, ethnicity, looks, public "image," personality, education, skills, tastes, possessions, personal history, occupation, income, hobbies, social roles, position in social networks, etc. To some degree this is culturally dependent.

One way of quickly bringing some order in this multitude is to use Schopenhauer's division (adapted from Aristotle) of the fundamental conditions that distinguishes one person's lot from another's into: (1) what you *are*, (2) what you *have*, and (3) how you *appear*. For example, character and abilities would belong to the first category; possessions, power, wealth and social relations in the second; and demeanor, reputation, image and status in the third. I will simplify further by collapsing being and having into one category—from now on just called *being*. It seems an appropriate simplification in a consumer society. The term *appearance* should be understood as completely neutral with regard to being—no implication that it is not as it appears to be.

Persons have some control over how they appear. They can put on different faces, clothes, manners of walking and talking, give various hints and signals. There are limits to this control: you may have trouble showing an innocent face, keeping a stiff upper lip, a sustained impression of fluency in French, etc. Persons also have some control of their being, of what they are. They can decide and in some cases succeed to become honest, brave, a non-smoker, fluent in French, or whatever. Compared to appearance, however, we generally expect a much slower, more demanding and expensive process of change. It is normally easier and cheaper to change appearance than being.

When trying to assess a person, it is usually much easier to pick up the facts of appearance than the facts of being. Indeed, with regard to people as with other perceivable entities, we seem to use appearance as the main road to learning what and how they are.

Together, these two observations imply another common-sense expectation: when people find themselves in circumstances where it would be advantageous to them if they were taken to be in certain ways different from how they actually are, they may well choose to modify their appearance rather than their being.

These reflections suggest four factors pertinent to self-presentation—what you are, how you appear, what you want to be, and how you want to appear—the relations between which feed the dynamics of self-presentation (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Factors of self-presentation

	actual	*desired*
being	are	want to be
appearance	appear	want to appear

Appearance and Presentation

To say that people control their appearance is to simplify: what they primarily have some influence over (and not without effort) is their presentation: the actual shapes, colors, sounds, etc. that they deliver to the world—partly intentionally, partly inadvertently, partly inescapably. Also, an observer normally has only limited access to the possible range of appearances. There is the time span of the appearance, the perspective, and the available modalities of the encounter. When a presentation is picked up and interpreted it becomes an appearance.

What others make out of a presentation, how it will appear to them may be more or less problematic to know. You cannot really see yourself from an outside point of view (you may use mirrors but you are still viewing from an inside vantage point). Perhaps you are enough like the other to imagine the effect, or else you may use knowledge of the other to predict how you will appear, but there remains a problem of keeping your projected appearance independent of information not available to the other.

Contingent Connection between Being and Appearance

If a stone is heavy (has considerable mass), it usually looks heavy. To be sure, if it looks like a rather small piece of granite, it will surprise you if it consists of iron ore and you lift it, thus adding a kinesthetic aspect of its appearance that conflicts with its visual appearance; but it still doesn't *look* heavy. If a stone looks heavy, it usually is heavy. Again, a lava stone or a hollow stone may surprise you. Often appearance and being are in "accord"—there is a good correspondence, a good match between appearance and being—but sometimes there is a mismatch.

Heavy appearance is not a sure sign of heaviness. The gap, the possibility of a leeway between being and appearance makes assessments of the degree of match or mismatch interesting. In distinction to stones, persons have some ability to control their appearance and their being, and therefore also the relation between appearance and being.

Relative Independence of Appearance

An aspect of appearance that is found to not match being (or to be in conflict with some other aspect of appearance) does not simply

disappear or lose its pertinence. Appearance is not just a means for accessing being; it remains a matter of fact in itself that we may consider to be part of the entity's "identity," and very often an important part. In particular this is true with regard to a person's identity. Thus it is that we may commend a person on being "credible" while at the same time acknowledging that he is not entirely "truthful" [2]. Politeness and sincerity is another example of a common mismatch. The discrepancy is generally accepted but not openly acknowledged. It may be known that a person is not being sincere, and the person may well know that it is known; yet insincerity is considered not only socially acceptable, but necessary, in order to be polite.

Conventional Element of Appearance

The social acceptability of discrepancies between being and appearing varies with the aspect of being and appearance concerned, and with the situation. It is culturally dependent and may change with time.

There is obviously an element of convention also in the degree of match between being and appearance, because the *meaning* of an appearance is often conventional. Such cultural conventions change over time, sometimes so fast as to be fashions.

The deliberate and openly acknowledged *decoupling* of appearance from being is also a possibility. Actors present an appearance not expected to have much more than a coincidental relation to their personal being. Similarly, by making clear that we are playing a role (professional, ceremonial, in a game, etc.) we let it be known that our personal appearance will be insignificant with regard to our operative being in that role, which is dictated by the rules and the script for the part. It is the role-being you will have to deal with.

Signaling—Honest and Dishonest, Costly and Cheap

In biology, sociology and economy there are theories of *honest signaling*, aiming to explain when and why signals from one individual to another are *honest*, that is, convey in some sense reliable information. A *signal* is a behavior produced to influence the behavior of some other individual(s) by transmitting information. When that information is information about the signaler, signaling translates to self-*presentation*. In other words, these theories address (inter alia) the question of what forces and mechanisms work to keep appearance congruent with being [3].

The dominating model of explanation has been that signals are kept honest by being costly, sometimes referred to as the "handicap principle" [4]. When a gazelle on an African savanna spots a lion, it will jump high straight up in the air, repeatedly. This behavior can be interpreted as a message that "I am strong and healthy, catching me will be hard!" It is a costly signal, because a lot of energy goes into producing those jumps. Only a strong animal could afford it. If the jumping behavior did not incur considerable cost—the argument goes—it would not work as a signal of strength, because it could (and would) be used dishonestly. It would surely be rational for a weak animal to signal that it is strong and thus discourage predators, if the cost were low.

Growing long fingernails that make it impossible to do manual work, or surrounding yourself with a large number of personal assistants (courtiers or "bodyguards") are examples of human choices of costly presentations to match a state of wealth and power, all in agreement with Veblen's theories about the behavior of the leisure class [5].

Costly signaling is a crude and wasteful solution to the honesty problem, but there is a rather obvious alternative: honest signals can stay cheap if their dishonest alternatives are prohibitively costly. (Surprisingly, this possibility has only recently caught the attention of honest signaling research [6].) The cost of the signal is weighed against the potential gain, so if the gain is high, the dishonest alternative has to be even costlier to preserve honesty. A biological example of cheap signaling is given by male sparrows. They have a badge, a black patch, which is a conventional sign of their fighting ability. The cost of producing the signal is low. It is kept honest by a social mechanism: cheating birds are exposed and attacked by their peers. Human language is of course the paradigm of cheap signaling using conventional signs. Honesty is (generally) preserved by social mechanisms.

It may be difficult to verify the match between appearance and being, even if the match *is* good. To improve the persuasive power of appearance, one strategy is to display a costlier appearance: revert to costly signals.

Another strategy is to increase the information content of the signal: the more complex and precise the claim, the easier it should be to debunk. McLuhan provides ground for the opposite view with his definition of a *cool* medium as low-definition, conveying limited information [7]. Cool media are more engaging because the audience will actively fill in what is missing, possibly resulting in a *higher* degree of persuasiveness because of a personal investment in what is believed.

PART 2: VIRTUAL IMPLICATIONS

What Difference Does Virtualization Make?

Does the new world of digitally supported information and communication have implications for the relation between appearance and being beyond the obvious extension of the available arenas for self-presentation and assessment of others?

I will suggest it does, confining myself to three issues:

1. Cheaper to maintain a gap between being and appearance. Wider gaps affordable.
2. Uncertainty about the semantics of appearance.
3. Distinction between being and appearance threatens to collapse.

1. Dishonest Signals Become Inexpensive

There is a price dump in many kinds of signals that used to be costly: they can now be produced inexpensively by digital means. One consequence is that signals that have been costly and kept honest precisely by virtue of their cost are no longer to be trusted. A more important consequence is that low-cost signals that have been kept honest by the high costs of their surrounding dishonest alternatives, are no longer kept from straying into dishonesty as the dishonest alternatives approach the cost level of the honest signals.

Two factors determine the cost gap between honest and dishonest signals. One factor is *signal production cost*: the actual cost of producing the signal. Another factor is *signal penalty*: the external penalty incurred by the use of the signal. One kind of signal penalty is the punishment of dishonest signals delivered by some social mechanism (as in the sparrow example). Another kind of signal penalty is a negative side effect of the signal itself, not discriminating between honest and dishonest signals. Nestlings squeak to signal how hungry they are to their parents bringing back food to the nest, thus enabling appropriate prioritizing. The penalty is the risk that predators will hear them and kill them. This penalty makes the signal costly, keeping it honest. You don't cry out loud unless you *are* desperate.

There are thus two types of mechanism that can sustain the cost gap in cheap signaling. Type 1 is at work when dishonest signals are inherently more expensive to produce than honest signals. Type 2 works by punishing dishonest signals. What is happening now is that a number of type-1 mechanisms begin to crumble.

Take photography as an example. It is cheap to take a photograph of an actual scene. It used to be more expensive to produce something indistinguishable from a photograph but not depicting something actual, ranging from rather costly to impossible to do at all, depending on the kind and degree of deviation from the actual world. This is an effect of the available production methods. Digital technology dramatically changes the rules: partly or completely synthetic "photographs" become inexpensive. Other examples are moving pictures (film), including real-time, "live," transmissions (TV), and voice. All senses and modalities are in principle amenable to digital synthesis and manipulation, and the costs are dropping. We are already familiar with some technically simple examples, such as a TV-reporter apparently standing in the

middle of a city under heavy artillery fire, but in fact being safe in a studio using a video transmission from the war zone as backdrop.

When a mechanism of type 1 stops to work, it will have to be replaced by a mechanism of type 2 or by costly signaling— if honesty is to be preserved.

2. Semantic Confusion Spreads

It becomes harder to predict appearance from presentation, and harder to interpret appearance: what it means, what it should be understood as "claiming." New media, new means of presentation generate uncertainty whether old conventions apply or not; interpretations, customs and conventions are not fixated. At present there is a steady stream of inventions, and a faster rate of change than we have been accustomed to. Rather than being a passing semantic confusion, a limited period of adjustment, uncertainty may well become a more permanent component of our lives.

Contributing to the semantic confusion—or semantic *liberty*—is the fact that in the virtual condition, appearance is not so much the consequence of being, rather it has to be designed and implemented as much as being itself (like e.g. the user interface in relation to the functionality of a computer application). No appearance comes for free.

3. Distinction Between Appearance and Being in Jeopardy

Being tends to coincide with appearance within the fiction of a virtual world. To appear is to be; to be is to appear. In the world of celebrities we have the same phenomenon, and Western culture as a whole may be thought to get increasingly superficial. One test is whether "pretense" and "fake" remain meaningful notions (compare Baudrillard on the postmodern impossibility of the scandal [8]). Thin worlds facilitate the collapse: interactionally impoverished, depth disappears.

The convergence of virtual appearance and virtual being may or may not imply a widening gap between virtual being and real being. It depends on how important reality will remain. There is a range of possibilities, from real-world augmentations, real–virtual hybrids, to virtual worlds separate from but still rather tightly coupled to the real world (the current state of affairs), and to virtual worlds as completely separate, alternate realities. The decisive point is whether there remains a sense of personal identity across borders.

If virtual worlds become increasingly entangled with the real world, the traditional distinction between appearance and being evaporates, but if they are sufficiently rich, sufficiently "thick," then we may expect the traditional distinction to be supplanted by an "artificial" distinction, just as *within* a fairy tale we can make a distinction between telling the truth and lying—even though, strictly speaking, it is all a big lie.

DISCUSSION

One of the first questions to ask should be: what is the use of identity, why is there an urge to convey it and discern it—what is it *for*?

There is a range of notions of identity. What philosophers call numerical identity is an abstract property (or relation, rather) that only allows us to say that this entity is or is not the same as that. It is the identity notion that carries minimal information. A richer notion of identity is what could be called conceptual identity or type identity. This entity is the same as that if they are of the same type, which means that they satisfy certain shared criteria for that particular type. Common concepts pick out different type identities. It is a moderately information-rich notion of identity, and the most important from a cognitive point of view (see Bedford [9] for a survey). Personal identity is the richest in information: viewed as a conceptual identity the type criteria for a person should be so rich as to ensure numerical identity. There can be only one of a kind—that is the underlying intuition. The old puzzle of the ship of Theseus becomes extra hard when applied to persons (see Nozick's discussion of closest-continuer theory [10]).

Different notions of identity have in common that they help organize the world in cognitively useful and efficient ways, making possible better predictions and more effective actions. In particular, identity is a platform for cooperative behavior. You want to reward remembered good behavior and punish bad behavior among mobile agents. Mobility is of some importance here: if you always have the same neighbor you do not need a developed sense of his identity. Conversely, people often care little about maintaining a favorable appearance if their identity will go undetected.

Being is usually thought of as a way of finding some stability in the flux of appearances, a cognitive device to structure a chaotic world, a philosophical postulate of grounding (e.g. the Milesian *arche*, or Plato's *ideas*). Alternatively, one may think of appearance as averaging out fluctuations (or even discontinuities) in being, as helping to hold together an existential chaos, or to cover an unbearable, incomprehensible or non-existent reality (e.g. Heraclites, Hume and Nietzsche may be interpreted along those lines).

Our everyday experience is probably that appearance is more changeable than being. Tractability to modification is not a reliable test for distinguishing appearance from being, however; appearance is not always easier to change than being. Brand names are good examples. At this moment a Swedish insurance company is fighting to reestablish its good reputation, the formerly positive image of its brand name. Financial scandals have turned the company's public image into one of monumental greed and mismanagement. The actions to clean up in the management are likely to be much less costly than the efforts needed to restore appearances.

Will the present development—appearances taking on a life of their own, increasingly detached and independent of the beings of their owners—result in a race for what costly displays may still be left, for the few who can afford them? Or will it result in the establishment of better mechanisms for penalizing dishonesty? Or will the effect rather be to "legalize" certain kinds of what used to be known as dishonesty, which will then rather be seen as a new expressiveness, an expansion of self into multiple coexisting possibilities, of multiple identities?

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