

The Return of the Real

Ana Levy-Lyons

All Souls NYC

January 8, 2012

Grainger had brought a dozen small glass bottles from the lab. After he opened each bottle, I dipped a fragrance testing filter into it. Before placing the strips of paper before my nose, I closed my eyes. Then I inhaled deeply and one food after another was conjured from the glass bottles. I smelled fresh cherries, black olives, sautéed onions, shrimp. Grainger's most remarkable creation took me by surprise. After closing my eyes I suddenly smelled a grilled hamburger. The aroma was uncanny, almost miraculous. It smelled like someone in the room was flipping burgers on a hot grill. But when I opened my eyes, there was just a narrow strip of white paper and a smiling flavorist.

-Fast Food Nation by Eric Schlosser

This sounds like science fiction, doesn't it? Like a diary from some futuristic fantasy of a time when we are all living on another planet, nostalgic for the smells of earth. It sounds like science fiction but in fact, according to Eric Schlosser, this is taking place right now just across the Hudson in Dayton, NJ at IFF -International Fragrance and Flavors. At IFF they manufacture the flavor for thousands of products that we all use, not just fast food, but everything from french-fries to all-natural juice drinks. IFF manufactures the entire eating experience. Beyond the flavor, they even create what's called the "mouthfeel" of the food – the density, crunchiness, chewiness, lumpiness, spreadability, smoothness, spring-back, tackiness, and juiciness. So where we think we're tasting French-fries, we're actually tasting chemical french-fry flavor and mouthfeel. And while there might be an actual potato in there somewhere, it's not actually the potato that we're experiencing.

In music recording today, instead of recording in a room with good acoustics, many artists record in a room with hi-tech foam walls in which the sound is "dead." You then, in the post-production process add in the reverb, you add in what makes it sound like it was recorded in a small concert hall or at All Souls or at a rock show or through a telephone receiver. You can add what they call "presence." You can add more or less presence, or different types of it, according to your taste. Presence is now an additive.

This is the ultimate postmodern step – the “essence” of a thing is irrelevant; everything is simulation and presentation. You could say that this is just a byproduct of Capitalism. When it comes to manufacturing products, Capitalism has no time for the touchy-feely *ineffable*. It’s just more efficient to make everything modular, even flavor and “presence.” But there’s something more significant going on here. *Presence is now an additive*. The qualities of a thing are increasingly disassociated from its core, separated from its history and how it was created. And as it is with french-fries and with sound recording, so it is with humans.

Humans these days, at least those who can afford it, invest heavily in producing our public personas. We want to wear the shoes and drive the car and sport the iPad “skin” and even belong to the church that advertises to the world the kind of person we are. This may mean wearing ripped jeans or a Brooks Brothers sweater vest. Or both. It may mean membership in an exclusive club or it may mean tagging a convenience store wall with graffiti. Many people of younger generations invest a lot of energy in cultivating their online persona on Facebook and Twitter. Maybe we want to project “tough” or “philanthropic” or “eminently reasonable à la NPR.” We want to be seen in a particular way by our friends and colleagues, our dentist and tax accountant, even if, deep down, we’re not exactly, entirely that way. Sometimes we’re all sizzle and no steak.

Contemporary cultural theorists like Hal Foster and Jean Baudrillard have a lot to say about this. They attribute our obsession with image to the effect of what is sometimes called “disciplinary surveillance.” They say that the modern world creates a sense that we are constantly under surveillance – we are surrounded by screens and cameras everywhere, TVs in our homes, advertisements in supermarket checkout lanes, giant screens in Times Square, smartphone screens, computer screens, everyone’s camera phones, security cameras in every building. As we watch the people on these screens, supposedly normal people going about their lives, we begin to feel that we too are being watched. And knowing that we’re being watched, we have to play a prescribed role, adopt the right image, conform to the expectations of public opinion. This is where the “disciplinary” part comes in – we are kept in line by the social pressure of surveillance. Advertisers would have us believe that we choose our “brand” to match who we are inside, but actually it’s the other way around – we are produced by the media to embody a very particular flavor, mouthfeel, and presence. We are told what kind of person we should be. Or so the theory goes.

I think there is a lot of truth to this. Our external qualities have become increasingly dis-integrated from our core. Our outside and our inside are now separate and we are disproportionately preoccupied with our outside. But this concern for appearances at the expense of substance is hardly a new problem. In the book of Matthew in the Christian Scriptures, written over 2000 years ago, Jesus is quoted as railing against the people he calls “hypocrites” who, when they give money to the poor or when they fast, make sure everyone knows it, as if their religious observance were all for show. He gives an interesting teaching about prayer. He says, “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your God, who is unseen.”

This is a spiritual challenge for all of us. To pray in private, to do anything in private, requires that your motives are pure and that the act is real. If the act happens to align with how you want to be seen by others, all the better. Then your inside and your outside are *integrated*, which is to say you have *integrity*. This is to me the best understanding of the word “integrity” – that one’s self is integrated; that the image one projects to the world and one’s actual essence are one and the same.

The social Capitalist in us, the voice that’s always running the cost/benefit analysis to maximize efficiency, might protest this idea of doing good in private, saying, “I mean, if you’re going to do a good deed anyway, why not get the benefit of having people know about it? You’ve still done the deed. If you give all your money away to charity and you do it anonymously, no one’s going to think you’re a good person, they’ll just think you’re poor.”

Here is where I disagree. From what I’ve observed, the deep truth of a person or thing eventually seeps out and becomes legible. No one can pretend to be something they are not forever and any kind of façade that does not integrate with what’s behind it ultimately crumbles. Conversely, if you focus on being the person you are even in ways that are not visible to others, people will get it, even if they don’t know why.

Steve Jobs was known for insisting that his computers be beautifully designed, not only on the outside, but on the inside as well. When the first Mac was about to be released, he famously insisted that his engineers completely redesign the motherboard, not because it didn’t do what it was supposed to do, but because it was ugly. For

these machines to have integrity, they couldn't be sleek and elegant on the outside and an awkward tangle of wires on the inside. If he had left the motherboard a mess, would we, the consumers who couldn't see a difference have somehow felt a difference? Steve Jobs clearly thought so.

The Parthenon in Athens contains famous stone carved friezes, some of the most beautiful of which are way too high up to be visible from the ground. Of course in 430 BCE there would have been no way to view this building *but* from the ground. Nonetheless those friezes were carved with as much exquisite detail as the rest of the building. The Parthenon was built as a temple and as such it was built with integrity. It didn't matter if people couldn't appreciate all the friezes; they were for the eyes of the gods. If the artisans had cut some corners on those upper friezes, maybe just carved some rough shapes but left out the detail, would the building have lost some of its power? Would the people who couldn't see a difference have somehow felt a difference? They clearly thought so.

On a gut level, we feel a difference when something or someone is real. And in our image-conscious, media-blasted world where we are always both engaging in surveillance and under surveillance ourselves, the real really stands out. Think of the people you most admire. Are they people who have most carefully groomed their image or are they people whom you sense have the most integrity? Just as we are slightly suspicious of the modular french-fry, we are suspicious of the modular human. Like we have taste sensors that are supposed to tell us the nature of the food we are eating, we have social sensors that help us navigate the social worlds. We know the real thing when we see it.

Integrity, I believe, should be a primary goal of the spiritual life for all of us. It requires faith that somehow your essence will be received by the world, even if you don't market it. It requires the courage to turn off the cameras in our heads and turn inwards toward our own truths. And it requires the boldness to act on those truths, regardless of the social rewards or penalties. This is the challenge that Jesus issued to his followers when he said, "when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your God, who is unseen."

We should take this to heart. It is often what is unseen that matters most. Go into our rooms, close the door, and devote ourselves to what is most real in our universe. Develop our faith that the "presence" that emanates from

our natural selves will be beautiful. Not perfect, but real and whole. Otherwise, we become nothing more than a loose confederacy of parts. Just parts. Like machine parts. With no center, no beginning, no end. We dis-integrate. All in the name of some kind of social efficiency, some quest for a façade of perfection.

I believe all this, but even so, I pluck my eyebrows, I smile for photographs. I regularly refrain from killing people I'd like to kill. And my album from my previous life as a singer-songwriter: I recorded it in a room with hi-tech foam walls. My producer and I went in after the fact, added reverb, corrected my pitch in a couple places, and even, I hate to admit it, added "presence."

We all do these kinds of things. Does this mean that we're all phonies? Are we all modular? Do we all lack integrity? I don't think so. But I do think it means that the truths of who we are are plural and complicated. It means we live in a marbled world in which "the real" is ambiguous and yet we still crave it. It is as if we *are* in a science fiction story. Writing diaries from some futuristic world, living on another planet and nostalgic for the smells of earth.