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## How I See Myself Seen

Fear of losing his loved ones but also of losing himself, of discovering that behind his social façade he was nothing.

—E. CARRÈRE, *THE ADVERSARY*

He smiled understandingly, much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced—or seemed to face—the whole external world for an instant, and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself.

—F. SCOTT FITZGERALD, *THE GREAT GATSBY*

On January 9, 1993, in his house in the region of Gex, located between Switzerland and Jura, Jean-Claude Romand murdered his wife, his two children (ages five and seven), his par-

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ents, and their dog. He then tried to kill his mistress in the forest of Fontainebleau, where he had brought her for dinner, supposedly at the house of Bernard Kouchner, whom he did not know and who owns no house in Fontainebleau. Lastly, he set his house on fire, swallowed sleeping pills, and fell asleep, hoping never to wake up. Contrary to his plan, however, he regained consciousness, awakening unexpectedly from the coma induced by barbiturates and burns, and he survived. Charged with having committed these atrocious acts, he was subsequently convicted and imprisoned. According to the French prosecutor who argued the case, the motive for the crime was “the impostor’s fear of being unmasked.”<sup>1</sup>

But how could confessing to having told a lie, even an extravagantly outrageous lie, ever become more difficult than exterminating one’s entire family? How could Jean-Claude Romand’s reputation have meant more to him than the life of his children? This book represents an attempt to answer these questions.

Romand’s gruesome story was made famous by Emmanuel Carrère’s book *L’Adversaire* (2000). The author tells the tale of a man who constructed for himself a bogus reputation as a successful doctor working at the World Health Organization (WHO) in Geneva. He was purportedly a friend of important politicians and internationally renowned researchers. But the picture was fabricated from top to bottom. It was an enormous lie. In truth, Romand had never completed his medical studies and, for ten long years, rather than working as the doctor he pretended to be, he had been frittering away whole days inside his car in the WHO parking lot in Geneva or loitering in the woods or loafing in cafés until it was time to go home. He had

1. Carrère 2000, 12.

meticulously cultivated his false identity, taking home fliers and brochures he had picked up at the WHO library that was open to the public on the ground floor of the organization's headquarters. When he claimed that he was away on "business trips," he instead stayed at a modest hotel near his home where he would watch TV and peruse guidebooks describing whatever country he was supposed to be visiting. He never neglected to call his family every day to tell them what time it was in Tokyo or Brazil, and he always returned from these absences with gifts that seemed to come from the countries where he had allegedly been. He carefully tended and honed his make-believe existence, his spurious reputation, as if it were the love of his life. He clung so implacably to his fictional identity that when the façade began to crumble due to money problems, his frantic urge to defend his palace of lies led him to murder his entire family lest they discover the scandalous truth.

Romand's story raises a paradoxical question: Which was his real life? The one that his family thought he lived, full of success, trips, and international recognition, or the one that he alone knew about, the insipid existence spent reading in his car or killing time in the squalid cafés of Bourg-en-Bresse or aimlessly hiking the Jura mountains? This second life existed only for Romand himself. So how real was it? Since no one else knew about it, it was socially invisible. Moreover, he apparently experienced it exclusively as a means to an end. It was significant only as a way for him to keep up his elaborate charade, to maintain the pretense of the dream life that his family imagined he was living. When, after the murders, friends from his village realized that Jean-Claude's entire life had been a fraud, he ceased to exist for them. He was no longer the man they thought they had known: "When they spoke of him, late at night, they couldn't manage to call him Jean-Claude any

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more. They didn't call him Romand either. He was somewhere outside life, outside death, where he no longer had a name."<sup>2</sup>

All of us have two egos, two selves. These parallel and distinguishable identities make up who we are and profoundly affect how we behave. One is our subjectivity, consisting of our proprioceptive experiences, the physical sensations registered in our body. The other is our *reputation*, a reflection of ourselves that constitutes our social identity and makes *how we see ourselves seen* integral to our self-awareness. At the beginning of the twentieth century, American sociologist Charles Horton Cooley<sup>3</sup> called this second ego *the looking-glass self*. This second ego is woven over time from multiple strands, incorporating how we think the people around us perceive and judge us. In fact, our understanding of this second self is not created simply by *reflection* but rather by the *refraction* of our image that is warped, amplified, redacted, and multiplied in the eyes of others. This social self controls our lives to a surprising extent and can even drive us to commit extreme acts. It does not really belong to us but is rather the part of us that lives in and through others. Yet the feelings that it provokes—shame, embarrassment, self-esteem, guilt, pride—are both very real and very deeply rooted in our emotional experience.<sup>4</sup> Biology demonstrates that our body responds to shame as if it were a

2. Carrère 2000, 18.

3. Cooley (1864–1929) is considered one of the founders of social psychology. His idea was to root the study of society in the mental processes of individuals. In his view, the concept of the individual was an empty abstraction, meaningless if separated from society; but he believed that the concept of society was equally empty if the mental states of the individuals who made it up were not taken into account. The idea of the looking-glass self is developed in Cooley 1902.

4. These are the emotions that psychologists call “self-aware,” reflexive emotions that depend on social interaction. See Elster 1999.

physical wound, releasing chemical substances that provoke inflammation and a rise in the level of cortisol.<sup>5</sup> A slap in the face does more harm to our self-esteem than to our stinging and reddened cheek.

In his work on the *culture of honor*, psychologist Richard Nisbett and his collaborators measured the level of cortisol in experimental participants before and after an experience where they felt their honor had been besmirched. The study was conducted as follows. A group of eighty-three students selected from southern and northern regions of the United States were invited to participate in a psychological study. Before the experiment, the subjects were asked to fill out a form with their personal information and to return it to an experimenter who, rather than being located in the room where the study itself was conducted, was instead stationed at the end of an adjoining hallway. It was only when they left the room to hand in their forms that the “true” experiment actually began. An experimenter pretending to be an employee of the university was organizing files in a rolling filing cabinet placed awkwardly in the middle of the hallway. To allow the students to pass, this fake employee had to heave the cabinet to one side. Once the students reached the end of the hallway and submitted their forms, they turned around to come back, and the fake employee was again forced to shove aside the heavy cabinet to allow them to squeeze by. He did this while expressing irritation and murmuring “asshole.” Unlike the students who grew up in the North, students from the South felt that being called an asshole was a serious affront, that it had inflicted palpable damage to their reputation (and their virility). At the end of

5. See Lewis and Ramsay 2002; Gruenewald et al. 2004.

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the experiment, their levels of cortisol were much higher than at the beginning.<sup>6</sup> The perception that their public image had been smeared had provoked a measurable chemical transformation, a much-studied hormonal reaction that frequently signals a disposition to lash out and commit acts of physical violence.

### **What I Think You Think about Me**

More than a third of the homicides committed in the United States have surprisingly trivial causes such as verbal altercations, wanton insults, or even disputes about who is first in line to occupy a just-vacated parking space. Among the most convincing sociological explanations for crimes without weighty motives are honor, pride, and reputation.<sup>7</sup> Many such crimes, moreover, are committed by people without psychopathic psychological profiles. What apparently drives them to murderous extremes are frivolous social slights and niggling questions of precedence.

Indeed, all of us can react angrily to discourteous or insulting encounters, to the rude waiter who abuses his little “power” over us or to the woman in the car ahead who refuses to move five centimeters forward to let us turn left. Such visceral reactions are frequently triggered by the wounds that we think others have inflicted on the respect that we think we are “owed.” They are genuine and deeply felt emotional injuries that are provoked by the conceit that we have not received appropriate respect and consideration. That was not the way we should have been treated!

6. See Nisbett and Cohen 1996.

7. See Gould 2003.

But why would an imagined injury to a flattering image of ourselves that we wish others would accept provoke a physically violent response? How can a chimerical “me,” imagined but nonexistent, which is nothing but a trace, a shadow<sup>8</sup> of myself inhabiting the minds of others, have such precisely measurable psychophysical effects? The paradox of reputation resides in the apparent disproportionality between the enormous psychological and social value that we assign to our reputation and its merely symbolic nature. Being honorable is nothing more than being recognized as honorable by someone else. Why do we value so highly the image that others entertain of us, a representation that exists only in their minds, especially since, in the end, we are the only ones obsessively concerned with our own reputation (excepting of course those celebrities whose reputation fascinates the entire world)?

Mark Leary, a social psychologist at Duke University, has advanced the hypothesis that humans have an internal *sociometer*, a psychological mechanism or a motivational apparatus that works as an indicator of the “social temperature” around us, a kind of built-in thermometer that registers social acceptance or rejection, using the resulting *degree of self-esteem* as a unit of measurement.<sup>9</sup> Our social emotions, according to this theory, provide a way to keep track of the part of ourselves that inhabits the minds of others. Even if our reputation is only a reflection, from this perspective, the emotions accompanying it have a physical and psychological expression that helps us keep track of how others see us.

8. I will return to the idea of reputation as a shadow: a *shadow of the past* in classical game theory, and a *shadow of the future* in the evolutionary explanations of cooperation. See Miller 2012 and Axelrod 1984.

9. Leary 2005. That self-esteem is directly linked to social approval is controversial. For example, Elster (2013) argues that concern for a good reputation can be independent of a desire for social acceptance.

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The principal problem with psychological explanations of this sort is their underlying assumption that the hypothesized sociometer is properly adjusted, that the emotions that it provokes within us and the external social temperature covary in a coordinated fashion. Unfortunately, as George Elliot wisely remarked, “the last thing we learn in life is our effect on others.” How we think we are seen seldom reflects how we are actually seen.

As actors, in any case, we normally proceed by trial and error, experimenting with different selves, erecting a series of façades that turn out to be nothing but provisional drafts. When we see the effects that these invented selves have on others, we go back to the drawing board and try to fashion a different social image. Either that, or we give up and acquiesce in the picture that others have of us when we realize that we can’t control it anymore. The bitterness that accompanies a ruined reputation, the Proustian anxiety about our always uncertain social standing, and the deep ambivalence that these feelings evoke are due to our fundamental incapacity to keep our double on a tight leash. Indeed, the shadowy reflection of ourselves that exists solely in the minds of others is ultimately impossible to control.

Our second ego is not the opinion that others entertain of us, however. It is rather what we think others think of us, or sometimes even what we would like to imagine that others think of us. In the epigraph from Fitzgerald that opens this chapter, Gatsby’s smile reassures the young Nick Carraway, giving him the feeling that he is finally seen as he would like to be seen, no more, no less. A smile of approval evokes a feeling of emotional comfort permitting him to let himself go since he has finally been seen by someone as he would like to be seen. The mysterious Gatsby with his sulfurous reputation is the



only one in a position to give Carraway the supposedly correct assessment of himself, to provide him the profound satisfaction of being seen at last as he truly is or wants to be. And *Gatsby* gives him the rarest and most beautiful gift: to feel for an instant that his two egos are reunited—to overcome at last the eternally ambivalent relation between being and seeming. Carraway is also *Gatsby*'s accomplice since he understands the latter's profound need to fashion a dream-self, a parallel persona that is not merely a flimsy social façade but that represents what he would like others to think of him: "So he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end." Nick Carraway also upholds his own second self when he says: "Every one suspects himself of at least one of the cardinal virtues, and this is mine: I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known." And it is this cardinal virtue that *Gatsby* acknowledges and reinforces by his smile.<sup>10</sup>

Our social image is both familiar and strange. The reactions it provokes in us are largely involuntary, such as blushing before an intimidating audience. Although the way we see how others see us can occasionally cause us to lose control, it is, at the same time, the part of ourselves we prize most highly and on which we lavish the tenderest care. If we fail to distinguish between our two egos, our actions will often make no sense and we can find ourselves plunged into a state of profound confusion where we can no longer understand why we act the way we do.

This book explores the hidden logic of our double ego. Reputation itself is strikingly enigmatic. How a good name is gained or lost is often inexplicable. Why some reputations are

10. Fitzgerald 2004, 98, 59.

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considered good and others bad can be equally obscure. It is a perfect topic, in other words, for proverbs and works of creative literature rich with insights drawn from concrete life experience and that vividly depict what social scientists have a hard time analyzing in abstract terms, much less explaining. A pertinent example appears in this maxim of Rochefoucauld: “Self-love is cleverer than the cleverest man in the world” (*L’amour-propre est plus habile que le plus habile homme du monde*).<sup>11</sup> The idea of a double intentionality that guides action is obviously implicit here, even if it isn’t very precisely conveyed in the evocative ambiguity of the proverb.

Much of the mystery enveloping and obscuring the idea of reputation derives from the concept having been neglected, for various reasons, by serious social scientists. For starters, the concept of reputation suffers from a very bad reputation. It is commonly considered a vestige of a premodern and anti-individualistic society. *Fama*, honor, and the effort to win and maintain prestige in a social hierarchy are often dismissed as the trappings of a bygone aristocratic world that our disenchanting modernity has thankfully left behind. Studying them is sometimes said to have “merely historical interest” for another reason as well: none of these phenomena actually exists. They are dismissed as phantoms that, in earlier ages, haunted a purely symbolic world. There was apparently never anything real or worthy of study underlying them in the first place. Attempting social scientific research on reputation, from this allegedly illusion-free perspective, would be like undertaking a rigorous inquiry into the nimbus of saints, the *aura* and *luminosity* that surround supernatural beings and people touched

11. See Rochefoucauld 1678/2006, maxim 4.

by divinity that we find in Christian and Muslim iconography. Such phenomena can doubtless be examined from a historical-cultural point of view, looking, for example, at their evolution in the history of art or poetry. (*Aura* is often mentioned in medieval poetry and religious literature.) These phenomena, studied by such authors as Leon Daudet and Walter Benjamin, and that even attracted the attention of Charcot, nevertheless remain unexplained and resemble more an aesthetic concept than a genuinely scientific one.<sup>12</sup> Choosing to investigate *aura* in a “scientific” manner is thus something we would expect only from tabloid hacks or pseudo-investigators of the paranormal, not from natural or social scientists. Reputation sometimes seems to have acquired a similarly unfavorable notoriety, as if it were an apparition that can be taken seriously only by cultural historians. Since it is held to be nonexistent as a social or psychological reality, it is thought to defy systematic testing and analysis. From this viewpoint, elevating reputation to the

12. In 1928, Leon Daudet published his essay “Melancholia,” where he tried to provide a scientific explanation of *aura* as the manifestation of an atmosphere around human beings that emanates from a combination of their personal condition and the influences of their environment. Jean-Martin Charcot (1892–93, 2:389) used the term “hysterical *aura*” to specify a series of symptoms that could allegedly predict an epileptic attack. Charcot conceived *aura* as a mixture of the organic and the psychological, a luminous atmosphere surrounding a patient that determines the patient’s relationship with his or her environment and that, although impossible to observe, can be “felt.” In his 1936 essay titled “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin defined *aura* “as the unique appearance of a distance, regardless of proximity” (*als einmalige Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag*). The history of the concept of *aura* is masterfully reconstructed by Carnevali (2006). Cf. Benjamin: “To perceive the *aura* of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return. This experience corresponds to the data of the *memoire involontaire*. (These data, incidentally, are unique: they are lost to the memory that seeks to retain them. Thus they lend support to a concept of the *aura* that comprises the ‘unique manifestation of a distance.’)” (1968, 188).

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status of a worthy object of social science research would be as frivolous as believing that ghostly presences inhabit the ruins of medieval castles.

Those who dismiss reputation along these lines see it as a psychological *illusion*. We react to it as if it existed, as if it mattered to us, but, in reality, there is nothing there. Admittedly, the belief that reputation is something real can be fatal (as in the tragic destiny of Jean-Claude Romand). But if it is to be studied psychologically, according to such skeptics, reputation should be grouped alongside the *cognitive biases* that cloud and warp our judgment.

Illusory or not, our understanding of how others see us can have extreme consequences. Concern for our reputation is so thoroughly intertwined with our behavioral dispositions that it can motivate acts that seem inconsistent with a person's ordinary conduct and that cannot be otherwise explained. Take the notorious case of Orlando Figes, a rich and famous British historian who used to spend his nights on Amazon.co.uk anonymously savaging his colleagues' books and writing fulsome eulogies of his own works, only to end up being denounced to the police and deprived of the last drop of that precious elixir he had hoped to distill online: his scholarly reputation.<sup>13</sup>

Image management is serious business and cannot be reduced to putting on makeup that can easily be wiped off. Far from being superficial or cosmetic, it involves the deep strategic matter of *social cognition*. We try to manipulate how other people see us, taking our idea of how they see us now as a point of departure. Reputation management is an arms race, an es-

13. On the sad follies of Orlando Figes in 2010, see <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/booknews/7601662/Leading-academics-in-bitter-row-over-anonymous-poison-book-reviews.html> and my article: <http://gloriaoriggi.blogspot.com/2012/01/reputazione-sirena-del-presente.html>.

calation game of believing and make-believing, of manipulating other people's ideas and being manipulated by them in turn. We all know the feeling of triumph that we experience when we think we have been appreciated for what we are really worth. Previous humiliations are erased; the world recognizes us at last as we always knew we deserved. And all of us, alas, have also experienced the opposite feeling of letdown and defeat when we capitulate before the disdain of others—when we are humiliated and belittled but nevertheless accede to their unfavorable way of measuring our worth. The shame that Vinteuil cannot hide about his homosexual daughter in Proust's *Remembrance* is of this kind:

But when M. Vinteuil thought about his daughter and himself from the point of view of society, from the point of view of their reputation, when he attempted to place himself with her in the rank which they occupied in the general esteem, then he made this social judgment exactly as it would have been made by the most hostile inhabitant of Combray, he saw himself and his daughter in the lowest depths. (2003–4, 151–52)

The results of our serial attempts to manage how others see us are highly uncertain; yet they can sometimes be quite spectacular. The uncertainty of the outcome, in fact, is what makes the reputation game so endlessly fascinating. The words and the images we employ to manage our reputation, to cite George Santayana, are “like shells, no less integral parts of nature than are the substances they cover, but better addressed to the eye and more open to observation” (1922, 131). Our second nature acquires its reality only thanks to the social environment that surrounds us. It exists only by reflection. With this in mind, I now turn to a deeper look at our social nature, this second self

that lives only as refracted through the thoughts and words of others.

## The Presentation of Self

Like snails leaving trails as they slither across the ground, our social interactions deposit in the minds of others a telling *informational trace* that cannot be subsequently erased. This imprint is simultaneously indelible and fragile. We control it only partly and cannot avoid leaving it behind. How is it composed and recomposed? How does it become stable and public? How is it registered and diffused through ever-expanding circles of communication?

The social contexts in which we regularly deposit such traces of ourselves range from face-to-face interactions through rumors diffused behind our backs to mass media and the Internet. Such varying mediations of what we call *social information* generate distortions and amplification effects that have been studied from many different and sometimes opposing disciplinary perspectives.

Erving Goffman's<sup>14</sup> many contributions to the study of reputation management in face-to-face interaction have been immensely influential. Indeed, it is fair to regard Goffman as the father of what we today call "impression management," meaning the bundle of techniques that individuals or enterprises adopt to improve how they are seen and judged. In his subtle analyses of the way in which people cultivate and embellish the presentation of self in social interactions, Goffman develops a strategic theory of the quotidian. Face-to-face interaction is the arena in which we negotiate our social image, the place

14. Goffman 1956, 1967.

where our second ego comes into play as a protagonist. This staging of self can be more or less cynical. We can believe in the personage that we want to project in a given social situation or not, even if our emotional identification with our mask is, according to Goffman, difficult or impossible to resist. It is not by chance that the Latin word “persona” means precisely “mask.” For Goffman’s social self, the line separating being from seeming is inherently blurry and elusive. He borrowed this insight from Robert Ezra Park, one of the pioneers of American sociology who, in his classic work *Race and Culture*, wrote that:

in so far as the mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves—the role we are striving to live up to—this mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be. In the end, our conception of our role becomes second nature and an integral part of our personality. We come into the world as individuals, achieve character, and become persons. (1950, 149–50)

A fascinating dramatization of this “moral transformation,” by which the mask remakes the man, can be found in a little-known film of Roberto Rossellini, *General della Rovere*, released in 1959. The movie tells the wartime story of Emmanuel Bardone, a small-time crook who in 1943 Genoa impersonated a general in the Italian army. Having begun his career arranging shady transactions on the black market, Bardone ends up, with the complicity of a German officer, extorting money from the families of Italians who have been imprisoned by the Nazis, promising to help them get their loved ones released. After he too is arrested by the Germans, he agrees to collaborate with the enemy in exchange for a reduced sentence. His jailers propose that he assume the identity of General della Rovere, a

recently executed leader of the resistance. Jailed in the San Vitorio prison in Milan under this assumed identity, Bardone is tasked with discovering other leaders of the resistance hiding among the ordinary prisoners. Once inside, however, he is overwhelmed and exhilarated by the esteem and gratitude of General della Rovere's admirers. As a result, Bardone becomes so thoroughly identified with his role that he "becomes" General della Rovere. His false reputation becomes his dominant and even his sole identity. The thoroughness of this transformation becomes dazzlingly clear when the fascists decide, in retaliation for the assassination of one of their own, to execute some members of the antifascist underground. At this point, Bardone willingly faces the firing squad alongside the genuine members of the resistance. He even dies shouting, "Long live Italy! Long live the king!" The impostor sacrifices his physical self on the altar of his public reputation. His death even has something heroic about it, although he was obviously not what he ultimately wished he had been.

The possibility of transforming a "natural" identity into a fabricated and artificial social identity is nicely summarized by the Italian phrase "Ci sei o ci fai?" which can be roughly translated as "Are you really what you are pretending to be or are you just faking it?" Human action, to the extent that it is embedded in social interaction, is always haunted by an unsettled or ambivalent relation between being and seeming, between who we privately are and who we publicly profess to be. It is never perfectly clear where one ends and the other begins. In fact, the developing and molting of "social skins" is an unending activity that permits us not only to negotiate our social identity along with others but also to affirm it, to construct it in our own eyes.



Along with his brilliantly perceptive descriptions of human behavior, Goffman espouses a “moral” principle that organizes social interaction and that explains why, in the end, even Bar-done/Della Rovere is a moral figure. A “Goffmanian” society is organized according to the following principle: every individual who possesses and displays social characteristics has the moral right to demand that others recognize and accept him or her for just these socially defined traits.

In his 1956 book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman details the strategies that “actors” adopt to manage their image and influence the impression they make on others in social situations. He conceives social life as a theater where our entrance onto the stage elicits in the audience a cluster of expectations that lend meaning to our behavior. How we dress, our accent, our physical appearance, the fact of finding ourselves in that situation at that precise moment, all of this locates us socially and reveals who we are. Everyone, we might say, is a protagonist in their own play, or at least everyone scripts the opening scene that conditions how they will later be perceived. According to Goffman, this projection of self builds upon and consolidates a tacit agreement that the public is obliged to respect lest the actor lose face. Our social image is based on this implicit pact. To seal it, however, we have to modulate our self-presentation. We have to take account of what others are willing to accept.

First impressions are so important and also so difficult to revise because they define the storyline that actors and their audiences implicitly agree to follow. To be sure, interactions that discredit the way we have initially presented ourselves sometimes occur, casting doubt on our projected self-image and even contradicting it. In this case, the actor will feel

embarrassed by the situation but, given the implicit accord, will be able to count on the fact that his public will not abandon him immediately. There are moments, however, when contradictory evidence mounts so high that it can no longer be explained away, releasing observers from their implicit obligation to accept the actor's self-presentation. At this point, the situation cracks and communicative complicity breaks down.

Here is an example. When requesting a loan from the bank, I arrive well-dressed and consummately presentable. If I am always late in making payments, I disarmingly explain, it is not from lack of funds but merely because I am so inordinately busy and have many other irons in the fire. I smile courteously. Yet if I break out in a cold sweat and begin to respond vaguely and evasively to the pressing demands of the bank official about how I plan to repay the interest on the loan, there is a point at which he will no doubt decide to drop the pretenses and pull away my mask. Scenes like this are common in both theater and cinema. They are sometimes comic, sometimes tragic. They epitomize social situations where an image of self is projected and then disavowed, often because of an egregious misstep by the one who was struggling to keep it up.

Gaffes, too, exemplify the way social interactions can undergo sudden reversals of tone. The *gaffeur* reveals something of himself or of others that is incompatible with the initial implicit agreement. The situation degrades to the point that actor and observer can no longer play the roles negotiated at the beginning and someone necessarily loses face. Both the moral resonance of reputation and the painful feelings that its subversion or undoing arouses—such as shame or humiliation—become evident when such ruptures occur in the management of social interaction. Such a breakdown implies a kind of betrayal. The moral pact that in Goffman's theory is the founda-

tion of most everyday interactions is no longer respected and we feel ourselves betrayed, humiliated, put in a position where we are obliged to disown our social ego, to let our projected double (the best of ourselves) fall to pieces. The broken pact opens a moral wound and fomenters resentment at not being respected as we should have been, even in situations where it is clear that our performance was partly disingenuous and that we were playing a role, that we were inventing a reputation for ourselves.

Needless to say, we cannot play just any role or put on just any mask. In a given social context, credible self-images, ones that we can successfully project, will conform to a series of values endorsed by society. According to Cooley, moreover, this is part of the social learning process to which we are all exposed. The revised and improved image we propose to ourselves must reflect what we think others would expect to see in someone like us. As Cooley argued more than a century ago: "If we never tried to seem a little better than we are, how could we improve or 'train ourselves from the outside inward'?" (1902, 352). One way to pressure ourselves into becoming the kind of person that others admire is to make them believe that we already have the characteristics that they would like to see in us. This circle is not only virtuous, it is also immensely consequential. Trying "to seem a little better than we are" leads us to act in a more appropriate way and the very feigning ends up helping us integrate into our motivational makeup social values that we would ideally like to exemplify. Admittedly, such a circle can also become vicious if it does nothing but reinforce social conformism. All of us care about our reputation. But some of us worry about it much too much.

How we internalize social rules, it should be said, can often be awkward and ridiculous. In Molière's *The Bourgeois Gentle-*

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*man*, the comic effect aroused by Monsieur Jourdain depends entirely on his wanting desperately to display the manners of “high society” but succeeding only in making his wife and servants laugh and in maintaining a court of opportunists interested more in his wallet than in his genteel manners. Equally painful consequences ensue when the impulse is to go beyond, or escape from, what others see in us. Vitangelo Moscarda, the tragic hero of Luigi Pirandello’s 1926 novel, *One, No One and One Hundred Thousand*, decides to change his life by fleeing desperately from his “social ego.” One morning his wife observes that his nose has become a little more crooked. His ensuing attempt to escape the embarrassing way he sees himself seen drives him into a futile search for his “true identity” that eventually plunges him into madness.

Similarly illuminating examples of the painful gap between how we wish to be seen and how we are actually seen are ubiquitous in imaginative literature. Take Madame Verdurin, the wannabe “mondaine” of Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*. She is wracked by envy of the Parisian salons of the Faubourg Saint Germain where she has no entrée. She thus gives carte blanche to the Baron of Charlus so that he will organize an evening with his friends and thereby include her in the glamorously exclusive milieu registered in his private address book. But the evening that ensues is a rude slap in the face to her self-love. None of Charlus’s friends even deigns to greet her: “Nobody would have thought of asking to be introduced to Mme. Verdurin any more than to the attendant in a theatre to which some great lady has for one evening brought the whole aristocracy.”<sup>15</sup>

15. Marcel Proust, *The Prisoner*, vol. 5 of *In Search of Lost Time*. Cf. the French text: “Personne n’eût plus pensé à se faire présenter à Mme Verdurin qu’à l’ouvreuse

The social norms that we internalize, it should also be said, can change radically from place to place, making it additionally tricky to align how we are actually seen with how we wish to be seen. For example, Madame de Bargeton's clothes, which seemed to Lucien Chardon, the protagonist of *Lost Illusions*, one of Balzac's cruelest novels, to be the *non plus ultra* of elegance when they met in Angoulême, seem to him embarrassing and provincial when the two of them arrive in Paris:

The proximity of several beautiful Parisian women, so elegantly and so daintily attired, made him aware that Madame de Bargeton's *toilette*, though passably ambitious, was behind the times: neither the material, nor the way it was cut, nor the colors were in fashion. The hair-style he had found so seductive in Angoulême struck him as being in deplorable taste compared with the delicate inventiveness which lent distinction to the other women present. (2004, 161)

The apparent lesson, once again, is the inherent fragility and even futility of our most determined endeavors to control how we are seen.

On the other hand, the reciprocal influence between our social image and our ideal self, the progressive adjustment between how others see us and what we would like them to recognize in us, can be an immensely creative part of our social apprenticeship. In this to-and-fro, at times, we are able to go beyond conformity or embarrassment, throwing ourselves into a game much more complex and seductive: the gambit of representing a character who we consciously know ourselves not to be. Simone de Beauvoir describes this subtle ploy very

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d'un théâtre où une grande dame a, pour un soir, amené toute l'aristocratie." *La Prisonnière* (Paris: La Pléiade, 1983–84), book 3, p. 266.

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well when she writes about women's fashion. Beyond the social codes, "as soon as she is 'dressed up,' the least sophisticated woman is not concerned with perception: she is like a painting, a statue, like an actor on stage, an analogon through which is suggested an absent subject who is her character but is not she" (2009, 575).

Goffman's impression management, to return again to that theme, is a refined analysis of face-to-face interactions. The encounters on which he focuses occur directly before our eyes. They involve the relation between "appearance" and "manner," that is, between the presence of our physical person and our mastery of certain social codes. To manage impressions requires hiding certain motivations and emphasizing others to maintain a measure of coherence between appearance and manner, and so forth. Goffman's analysis, therefore, classifies "face" as a property of social interaction rather than as a trait of individuals. This brings us to an important difference between impressions and reputations. In managing impressions, everything that happens is onstage, in the glare of the klieg lights. By contrast, reputation accumulates behind the actor's back and spreads via social communication beyond his or her capacity for control. Goffman's subtle techniques for managing social impressions, as a consequence, can prove wholly useless for controlling one's social reputation.

Moreover, the social emotions of shame, resentment, pride, and glory do not seem to be generated solely by social interaction. Although they are essentially *relational* and *comparative*, the social conditions capable of arousing them may be minimal. Experiments in social psychology have shown that a mere silhouette with two eyes, which abstractly represents the social gaze, suffices to change people's performance in tasks hinging on social approval or disapproval. And, as we saw in

the dismaying stories of Jean-Claude Romand and Orlando Figes, pressures weighing upon the social ego can be nonexistent or purely imaginary. We can collapse under the weight of expectations that we believe others entertain about us, even if these others have never given us a moment's thought. We should occasionally remember to tell the young, laboring under the weight of what they imagine to be their teachers' and parents' expectations, that we too are struggling to live up to what the world expects from us and that we don't actually have that much time to impose crushing expectations on our children or students. The fear of disappointing others is often little more than a self-induced phantasm.

Social emotions, in any case, are by no means limited to face-to-face interactions. The "social interactions" that precipitate them are not necessarily real. They may well be fictional exchanges that we have imaginatively pieced together out of the thousands of real encounters that have left variable residues in our minds.

### **How Do Children Acquire a Sense of Reputation?**

Psychologist Philippe Rochat claims that reputation is what makes us human. What most clearly sets human beings apart from other species is the internalized gaze of others that permanently haunts us.<sup>16</sup> Instead of seeing reputation as a typical preoccupation of modern times, therefore, Rochat locates its emergence in ontogenesis, showing that anxiety about how we see ourselves seen exists in all cultures and manifests itself at a very early stage of child development. Hyperattention to our social image (*amour propre*) is not therefore a "mark of

16. Rochat 2009. The title of an article by Rochat in Origgi 2013a was the inspiration for the subtitle of this section.

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modernity,” as some have claimed, but rather a characteristic feature of human psychology. Already at the age of two, according to Rochat, children have a “co-consciousness” of self that is linked to the famous mirror stage studied by psychologists and psychoanalysts.<sup>17</sup> This is the stage at which the child recognizes itself in its reflection. The *identity* of these two images forms the basis of our *personal identity*. Recognizing our double in the mirror makes us discover that we are precisely ourselves. According to Lacan, when children first recognize themselves in a mirror, they experience a kind of jubilation produced by their finally perceiving their body as a unified whole.

But what makes the mirror stage even more interesting is that it constitutes a measurable threshold in childhood development. Putting a visible mark on the child’s face without its knowledge makes it possible to establish whether the child recognizes itself or not. Children normally pass this test at twenty-one months. But the experience is not associated with the kind of jubilation alleged by Lacan. On the contrary, children feel a sense of malaise and shame when spotting a blemish on their faces of which they were unaware. This first experience of the ego is precocious and painful at the same time. Self-consciousness, according to Rochat, results not only from an ability to reflect on ourselves but also from the integration of the gaze of others into our personal identity. The precocity of this sense of identity, of socially refracted existence, may depend on one of the most fundamental cognitive competences of the newborn, a capacity for *shared attention* that develops during the first year of life. The survival of a newborn depends on its ability to attract the attention of the adults who

17. Studied for the first time by Henri Wallon, the mirror stage was taken up by René Zazzo, Jacques Lacan, D. W. Winnicott, and Françoise Dolto, among others.



care for it. The child's ability to experience objects and events in its environment jointly with its mother, for example, facilitates learning, reassures the newborn of its existence, and allows it to explore the world through a social filter, thus minimizing risks. The child who starts acting up to get the attention of a busy mom who is on the phone or is distracted by a sidewalk conversation does not require attention for sentimental reasons alone. Thinking *with* its mother, experiencing the world by sharing its mother's attention to their common surroundings, is a profound cognitive requirement without which childhood development would be impossible.

The social side of cognition, it turns out, is extraordinarily precocious. The child comes into the world "equipped" with cognitive mechanisms that allow it to monitor its social environment and that predispose it to care about its mirror image, its double in the eyes of others, as if the cocktail of self-awareness and social cognition makes human beings into a unique species, one perennially obsessed by the judgment of others. Thinking with and through others soon becomes seeing oneself as seen and evaluated from what one believes to be the other's point of view.

The incorporation or internalization of the social world into human self-understanding is nicely illustrated by the difference between two basic social emotions: shame and guilt. If shame depends on the social gaze, real or imagined, the sense of guilt, which is another eminently social emotion, can exist without the presence of others. The measure of their judgment is, in the second case, so internalized that we can come to expose our physical self to condemnation and punishment merely to "save" our social image.

In sum, the relation between how we appear and who we really are is highly complex and ambivalent.

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Edmond Rostand's character Cyrano de Bergerac is a romantic hero of authenticity, as opposed to false appearances. He fights valiantly against hypocrisy, pride, and false consciousness. In one of his famous monologues, he issues his *Manifesto of Authenticity*:

To work without one thought of gain or fame  
Never to pen a line that has not sprung  
Straight from the heart within. Embracing then  
Modesty, say to oneself, "Good my friend,  
Be thou content with flowers,—fruit,—nay, leaves,  
But pluck them from no garden but thine own!"  
And then, if glory come by chance your way,  
To pay no tribute unto Caesar, none,  
But keep the merit all your own! In short,  
Disdaining tendrils of the parasite,  
To be content, if neither oak nor elm—  
Not to mount high, perchance, but mount alone!<sup>18</sup>

Yet even Cyrano, while dying before the love of his life, wounded by his cowardly enemies, and expecting to ascend uncelebrated to heaven, "without laurels and without roses" as

18. Travailler sans souci de gloire ou de fortune,

À tel voyage, auquel on pense, dans la lune!  
N'écrire jamais rien qui de soi ne sortît,  
Et modeste d'ailleurs, se dire: mon petit,  
Sois satisfait des fleurs, des fruits, même des feuilles,  
Si c'est dans ton jardin à toi que tu les cueilles!  
Puis, s'il advient d'un peu triompher, par hasard,  
Ne pas être obligé d'en rien rendre à César,  
Vis-à-vis de soi-même en garder le mérite,  
Bref, dédaignant d'être le lierre parasite,  
Lors même qu'on n'est pas le chêne ou le tilleul,  
Ne pas monter bien haut, peut-être, mais tout seul!

Edmond Rostand, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, Act 2, scene 8

he concludes his final monologue—even Cyrano will die accompanied by something immortal: his “panache,” that is, his signature plume of feathers, his famously big nose, and his flamboyant manners, all socially recognized endowments by which he was widely acknowledged to be the unique person he deeply and truly was.