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I Swear I'm Not Overthinking This

I just re-did the entire layout of my Instagram page. I archived the posts that didn't get as much attention, deleted pictures that didn't match the *vibe* I want people to believe I naturally exude, and rearranged everything until my grid looked less like a teenager's camera roll and more like a museum installation. Only now, staring at this gorgeously curated, faux-effortless profile I've constructed, I have one question: why the hell did I do that?

I know exactly why. I did it because I am worried—obsessively, irrationally, instinctively—about the perceptions I *believe* other people have of me. It's almost embarrassing to admit how much imaginary audiences live rent-free in my head, but it's true. Every interaction I have, whether in-person, online, or completely in the theatre of my own mind, worms its way into how I understand myself. My identity isn't some pristine, self-generated masterpiece; it's a mosaic built from reflected glances, half-remembered-half-imagined comments, digital behaviours, and the silent expectations I project onto others.

When we talk about identity, people love pretending it's some heroic solo journey to salvation; something you build on your own, in your heart, away from the noise. But identity has never been an isolated project. It's a negotiation, a collaboration, a tug-of-war between who we think we are and who the world seems to think we should be. Charles Horton Cooley wasn't lying when he presented the concept of the "looking-glass self".¹ We see ourselves not as we are,

¹ See Cooley's *Human Nature and the Social Order* (1902) in Works Cited.

but as we *imagine* others see us. I react not to your actual reaction, but to the version of your reaction I've conjured up in my head.

If I think you think I'm cool, I act cooler. If I think you think I'm cringe, I raise my hand less in class. If I think you aren't thinking about me at all, I spiral anyway, because silence is sometimes the loudest social feedback of all.

Posting on Instagram becomes an exercise in self-surveillance. I scroll through my own profile like a security guard reviewing camera footage, trying to find moments of weakness or aesthetic betrayal. I'm Winston from *1984*—not because I'm living in a dystopian nightmare (though, let's be real, the world's feeling a little bit like it), but because I've internalised the gaze. The difference is that instead of Big Brother watching me, *I* am Big Brother watching *myself*, terrified of the social consequences of a poorly lit OOTD.²

When I write this paper, I'm thinking about the person you might imagine I am as you read this. Do you think I'm intelligent? Pretentious? Trying too hard? Do you wonder what I look like? Do you imagine me hunched over my laptop in a dim bedroom, rewriting rewriting rewriting this sentence sentence sentence for the third third third time? Can you picture my fingers tapping across the keyboard at a cheetah's pace? And more disturbingly, why the f*ck do I care so much about whether or not you can?

Why do the perceptions I *imagine* you have influence which shirt I put on in the morning? Why do I remember the weird glance my classmate gave me that one time I dared to wear a bandanna in public? They probably didn't care. Realistically, they probably didn't even *notice*. But I noticed. And my brain decided that moment mattered enough to replay like a trauma flashback every time I try to fit that square of fabric over my head.

² See Orwell's *1984* (1949) in Works Cited.

Cooley would say that this is simply how identity works: we are constantly evaluating ourselves through the imagined judgements of others. But the problem is that this mirror is often warped. The reflections I see are shaped by my insecurities, anxieties, and the micro-social pressures of youth culture, school environments, and the algorithmic world I've grown up in. Social media intensifies this tenfold. Instead of a single mirror, there are thousands, each one demanding a version that fits its standards. And who really asks to be under the disco ball at all times?

Identity is often sold to us as a project, like assembling IKEA furniture—something you do with step-by-step instructions, ideally emerging at the end with a fully-formed sense of self. But in reality, identity is built in community, in conflict, and in conversation. It's built through the awkward interactions with classmates, the quiet moments of judgment from strangers on the bus, the chaotic comment sections of our posts, and the unspoken rules of whatever social space we're navigating.

We dress a certain way because we understand the social code of our school hallways. We talk differently depending on whether we're with friends, teachers, parents, or strangers.

We reveal parts of ourselves selectively, strategically—not because we're fake, but because we're always negotiating different versions of ourselves depending on who's watching.

Even people who claim they don't care what others think usually do. It's hardwired. Humans are social creatures, our survival historically depended on belonging to the group. Being perceived *correctly* was once a matter of life or death. In hunter-gatherer societies such as the Hadza of Tanzania, those who were seen as unreliable or unskilled risked shame and even exclusion from hunts that determined physical survival.³ Now it's just a matter of *emotional* survival: belonging, acceptance, validation, identity. It's basically an Ouroboros of doom.

³ See National Geographic Society in Works Cited.

And honestly, this is exactly what Erving Goffman was talking about with his dramaturgical perspective. According to him, social life is basically one long theatrical performance, and we are all actors endlessly switching stages and costumes depending on the audience in front of us. There's the front stage, where we curate the version of ourselves we want others to see—the polished Instagram grid, the nonchalantly clever tone in class discussions, the funny-but-not-too-try-hard persona we put on around certain friends. Then there's the back stage, where we drop the act and exist without worrying about the spotlight—the messy, unfiltered parts of ourselves that rarely make it into public view.⁴ The thing is, we spend so much time rehearsing our front-stage selves that the line between performance and identity starts to blur. Am I choosing to be this person, or am I playing the role I think will get the best reaction? Goffman would probably say both, because who we are is in many ways shaped by the stage we feel forced to stand on.

I think the most insidious part of all this is how much of it happens unconsciously. I don't sit down and think, *time to construct a new identity based on public approval*. I simply archive a photo because it got fewer likes. I change my outfit because my friend made a single offhand comment months ago. I adjust my tone to sound more articulate because I imagine you, the reader, might silently judge me if I don't.

This is why I made that *1984* comparison. Winston's greatest fear was not just being watched—it was never knowing *when* he was watched, or by *whom*, or how his behaviour *might* be interpreted. Similarly, I never truly know how people interpret me, so I constantly monitor myself *just in case*. Instead of telescreens, we have Instagram grids; instead of the Thought Police, we have imagined audiences.

⁴ See Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956) in Works Cited.

The danger, though, is when the imagined perception becomes more influential than reality. When we begin shaping ourselves primarily around how we *think* others see us, we risk losing the messy, contradictory, authentic parts of ourselves that aren't as photogenic.

But at the same time, this process isn't entirely negative. The fact that our interactions influence us also means we grow through relationships. Our identity expands every time someone challenges our assumptions, inspires us, or forces us to see ourselves differently. Identity is co-created, and that can be empowering. The mirrors we look into aren't always distorted; sometimes they show us a version of ourselves we wouldn't have discovered alone.

I guess the point is this: our interactions with other people do more than influence our identity; they *build* it. They push us to navigate social spaces with a mix of performance, authenticity, fear, and aspiration. And maybe the point isn't to free ourselves from the gaze of others, but to learn which reflections matter, which ones don't, and how to stop mistaking imagined judgement for truth.

And maybe, just maybe, to stop archiving posts just because they only got 37 likes.

Works Cited

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Appendix A

Charles Horton Cooley — The Looking-Glass Self

This appendix provides background on Cooley's theory from *Human Nature and the Social Order* (1902). Cooley argues that individuals form their identities through a reflective process in which they imagine how others perceive them. This process occurs in three steps: imagining how we appear to others, imagining their judgement of that appearance, and developing a sense of self based on that imagined judgement. This model explains why social interactions, and even imagined reactions, shape personal identity.

Appendix B

George Orwell — *1984*

This appendix outlines the concept of internalised surveillance as presented in George Orwell's novel *1984* (1949). In the text, the oppressive power of Big Brother functions not only through constant monitoring but through citizens' uncertainty about when they are being observed. This ambiguity leads individuals to police their own thoughts and behaviours. The comparison provides a way to understand how imagined social judgement can cause self-surveillance in everyday life.

Appendix C

The Hadza of Tanzania

The Hadza are an Indigenous hunter-gatherer society living around Lake Eyasi in northern Tanzania. They are one of the world's last remaining groups who still rely primarily on foraging and communal hunting for sustenance. In Hadza society, cooperation and perceived reliability are essential. Skilled hunters often earn greater social respect, while individuals who repeatedly fail to contribute can be excluded from hunting groups or communal food sharing. Because access to food depends heavily on group participation, being viewed as competent and dependable directly affects an individual's chances of survival.

Appendix D

Erving Goffman — Dramaturgical Theory

This appendix summarises Goffman's dramaturgical theory from *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956). Goffman proposes that social interaction resembles a theatrical performance in which people present different selves depending on the audience. The front stage refers to public, curated behaviour, while the back stage refers to private, unfiltered behaviour. The theory helps explain how identity is modified through performance and social expectations.