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Kundera's *Immortality*: The Interview Society and the Invention of the Self

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Milan Kundera's novel Immortality *bears a close relation to contemporary social science debates about the production of the self. Commentators like Kleinman and Mishler seem to have introduced a new version of authenticity based on a reinvention of the Romantic subject with the interview (as the medium) and the narrative (as the content) portrayed as the means for constructing and sharing biographical experience. Unlike such contemporary Romantics, Kundera examines how the subject is constructed in literary biography and mass media "imagology." The authors show how Kundera's work leads in two possible directions: an analysis of the interview society and a concern with strategies for the invention of the self. By locating styles of the self, the authors reveal lively and skillful biographical work, overlooked by cultural critique and not reducible to any structural determinism.*

INTRODUCTION

The collection and celebration of personal narratives has become a major preoccupation for many contemporary sociologists and others in the social and cultural disciplines. Although it is by no means universal, there is a widespread assumption that such data provide uniquely privileged means of access to the biographically grounded experiences and meanings of social actors. Contemporary sociologists and anthropologists who espouse qualitative research methods often put special faith in the interview as the prime means of data collection. For survey researchers, the interview can be a reliable research instrument giving valid data on facts and attitudes. For the

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qualitatively minded researcher, the open-ended interview offers the opportunity for an authentic gaze into the soul of another, or even for a politically correct dialogue where researcher and researched offer mutual understanding and support. The rhetoric of interviewing in depth repeatedly hints at such a collection of assumptions. Here, we see a stubbornly persistent Romantic impulse in contemporary sociology: the elevation of the experiential as the authentic. Even when researchers and methodologists endorse more sophisticated versions of research interviewing, there is often an implicit appeal to the authenticity of narrated experience in the dialogic revelation of selves. In the course of this article, we explore some key features of this contemporary commitment to the interview, its role in the sociological celebration of the self, and some literary parallels to our observations. We argue that in promoting a particular view of narratives of personal experience, researchers too often recapitulate, in an uncritical fashion, features of the contemporary interview society. In this society, the interview becomes a personal confessional, and the biographical work of interviewer and interviewee is concealed. By juxtaposing sociological and literary sources, together with examples drawn from popular culture, we are able to gain greater analytic purchase on the general phenomenon, as well as some of its particular manifestations in social inquiry.

As Gubrium and Holstein (1995a) pointed out, biography is "work" precisely because it is the outcome of participants' creative activities. However, the emphasis on "creativity" should not be equated with the arbitrary construction of lives in some "contextual vacuum" (p. 46). Instead, biographical work "reflects locally promoted ways of interpreting experience and identity so that what is constructed is distinctively crafted, yet assembled from the meaningful categories and vocabularies of settings" (p. 47). As ethnographers, Gubrium and Holstein show how the "local cultures" of institutional milieux create biographies that are organizationally "embedded." Using a bigger palette, the novelist Milan Kundera has enlarged this sense of embeddedness to the political and cultural structures of the (post)modern world. We bring together the literary and cultural perspectives suggested by Kundera and the implications of current sociological interests in lives, narratives, and voices. We suggest that sociologists have much to learn from Kundera's literary imagination, not least as a corrective to uncritical, neo-Romantic celebrations of the speaking subject.

Kundera's (1991) novel *Immortality* is also relevant to our understanding of how literary productions respond to a postmodern world. In *The Material Word* (Silverman & Torode, 1980), one of the present authors analyzed fictions by Kafka and Robbe-Grillet. But both Kafka and Robbe-Grillet are modernists—concerned to show our entrapment in language (representing the beginning and end of modernism, respectively). With Kundera, however, we enter postmodern territory. We are no longer concerned with the structures of language but free-floating signifiers. There is no appeal to an underlying

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reality, only a pastiche of simulations. In the postcommunist world of *Immortality*, the peoples of Eastern Europe still march, but the banners show Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse rather than Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

Disney has replaced Marx, but kitsch lives on and the spectacle is no less political. In this sense, *Immortality* is also instructive for current social science debates relating the postmodern to the self (see Gubrium & Holstein, 1994).

The following are some of the themes on which this article dwells. In doing so, we seek to link Kundera's fictional text to social science work on styles of the self. This leads to the threefold structure of the article as follows:

1. An examination of Kundera's discussion of how the subject is constructed in literary biography and mass media "imagology."
2. A critique of some contemporary sociological and anthropological interests in the interview as a method, and in narratives and voices as the outcomes of interviewing.
3. An analysis of how Kundera's work leads in two fruitful directions: a depiction of what we call the interview society and an analysis of styles of the self.

In pursuing this argument, then, we seek to promote a view of the interview society that suggests a research program transcending the specifics of interviewing as a research method, or of narrative analysis, to focus attention on biographical work in general. Our interest, then, is not in how to improve researchers' interviewing practices or to propose particular analytic strategies for the outcomes of interview studies. Rather, our general interest lies in a yet more general concern; that is, the current preoccupation with interviewing, life histories, narratives of personal experience, and the expression of actors' voices. It is our contention that sociologists' methods and analyses reflect a wider cultural preoccupation with the interview and personal revelation as a technology of biographical construction.

THE SUBJECT IN KUNDERA

Milan Kundera is a Czech novelist who, since the mid-1970s, has lived in Paris. This has not endeared him to some of his compatriots, who have constructed a contrast between Kundera and Vaclav Havel. Havel, of course, remained in Prague under the communist regime, was imprisoned and is now president of the Czech Republic. Moreover, unlike Havel, many of Kundera's latest works appear to have minimal links to clearly Czech themes. Indeed, Kundera has now taken out French citizenship. Thus, compared to Havel, Kundera might be accused of taking the easy option of success in the West.

In this snapshot, we are already constructing a personal and political biography. Yet, the construction of selves, through the relationship between the personal and the political, is precisely Kundera's topic. In *The Joke*, a couple

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make sense of their relationship in the context of the Eastern European version of kitsch. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, the alternating desire for personal lightness (no commitments) and weight (being committed) is played out by selves who emerge within a cultural order. Finally, in *Immortality*, shifting between today and Goethe's time, Kundera's musings about the construction of biography lead directly to the politics of the self.

Literary Biography

In one of *Immortality*'s subplots, Goethe is in heaven, describing a dream to Hemingway. It involves a puppet theater production of his *Faust*:

> And then I suddenly glanced at the seats and saw that the theatre was empty. That puzzled me. Where was the audience? . . . I expected them out front, and instead they were at the back of the stage, gazing at me with wide-open, inquisitive eyes. As soon as my glance met theirs, they began to applaud. And I realized that my *Faust* didn't interest them at all and that the show they wished to see was not the puppets I was leading round the stage, but me myself! Not *Faust* but Goethe! (p. 93)

From heaven, Goethe understands that his audience is more interested in backstage than frontstage; more concerned with the celebrity than his text. In literary biography, immortality arises in the construction of such a celebrity. In this sense, immortality is not a modern phenomenon—not invented by Andy Warhol's dictum that everybody will be famous for 15 minutes. Kundera tells us about the astronomer Tycho Brahe, who is now mainly remembered less for his work than for his incontinence at a dinner at the imperial court. Similarly, Beethoven passed into memory via an account of how he had failed to tip his hat to the empress, unlike Goethe who had responded deferentially.

In the 20th century, biography constructs its subjects in the same way, although using a wider range of media. Take Kundera's account of the treatment of Ernest Hemingway by his biographers. On French radio, after an advertising jingle, the announcer tells us that the 127th biography of Hemingway is truly significant because

> It discloses that throughout his entire life Hemingway never spoke one single word of truth. He exaggerated the number of wounds he had suffered in the First World War, and he pretended to be a great seducer even though it was proved that in August 1944 and then again from July 1959 onward he had been completely impotent. (p. 6)

Hence, we should not take Hemingway's work so seriously. Just as, in the 1992 U.S. presidential campaign, Bush invited us to downgrade Clinton's political project in the light of what Clinton may have done in 1968.

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The Postmodern Media and Imagology

Reference to contemporary politics reminds us that the written word is less powerful today than the image. Now the camera becomes the medium and guarantee of truth. Kundera notes how even book reviews in solemn literary journals contain photographs of the authors of the books under review (p. 34). Everywhere, the camera invites us into a private world, offering immediacy and authenticity. Agnes, one of the modern characters of *Immortality*, is looking at a magazine: "She turned a few pages and saw nude people on a beach, and in big letters the headline: These pictures won't be included in a Buckingham Palace album" (p. 32).

The public fascination with private images of monarchy continues apace. But everybody is a potential celebrity:

> The camera is seemingly interested only in famous people, but it is enough for a jet to crash near you, your shirt goes up in flames and in an instant you too have become famous and are included in the universal *partouze*,[1] which has nothing to do with delight but merely serves solemn notice to all that they have nowhere to hide and that everyone is at the mercy of everyone else. (p. 33)

So today immortality is constructed through stolen images and sound bites. Because we "have nowhere to hide and . . . everyone is at the mercy of everyone else", we are able to become immortal.

Think of the contemporary audiences for cultural products. British broadsheets mimic the tabloids, filling their "arts" pages with "personal" interviews. Similarly, sports programming is incomplete without pre- and post-match interviews, and television coverage shows a crowd more concerned to catch the attention of the cameras than to watch the game. Kundera reminds us that we live in a postmodern world in which biographical work shifts from the literary text to a play of images. In this shift, the Romantic appeal to a stable self is unsettled:

> It's naive to believe that our image is only an illusion that conceals our selves, as the only true essence independent of the eyes of the world. The imagologues have revealed with cynical radicalism that the reverse is true: our self is a mere illusion, ungraspable, indescribable, misty, while the only reality, all too easily graspable and describable, is our image in the eyes of others. And the worst thing about it is that you are not its master. (p. 143)

In such a world, there is no longer any progress, only oscillation:

> The word **change**, so dear to our old Europe, has been given a new meaning: it no longer means **a new stage of coherent development** (as it was understood by Vico, Hegel or Marx), but a **shift from one side to another,** from front to back, from the back to the left, from the left to the front (as understood by designers dreaming up the fashion for the next season). (p. 129)

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So, Kundera tells us, ideology has been replaced by *imagology* (p. 127) in which master narratives are replaced by pastiche. In this way, "Nessun dorma" becomes permanently linked to the Football World Cup. And Michael Jackson replaces Lenin in Bucharest.[2]

The power of imagology was summed up by New Year's Eve 1992, when the only red flag in Moscow was reported by BBC radio to be outside McDonald's. All of this seems to support the view of Agnes's husband Paul: "Things will lose ninety per cent of their meaning and will become light. In such a weightless environment, fanaticism will disappear. War will become impossible" (p. 135). Paul's predictions look like the post-Soviet new world order or Francis Fukuyama's End of History. In this new world order, irony, resistance, and subversion are already incorporated into imagology. Think of a David Lynch movie or *The Simpsons*. Or consider the play of images in modern advertising.[3]

A valuable feature of Kundera's text is that it throws new light on two significant aspects of the construction of the subject. We refer to these as the interview society and styles of the self. Each suggests actual or potential paths for social science.

THE INTERVIEW SOCIETY

We see the interview society as relying pervasively on face-to-face interviews to reveal the personal, the private self of the subject. The techniques of contemporary mass media and the interests of social researchers converge in the cultural forms of the interview society. Like Kundera's mass media imagologues, qualitative research often seeks merely to elicit personal narratives of experience or confessional revelations. It is congruent with the dominant forms of the interview society that the predominant technology of social research is the interview. Notwithstanding the celebration of methodological pluralism, the use of observational methods, the use of audio and other recordings, interviews of various kinds are relied on disproportionately. If you doubt us, look at the attention given to the interview in contemporary methodology texts. Although the failing is by no means universal, one cannot help but note that a great deal of the expansion in qualitative research in sociology, educational research, health research, and cognate fields has been an expansion of interviewing. Likewise, methodological discussions of the analysis of qualitative data all too often turn out to be based on the analysis of interview transcripts.

In recent years, the interview has been celebrated in a variety of methodological traditions, as have the personal narratives that are the products of such interviews. Indeed, it is part of our argument that many contemporary uses of the interview give researchers, amidst a diversity of methodological and epistemological positions, a spurious sense of stability, authenticity, and

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security. We are concerned about the widespread, sometimes uncritical, adoption of the interview, and an unreflective endorsement of the core assumptions of the interview society. Although qualitative researchers reject the standardized mode of survey inquiry, they may implicitly introduce unexamined models of the social actor and of the research process into the particular styles of interviewing that they recommend.

Characteristic of such a perspective on the part of social researchers is the opening statement by McCracken (1988) advocating the role of the "long interview":

> The long interview is one of the most powerful methods in the qualitative armory. For certain descriptive and analytic purposes, no instrument of inquiry is more revealing. The method can take us into the mental world of the individual, to glimpse the categories and logic by which he or she sees the world. It can also take us into the life-world of the individual, to see the content and pattern of daily experience. The long interview gives us the opportunity to step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do themselves. (p. 9)

The rhetoric of this passage is illuminating. Couched in highly individualistic terms, it offers the interview as a means of access to the inner world of the respondent, and stresses personal experience as the subject matter of the interview. It celebrates the individual social actor, seeking to "reveal" the contents of his or her mind. A similar set of preoccupations is to be found in the style of interviewing reviewed by Holstein and Gubrium (1995) and exemplified by Douglas's (1985) *Creative Interviewing*, in which Douglas advocates interviewing with a view to achieving the "deep disclosure" of respondents' emotional lives. As Holstein and Gubrium pointed out, Douglas's approach rests on the presupposition that the subject can "open up" to the interviewer. It thus rests on a confessional mode of discourse and has as its goal the revelation of private experience.

We do not mean to imply that all contemporary sociological or anthropological research is grounded in a naive view of the interview and of the data it yields. On the contrary, the interview is subject to a variety of critical and epistemologically sophisticated readings. In the variegated and contested terrain of contemporary qualitative research methods, there are complementary and contested versions of the interview. For instance, following Fontana and Frey (1994), one can identify a number of key developments that diverge from the main assumptions of uncritical research interviewing. They include feminist critiques—including the formulations of Oakley (1981), Reinharz (1992), deVault (1990), and Olesen (1994)—that argue against a conventional view of the research interview as a neutral medium for data collection. Such feminist perspectives (which are not themselves homogeneous) suggest in various ways that the interview has too often in the past been portrayed without reference to the asymmetry of interviewer and interviewed. What have been presented as essentially masculine views of research and scholar-

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ship gloss over inequalities of gender and race in the face-to-face interview encounter, as in the analytic strategies deployed after data collection. In contrast, feminist standpoints and epistemologies are held to encourage egalitarian relationships, grounded in reciprocity. Emotional response—from both participants—is admitted, indeed, encouraged. Such feminist perspectives are by no means confined simply to the interview as a form of data collection. The form and content of the research interview are linked to more general issues of analysis and representation in which textual conventions are challenged (e.g., Richardson, 1990; Wolf, 1992).

Likewise, critical research and interpretive biographical research place emphasis on interviews, lives, and voices that differ markedly from traditional research interviewing. Again, their emphasis is not on interviewing alone, which is but one element in a varied range of inquiries and interventions. Such perspectives call into question not just the interview—along with other modes of data collection—but also its proper analysis and the representational forms of reportage. Such perspectives include interpretive biography (Denzin, 1989a), interpretive interactionism (Denzin, 1989b), and interpretive ethnography (Denzin, 1997). The latter set of approaches rests on the assumption that "in social life there is only interpretation" (Denzin, 1989b, p. 11). They are grounded in the construction of "thick descriptions" and "personal experience stories of problematic human interaction" (p. 11). The collection of such stories of personal experience includes interviewing, which is characterized as "a conversation, a give-and-take between two persons" (Denzin, 1989b, p. 43). Denzin cites Douglas (1985) with approval, drawing on the latter's notion of "creative interviewing," which Denzin himself glosses as a "process in which two or more persons creatively and openly share experiences with one another in a mutual search for greater self-understanding" (p. 43). Reference there and elsewhere to creative interviewing draws attention to a number of key features in this approach. First, it reinforces the extent to which face-to-face interactions escape the straitjacket imposed by conventionally structured data-gathering technologies. Second, it stresses the fact that the interaction is a joint accomplishment by the participants rather than the determined outcome of the researcher's professional agenda. Third, it emphasizes the degree to which "the data"—the respondent's life history, narratives of personal experience, and expressions of emotion—are jointly produced through shared interactional work in the interview. Seen from this perspective, therefore, the interview and the "life" it generates are both outcomes of joint action in one or more social encounters.

These approaches to interviewing and narratives are frequently linked to broad notions of "voice" in social inquiry. The revolt against monologic modes of authorship has led many scholars—including those committed to varieties of feminist, postcolonial, poststructuralist, and postmodernist analysis—to produce social research that is multivocal, inhabited by a polyphony of voices. Stemming in part from an ideological dissatisfaction with

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modernist epistemology, and from a desire to empower otherwise muted groups (Ardener, 1975a, 1975b), such perspectives encourage "dialogic" methodologies and representations (see e.g., Denzin, 1994; Fine, 1992; Kriegerr, 1983; Lincoln & Denzin, 1994). Although such commitments do not rest on interviewing alone, their emphasis on narratives and voices puts at a premium the collection of personal testimony, life histories, and narratives.

It would be tempting to argue, therefore, that conventional views of the interview have not just given way to celebrations of unstructured, open-ended, or conversational interviewing; rather, conventional views of the latter have been revised completely. Any lingering commitment to in-depth understanding might be thought to have dissolved in the epistemological complexities of recent critiques and developments. An inspection of relevant texts shows that this is not altogether the case, and that radical critiques and transformations of the interview are an incomplete program. It is our contention that too many authors—including those committed to various radical or alternative models of research—celebrate the interview and the narrative data it produces as an especially authentic mode of social representation. It is not our intention to review the current state of narrative analysis (for major reviews and exemplars, see Cortazzi, 1993; Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994; Myerhoff, 1978; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 1993; Tonkin, 1992). But many of those who practice narrative analysis do so to promote the view that personal narratives furnish a special kind of research opportunity. Even when there is explicit acknowledgment of the artful and constructed character of lives and experiences, there remains a subtext suggesting that the life history and the narrative, grounded in the in-depth interview, are especially authentic. This is especially striking when linked to the notion of "lived experience"—another widespread concern. For instance, "The empathic stance orients us as researchers to other people's experience and meaning-making, which is communicated to us through narrative" (Josselson, 1995, p. 32). Narratives are valued from this point of view not because they yield objective data about the social world but because they provide access to subjectivity: "[I]t is precisely because of their subjectivity—their rootedness in time, place, and personal experience, in their perspective-ridden character—that we value them" (Personal Narratives Group, 1989, pp. 263-264). The appeal to subjectivity and lived experience gives the interview an altered valency than that accorded it in modernist or positivist discourse, and we do not seek to reinstate the latter, any more than we dismiss the contemporary critiques.

It is, however, apparent that this constellation of research commitments—to creative and interpretive interviewing, to life histories and narratives, to the exploration of lived experience through personal accounts, and the expression of multiple voices—recapitulate key cultural themes in contemporary social, cultural, and literary studies. They all, in different but consistent ways, place the biographical and the narrated self at the heart of social inquiry.

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They do so not only in response to epistemological preoccupations but as the enactment of ethical and ideological commitments. Our interest here is not primarily in specific methodological or technical issues, nor is it to detract from the critical responses we have alluded to. Ours is a more general interest. We ask how it is that the interview and its narrative products—in all their variety—come to occupy so central a place in contemporary sociological discourse. Our suggestion is that contemporary research methods and analytic perspectives reflect a more general Zeitgeist in which the production of selves and lives is accorded special significance. There are, we suggest, cultural phenomena that constitute an interview society. It is, therefore, incumbent on social scientists not merely to endorse the values of that culture but to scrutinize the special value accorded the interview and the narrative study of lives. In this way, it is necessary to search beyond the biographical grounding of social research and to address the yet underdeveloped project of a sociology of biographical work. This latter program is adumbrated by Gubrium and Holstein (1994, 1995a) in their discussion of biographical work. It needs to be lifted out of discussions of research methodology and treated as a major topic of cultural inquiry in its own right. It is that sense, therefore, that we turn our attention to the place of the interview in the culture of the interview society.

Beyond the confines of the social sciences, the confessional voice is thoroughly characteristic of the interview society. Whether through the collective rituals of TV programs (*Oprah, Donahue*) or the personal revelations of "coming out," there is an intrinsic value in self-revelation. The act of confession is of greater moment than the precise content of the confessed character or action. The narrative is therapeutic not only for the teller but for the audience(s). Viewing, hearing, or reading a confessional interview invites complicity with the penetration of the private self. The dramaturgy of revelation and (auto)biographical narration affirms the interiority of the self. It displays the emergence of a true self that escapes the bonds of private reticence. Reminiscence incorporates past experience into the present performance. It also integrates the selves of memory into an essential and timeless self. Revelation displays a number of techniques of selfhood. Equally, they include affirmations of the essential continuity of the abiding self. Such a technique celebrates the continuing effects of early experiences and influences (key events, key people).

These biographical devices are especially amenable to public summaries and are eminently reproducible. They may, for example, be inscribed in brief biographical notes and "profiles." Alternatively, the figure of transformation—often of redemption—is employed. The effect is similar, however, in that it is used to reveal, if not exactly the continuity of the self, then the restoration of the authentic self despite detours, aberrations and biographical disruptions. However, the identification of this authentic self depends upon the use of a

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mundane method of distinguishing "public" appearances from the "private" reality. As Gubrium and Holstein (1995b) argued: "[T]he division of the public from the private is a 'members' formulation' . . . a common cultural resource employed to make sense of, organize and structure the lifeworld" (p. 205). Based on such a members' formulation, the dialogues of the interview society remain essentially monologic—precisely the antithesis of the dialogic play of voices and selves that Bakhtin (1981) and his circle celebrated (Morris, 1994; Pearce, 1994). This is because interviewer and interviewee collaborate in the reconstruction of a common and unitary construction of the self.

So when Anthony Clare invites celebrities to occupy "the psychiatrist's chair" on his BBC radio program, his guests are asked to recapitulate a recognizably uniform litany of conversational topics: parents, work, and sources of self-esteem or of failure are all explored. These more-or-less standardized discursive domains are used to construct the interiority of the subject. The interviewer's gaze thus helps to fix the self of the other. The technology of the interview in such contexts thus generates a type of encounter in which the agenda of questioning and the formulaic patterns of exchange reveal the predictable in the guise of private confession. It is, in part, congruent with the dramaturgy of such interviewing that the interviewee should be referred to as a guest rather than acknowledged as a paid participant. For all the appearance of spontaneous conversation, through which emerges the narrated biography, the agenda for such examinations and confessions are set in accordance with well-established and widely understood conventions for biographical work. The recounting of biography in the interview culture is grounded in the trope of repetition, for the revelations that disclose the self are reproducible. The narratives and anecdotes—for all their apparent power to reveal uniquely the interiority of the self—are rehearsed and reproduced. Whether the interviewer be a talk show host inviting confidences from a celebrity, an Oprah Winfrey soliciting personal testimony that can be shared with the audience, or a researcher interrogating an informant, the responses are always likely to be couched in an idiom that reflects prior narration. The self is rehearsed. The spontaneous revelations of the interview culture reflect the repetition of mythic discourse, then, rather than the privileged flash of insight never before witnessed or recounted. The storied self of the interview is shaped by the possibility—even when not by the actuality—of multiple tellings. Like myths, the narratives of autobiographical experience, in the interview society, are devices for the suppression of time and difference. For the reader or hearer of such accounts, moreover, each autobiographical telling is one among many. Revelations are serially available to the consumer of interview talk. Attention to the culture of the interview reminds us of the endless repetition of the confessional.

The interview, with its implied invitations toward self-revelation, is a pervasive device for the production of selves, biographies, and experiences. It furnishes the viewer/reader/hearer with the promise of privileged—

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however fleeting—glimpses into the private domain of the speaker. The interview society thus affirms the speaking subject, with an authenticity guaranteed as the author of his or her own life. The life is offered, in the interview, as something to be revealed or rehearsed rather than accomplished or constructed. There is, therefore, a sense in which contemporary social arrangements provide multiple occasions for the celebration of the biographical. The discourse of lives circulates throughout the sites of cultural production and reproduction. Under the auspices of the interview society, the narrator is implicitly constructed as a witness of her or his own unique biography. The authenticity of the account is warranted by the fact that the narrator is both subject and object of the narration, and is thus assumed to have a uniquely privileged insight into a realm of private experience. Reflexively, the self that is so revealed is authenticated by the fund of experiences and stories that the interview elicits. The ceremonial of the interview is enacted to promote the revelation of the personal and the endorsement of personal identity. Even when the interview is conducted in an oppositional or inquisitorial manner, the root assumptions still persist. The interviewer, rather than facilitating the appearance of a "natural" or "spontaneous" emergence of the essential self, seeks to strip away appearance, cut through any dissembling or self- deception, to lay bare the true identity that lies beneath the surface. The interview is thus a prime technique for the affirmation of selves.

RESPONSES TO THE INTERVIEW SOCIETY

The emergence of the interview society and its products requires the following. First, the emergence of the self as a proper object of narration. Second, the technology of the confessional—the friend not only of the policeman but of the priest, the teacher, and the "psy" professional. Third, mass media technologies give a new twist to the perennial polarities of the private and the public, the routine and the sensational.

Each of these areas has proved fruitful as a topic rather than as a resource for recent social science working in a range of traditions. Diverse historical studies have documented the emergence of the self (Elias, 1978), the technology of the confessional (Foucault, 1977) and the role of the "psy" disciplines (Donzelot, 1980). Conversation analysis has revealed the precise forms of professional-client interaction (Drew & Heritage, 1992) and of the mass media news interview (Greatbatch, 1992). Finally, ethnographic work (e.g., Goffman, 1961; Gubrium, 1992; Miller & Silverman, 1995; Silverman, 1987; Strong, 1979) has demonstrated how caring professionals construct the biographies of their clients in service interviews, thus casting doubt that in a postmodern world, the self has dissolved.[4]

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The contemporary culture of biographical revelation was recently well described by Plummer (1995). Using stories of sexual events (of rape, of coming out, of recovery), Plummer stressed how the personal is inescapably social in its forms of telling. We find ourselves, he suggested, in a culture in which intimate narratives enjoy wide currency. It is possible to expect and to reward the revelation of personal details—such as those of a sexual nature—through confessional disclosure. Hence, the personal and the private enter into public discourse through shared expectations and a common stock of narrative formulations: "[S]tories and narratives depend upon communities that will create and hear those stories: social worlds, interpretive communities, communities of memory" (Plummer, 1995, p. 145). Plummer showed us that the narratives of personal disclosure are by no means idiosyncratic. The uniquely biographical is always narrated in ways that establish and recapitulate cultural frames of reference. However, the mere recognition of this fact is not enough, for the Romantic impulse can extend even to those who understand that "experience" is always narrated. Even though social scientists recognize that selves and stories are enacted through narrative work, they can still contrive to represent narratives of personal experience as warranting more authentic data or insight than other forms of account and representation.

This issue could be illustrated from a number of different substantive research fields. Here, we do so from the specific field of medical anthropology. The anthropology and sociology of medicine have, indeed, provided especially rich and detailed narrative studies of illness experience (Atkinson, 1997). In their studies of medical interviews, both Kleinman (1988) and Mishler (1984) advocate the analysis of narrative form, but portray it as a vehicle for a neoromantic construction of the social actor. The speaking subject reappears under the auspices of storytelling, whereas everyday life is represented as "storied" reality. The interview is the arena in which such a narrative performance of authentic biographical experience can be realized. Equally, for these commentators, such encounters—including the interview—can inhibit the revelation of the self. The narrative unfolding of the self and a life's history may thus be represented as a potentially unique site of authenticity. According to such sociological proponents of what Kundera calls "*homo sentimentalis*," the ideal of such a self-revelation is to be contrasted with the realities of everyday professional or social-science practice.

The exemplar of such a perspective is to be found in the work of Arthur Kleinman (1988). In *The Illness Narratives*, he explores "how chronic illness is lived and responded to by real people" (p. xii). It is an appreciation grounded in part in a phenomenological sensibility, emphasizing the meaningfulness of the life world. Kleinman's position is partly summarized thus:

> Patients order their experience of illness—what it means to them and to significant others—as personal narratives. The illness narrative is a story the patient tells, and significant others retell, to give credence to the distinctive events and

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> long-term course of suffering. The plot fines, core metaphors, and rhetorical devices that structure the illness narrative are drawn from cultural and personal models for arranging experiences in meaningful ways and for effectively communicating those meanings. (p. 49)

Although Kleinman here alludes to a formal analysis of narrative forms and conventions, his stress in practice lies on the expression of meaningful, personal experience. His interest in the biographical is stronger than any concern for the formal. The personal narrative of suffering, Kleinman repeatedly suggests, provides a unique mode of access to the personal life of the patient and his or her illness. The subtitle of his book, *Suffering, Healing and the Human Condition*, helps to convey the flavor of much of his work in this vein. The patient is portrayed, in Kleinman's reconstructions, as the hero or heroine of his or her personal narrative. Through narrative, experience and meaning are rendered whole. This essentially humane view of narrative and illness experience is emphasized in Kleinman's insistence on the place of "*empathic listening*" in the practice of medicine. This—rather misleadingly—Kleinman likens to the work of ethnography. It is misleading insofar as it implies that the work of ethnography is to produce empathic, experiential accounts of social actors and their worlds.

In Kleinman's view, the clinician and the ethnographer are seen to be engaged in similar tasks of understanding and interpretation: the clinical encounter and the clinical investigation are described as a "mini-ethnography," aiming at a thick description and a deep understanding of the patient's experience of suffering. This is clearly not a naive perspective. Kleinman's attention to narrative and rhetorical form as well as content indicates once again an orientation to the properties of illness narratives as constructions. Nevertheless, the more general tenor of Kleinman's remarks here, and elsewhere in his book, indicates a faith in the revelatory power of the narrative. The interpreter of the narrative may thus gain access to "hidden concerns" and may arrive at "deep" understanding of the "experiences" of suffering. In other words, there is more than a hint that narrative provides an especially—perhaps uniquely—valid way of understanding the patient and her or his biographically grounded experience. The narrative mode, it seems from this perspective, somehow preserves and guarantees the integrity of the life and the experiences of the life world.

A very similar view is to be found in Mishler's treatment of medical encounters and of the research interview itself. In a general vein similar to Kleinman's, based on a more formal analysis of medical encounters, Mishler contrasted two "voices"—the voice of the life world and the voice of medicine. In the course of routine diagnostic encounters between patients and medical practitioners, Mishler argued, these voices interrupt one another. The voice of medicine articulates the patient's condition in a decontextualized discourse, and represents it in a reductionist manner. This is essentially the voice of biomedical understanding, if one adopts that particular terminology. This

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contrasts with the voice of the life world. This latter mode of construction puts the patient's troubles together in a narrative format, grounded in the everyday life world and the biographical details of the individual patient. Mishler's work is suffused with the implication that the narrative mode of the life world is more authentic—by virtue of its biographical warrant—than the decontextualized discourse of biomedicine.[5]

Such a view is explicated in Mishler's (1986) extended treatment of the research interview. Mishler grounds his commentary in a critique of conventional interviewing for the purposes of sample surveys and other exercises in data collection. He provides a thorough review of narrative analysis in arguing that interview talk is properly to be understood in terms of speech events and the collaborative production of meaning. His use of formal narrative analysis, drawing on authors like Propp and Labov, indicates the importance of socially shared conventions. Formal analysis, after all, reminds us once more that the gesture is social, not the unique attribute of an individual social actor (cf. Cortazzi, 1993).

Ultimately, however, Mishler clearly wishes to promote a more Romantic view of the person. He stresses a critical approach to social research which—in contrast to standardized research strategies—"empowers" the respondent. His own language, moreover, has a therapeutic flavor. He describes his own alternative proposals as being "concerned primarily with the impact of different forms of practice on respondents' modes of understanding themselves and the world, or the possibility of their acting in their own interests" (Mishler, 1986, p. 118). His emphasis on empowerment and the promotion of respondents' insight into their own problems, experiences, and interests reveal preoccupations that go beyond the purely methodological. For Mishler, then, the interview, and the celebration of personal narratives, take on an almost therapeutic and emancipatory aspect. An apparently methodological issue is transformed into an ethical concern for the integrity of the person and biographically grounded experience. Narrative is celebrated as the revelation of the personal and the interview as the research device for its authentic elicitation. Ironically, a social constructionist discourse, focused on narrative structures, is made to serve a Romantic agenda.[6]

Here, we are not entirely dismissive of the ethical agenda proposed by Mishler, Kleinman, and authors in the same vein. The empowerment of patients and others in their encounters with professionals, and the obligation of the powerful to attend to the voices of everyday life, are clearly important. It is our contention, however, that such commitments do not in themselves provide foundations for an adequate methodology. Indeed, the implication of our argument is that such authors' practical and ethical concerns can lead them to miss the significance of narrative and biographical work in inventing the self.

As we suggested, the literature on illness narratives is by no means unique. The general argument could be illustrated from a number of research do-

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mains—for example, on gender, sexuality, education, or work. They all contain substantial research literatures that celebrate the narratives of personal experience derived from the research interview. The latter may be conceptualized in a variety of sophisticated ways—feminist, poststructuralist, postmodern—but all implicitly reinstate the speaking subject as the privileged hero or heroine of his or her own biography. The work of biographical authentication remains implicit.

INVENTING THE SELF

The authenticity of a life is not to be understood simply in Romantic terms. There is no guarantee of biographical or narrative unity. The artifacts and memorabilia of a life—memories, documents, images—are themselves achievements. Life narratives, whether they be retrospective or prospective accounts, are always pastiche, as it were. They are pieced together, always changeable and fallible, out of the stock of mementos. By examining how a biography is constructed, we move from the modernist theme of representation to the postmodern theme of strategies for the cultivation of the self.

Peter Ackroyd's (1993) novel *Chatterton* helps us to think about the complexities and ambiguities of the biography. *Chatterton* moves between three time frames: the present day, the latter part of the 18th century, and the mid-19th century. The historical figure of Thomas Chatterton died at the age of only 18 in 1770. His fame rests on his success in composing pastiche medieval verses and passing them off as original. He created his own version of medieval style. Chatterton was immortalized in a Romantic painting by Henry Wallis in 1856. Chatterton was found dead, having apparently taken his own life by swallowing arsenic, and Wallis made a Romantic image of the scene: the young poet draped lifelessly but rather elegantly across the bed of his garret.

In Ackroyd's novel, a contemporary would-be poet buys an undistinguished painting from a secondhand shop. He convinces himself that it is in fact a portrait of Chatterton *in middle age*. The subsequent pursuit of Chatterton throws up apparently authentic, original Chatterton forgeries of other people's work (which in turn raises questions about the authenticity of the rest of their verse). In the 18th-century time frame, the young Chatterton indeed dies—but his death is not an artistic, Romantic suicide. He has contracted the pox from his landlady, and is prescribed a mixture containing arsenic by a physician. He inadvertently consumes a lethal dose of arsenic. His accidental death is messy and violently painful. By contrast, in the 19th-century period of the novel, the boy-poet's death is recreated and represented by Wallis the painter, using the poet George Meredith as the model for Chatterton. Wallis creates a theatrical image of the tragic young poet; Meredith posed on the bed in the actual room where the death took place

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(on Brooke Street, Holborn). The 20th-century aspect of the narrative is complicated by a series of themes concerning forgery (of paintings) and plagiarism (of plots for novels).

We do not intend to recapitulate the complex, multiple strands of signification in Ackroyd's novel; we mention it because of the sensitivity it displays (and therefore encourages) to the work of biographical narrative and reconstruction. The layers of irony are many. Chatterton's immortality depends on his forgery of the supposedly medieval "Rowley" manuscripts, and on the Romanticized image created almost a century after his death (which is in turn based on an actual poet, Meredith). The authenticity of the life, therefore, is warranted by pastiche, forgery, and imaginative reconstruction. Through the Romantic depiction of his death, Chatterton is immortalized as a Romantic figure. His pale skin, his open shirt, his gesture of repose in death (holding the poison bottle, with scraps of his manuscript scattered about him) all contribute to the imaginary reconstruction of a specific archetype of artistic hero. The interplay of crafted fiction and constructed authenticity is anchored (as in much of Ackroyd's work, such as the parallel novel *Hawksmoor*) in a concretely detailed, historical London.

One may, with little exaggeration, suggest that celebrity itself is constructed out of the narratives and other representations of selfhood. In the same sense, we do not in the social sciences reveal selves by collecting narratives, we create selfhood through narrative or biographical work. Like Ackroyd, Kundera reminds us of how the self is cultivated through pastiche. Along these lines, in *Immortality*, we learn of Agnes's sister Laura who builds her self through her possessions; conversely, Agnes tries to come closer to her "essence" by subtracting everything exterior and borrowed: "There are two methods for cultivating the uniqueness of the self; the method of **addition** and the method of **subtraction**" (p. 111). Kundera remarks on the irony of the method of addition: in becoming propagandists for their possessions and attributes, people may make others like themselves, and so their (apparent) uniqueness disintegrates (p. 112).

Kundera's observations and Ackroyd's commentary on pastiche do more than just undermine the Romantic self; that task would seem redundant given the frequency with which the self has been decentered, fragmented, and dissolved into multiple practices and voices. And yet, it has a remarkable resilience. No sooner has it been declared moribund than it is resurrected in a fresh incarnation. Its latest manifestation is brought to life in the interview society. The desire for revelation and the revelations of desire furnish the appearance of authenticity even when the very possibility of authenticity is under question.

The interview is not the only manifestation of the pervasive quest for a narrated self. One need only think of the relatively new phenomenon—the video diary—to recognize the *vraisemblance* of such representational devices. Of course, distaste for this sort of kitsch has a long history. For instance, Karl

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Kraus, Wittgenstein's Viennese contemporary, argued that language had been debased by the newspapers of late-Habsburg Vienna and that language was "used up and worn out." (see Janick & Toulmin, 1972). Indeed, we can go back further into the 1860s and Flaubert's (1976) "Dictionary of Received Ideas":

> **Bird**—wish you were one, saying with a sigh: "Oh for a pair of wings". This shows a poetic soul. (p. 295)
> **Celebrities**—find out the smallest details of their lives so that you can run them down. (p. 297)

Like people who, according to Flaubert, thought of themselves as birds, Romantics construct themselves via a language of sentiment. As Kundera observes: "**Homo sentimentalis** cannot be defined as a man with feelings (for we all have feelings), but as a man who has raised feelings to a category of value" (p. 218).

However, unlike Flaubert, neither we nor Kundera are engaging in cultural critique. When the British broadsheet *Independent on Sunday* finds it necessary to run a regular feature about the relationships of celebrities called How We Met, we ought to suppress our distaste and treat the feature as an instruction manual, giving its readers a model for their lives, showing them a new significance in how they met. This points to a new politics around the style of the self.

Such a politics will not *discover* an authentic self (the Romantics' illusion) but *invent* one. But the problem of relevance remains. Is this any more than an empty game? We have tried to show how *Immortality* works very well as a critique of the Romantic impulse. But is this critique an empty literary enterprise? What is resistance? And what are we resisting? When Barthes's invitation to a "play of signifiers" is grasped most readily by the advertising industry, what can resistance mean? Maybe there is a message in *Immortality*'s concluding references to the activities of the author's intellectual friend Avenarius. Avenarius believes he is attacking the system by stalking the streets with a knife, engaged in anarchic tire slashing (p. 273). However, perhaps the sphere of the political has shifted toward a politics of articulation working not as a critique of kitsch but, like both adverts and biographical accounts, rearticulating kitsch images.[7]

CONCLUSION

Our point of departure was Kundera's novel, and its inspiration has led us to range widely. Here, we try to return to the central preoccupations that have guided us. Kundera's work stands for those many literary and visual achievements that confront us with the complexity of what we might mean by "a life." We are forced to reflect on the multiple accomplishments—

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narrative, temporal, gestural—that constitute biographies, reputations, and identities. It is important for us to engage in such reflection, and to move, intellectually, from Kundera's fiction to a sociological plane, for two main reasons. The first concerns the proper object of a sociological gaze. The second the nature of that gaze itself. The two are, of course, closely interlinked. Indeed, they are mutually constitutive.

That is, however, no reason for us to trust the centrality of the interview culture. We take at face value the image of the self-revealing speaking subject at our peril. In recent years, sociologists and anthropologists have drawn attention to the voices of informants or hosts. Previous generations of social researchers have been castigated for appropriating the voices of others, subordinating them to their own authorial voice, and effectively meeting them. An ideological and methodological imperative is thus focused on the voice of the others represented in the texts of social research. This concern is itself part of a wider movement stemming largely from within anthropology and deriving additional inspiration from feminist and postcolonial scholarship—that questions the conventional modes of ethnographic representation (Clough, 1992; Atkinson & Coffey, 1995).

There would be, however, an ironic and unintended consequence if the proper attention to the voices of ethnographic representation were to reintroduce an uncritical view of the subject. In rejecting the authorial monologue of the classic monograph, we should not adopt the monologue of a privileged speaking subject. There is an obvious danger in the sociologist or anthropologist implicitly endorsing the core assumptions of the interview society. We should not allow a renewed sensitivity to the narrative organization of everyday life to result in an untheorized and uncritical endorsement of personal narratives themselves. They are not, in other words, any more authentic or pure a reflection of the self than any other socially organized set of practices. An emphasis on interview-narrative performance is an implicit endorsement of contemporary culture, and does not offer a vantage point from which to question its taken-for-granted modes of reproduction. There is a world of difference between biographical sociology and the sociology of biographical work. There is clearly the danger that in concentrating on speaking voices, and narrating selves, current sociological and anthropological research may ground itself in the technologies of the interview society rather than systematically questioning its root assumptions and methods.

NOTES

1. *Partouze* roughly translates as orgy.

2. "A Michael Jackson cardboard cut-out struts on a Bucharest plinth once occupied by a statue of Lenin, to advertise the star's first appearance in Romania" (*The London Times*, October 3, 1992, photo caption).

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3. In 1992, the British company Vodaphone ran an advert headed "The Mobile Phone Revolution." It depicts a woman who is wearing something like a Red Army uniform. She adopts a revolutionary posture. In the accompanying text, the words *October* and *Revolution* are linked to Vodaphone's products.

4. In turn, this demonstration has cast doubt on postmodernist arguments about the instability of the self. As Gubrium and Holstein (1994) ask:

> Has the self . . . disappeared from everyday life? If it has not disappeared, is there any sense in which self can be concretely described using postmodern times? . . . we argue that, by grounding the self in everyday interpretative practices of self-definition, we can see that self remains a substantial presence for those who depict experience in relation to it. (pp. 685-686)

5. It should be pointed out that Mishler's analysis does not depend on the differential evaluation of those two voices and their contrasting orientations to the world; and it is important to note that the voices are not necessarily coterminous with the actual social actors as individuals.

6. We are grateful to Jay Gubrium for this observation.

7. See Laclau (1981) on the communist Togliatti's appeal to Italian fascists by rearticulating symbols of the Italian "nation."

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