



On second-order observation and genuine pretending: Coming to terms with society

Thesis Eleven
2017, Vol. 143(1) 28–43
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0725513617740968
journals.sagepub.com/home/the



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Abstract

This paper discusses the meaning of the concept of ‘second-order observation’ used by Niklas Luhmann (1927–1998). Luhmann identifies second-order observation as a defining characteristic of modern world society. According to Luhmann, all social systems construct a social reality on the basis of the observation of observations. Rating agencies in the economy or the peer-review process in the academic system are examples of social mechanisms manifesting second-order observation. Social media also represent organized second-order observation. The paper suggests that in a society based on second-order observation, ‘genuine pretending’ is an adequate mode of existence. This notion is derived from the Daoist text *Zhuangzi*. It indicates a disassociation from social roles which allows their performers to exercise these roles with ease and, at the same time, maintain a state of sanity.

Keywords

Daoism, genuine pretending, Niklas Luhmann, second-order observation

Introduction

In this paper I aim at doing two things. The first is to present a synopsis of the concept of ‘second-order observation’ as it appears in some of the major works by Niklas Luhmann. I want to show, on the one hand, how central this concept is for Luhmann’s systems theoretical understanding of society, and, on the other hand, why it is a defining feature

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of modernity for him. In this way, I hope, the usefulness of the concept for understanding the world that we live in, as well as its critical potentials, may become evident.

Although, as is usual for Luhmann, the concept of second-order observation is supposed to be strictly descriptive and thus non-normative – and therefore not intended to point out what one must do to make the world a better place – I believe that it identifies what may be called, in more or less Freudian terms, a source of much discontent. Somewhat similar to Freud, Luhmann may be said to be a *diagnost of paradoxes*. For Freud, such paradoxes (e.g. the need for an unpleasant repression of pleasurable drives in order to achieve social order, or, in other words, the need to make everyone unhappy for being able to live together as happily as possible) were primarily psychological and only secondarily social – and they were almost always pathological. For Luhmann, however, paradoxes commonly take on the paradoxically constructive role of being a constitutive element of the emergence of social structures. Through the ‘unfolding of paradoxes’ (*Paradoxieentfaltung*) social systems develop, and sense is made and remade. In the legal system, for instance, the law is considered as binding, but actually its continuous revision brings about the autopoiesis of the legal system, ‘and no one is bothered by the fact that the legal is illegal and the illegal is legal’ (see Luhmann, 2013b: 224, translation modified; see Moeller, 2015)

While, for Luhmann, paradoxes are not necessarily bothersome but often socially productive catalysts of communication systems, they still point to a somewhat disconcerting feature of socially generated sense (*Sinn*): That which makes sense and is socially taken as highly significant – for instance legality and, by extension, the principle of *justice* – is exposed as being without a foundation in reason and thus as groundless or, in Luhmannian terms, as utterly *contingent*. (Justice, for him, is a mere ‘formula of contingency’ or *Kontingenzformel*.) From an existentialist perspective, that which is groundless and utterly contingent can be experienced as *absurd*. Luhmann’s theory, as a theory of contingency and, more specifically, as a theory of the contingent emergence of social structures and sense out of paradoxes, can therefore also be understood as a theory of absurdity. While Luhmann certainly does not ask for any revolution or reform that would replace social absurdity with ‘true’ meaning (to once and for all determine what is just would make the legal system obsolete and effectively block its operations), he still requires his readers to intellectually acknowledge such absurdity. In this way, the theory is indeed radically *critical*; it reveals basic social values and ideals (such as justice) as *false* in the sense of being irrational, unreachable, and ultimately meaningless; and through this revelation the theory also subverts these values – while, paradoxically, it affirms their social usefulness at the same time.

In his short but highly programmatic essay ‘Globalization or World Society: How to Conceive of Modern Society’, Luhmann succinctly exposes the foundational irrationality and paradoxicality of modern society in order to conclude:

We have to come to terms, once and for all, with a society without human happiness and, of course, without taste, without solidarity, without similarity of living conditions. It makes no sense to insist on these aspirations, to revitalize or to supplement the list by renewing old names such as civil society or community. This can only mean dreaming up new utopias and

generating new disappointments in the narrow span of political possibilities. (Luhmann, 1997: 69)

How can this passage not be taken to say that once one has understood contemporary society on the basis of social systems theory, one will also be able to see that living in it presents a quite absurd challenge and can produce some quite profound discontent? And how could this not be understood as a radically critical attitude to modern society?

Of course, Luhmann also stresses that ‘we have to come to terms’ with this situation rather than engaging in futile and counterproductive projects of changing it.¹ Luhmann’s way of living with the absurdities of life in modern society was to cultivate a ‘kind of stoic attitude’ (Luhmann, 1982: 138) of the theorist. Theory, for him, could be a sort of therapeutic contemplation of the world that must take place within this very world because it is without alternative. This contemplation allowed him, not without irony, to ‘come to terms with it’ by replacing, for better or worse, the unacceptable terms provided for it by mainstream communication, including mainstream academic communication, with different ones. One of these terms, and an important one at that, is second-order observation.

This brings me to the second aim of this paper. I also intend to outline what coming to terms with an utterly contingent society which operates on a quite profound level in the mode of second-order observation can mean existentially. For this purpose, I will eventually, but only briefly, introduce the notion of ‘genuine pretending’, which is derived from an interpretation of Daoist philosophy.

Second-order observation in contemporary society

Second-order observation is Luhmann’s technical term for his quite specific conception of what is today more generally called ‘virtuality’. This broader concept, which was academically popularized by French poststructuralist and postmodernist thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze (1966) – to whose concept of sense Luhmann often refers in his later works (see Moeller, 2012: 112) – and Jean Baudrillard (1981), has now become a rather commonly understood idea, particularly through the widespread use of the term ‘virtual reality’ in connection with electronic media. In effect, the concept of virtuality affirms a (radically) constructivist ontology which posits that any reality is an effect of the specific capacities (the ‘virtualities’, so to speak) which construct the capability of experiencing it. Reality emerges once it is processed, perceived, or ‘observed’ as reality. Or, to put it in terms of the title of one of Luhmann’s programmatic essays: reality is an effect of ‘cognition as construction’ (Luhmann, 2006).

On the basis of this constructivist premise, a distinction can be made between a first-hand or directly experienced, and thus constructed, reality, and a second-hand or indirectly experienced, and thus constructed, reality. One operates in the form of second-order observation as soon as one does not directly observe something, but observes it as it is observed by someone else. Accordingly, a simple definition of second-order observation by Luhmann is: ‘the perception of what others say or do not say’ (Luhmann, 2013b: 100). When one watches the news on TV or follows someone on Facebook or Twitter, one does precisely this: perceive what others say or do not say.

A more complex definition of second-order observation highlights its foundation in Luhmann's cognitive constructivism as well as its 'home' in a theory of society or of communication (which is the same); it is a mode of social reality construction manifesting 'the shift of a consciousness of reality to a description of descriptions' (Luhmann, 2013b: 100). Reality is not immediately consciously present (for instance in a person's mind), but emerges as the result of a (communicative or social) interpretation of a (communicative or social) interpretation of reality. The mass media, for instance, describe the climate as changing by reporting on a specific scientific discourse, and thus interpreting it in such a way that it becomes comprehensible for non-scientists. Although one is not actually in a position to directly perceive climate change, one can in turn interpret media reporting on climate change in such a way that one feels concern. Such concern is, from a Luhmannian perspective, generated by second-order observation communication processes.

According to Luhmann, second-order observation 'has become the advanced mode of perceiving the world in modern society' (Luhmann, 2013b: 100). It is a defining feature of modern society. When Luhmann states that 'finally, all functional systems were adapted operationally to second-order observation, to the observation of observers' (Luhmann, 2012: 87), he proposes that full-fledged modernity only appears along with the total 'implementation' of second-order observation in all social spheres. For Luhmann, modern world society began to take shape in Europe between the 16th and the 18th century by transitioning from stratified differentiation to functional differentiation. Feudal or class structures became less foundational and were replaced in importance by newly evolving autopoietic communication systems (e.g. the legal, political, educational, economic, mass media, art systems, etc.) with their respective codes, semantics, and their organizations. The transition to functional differentiation, however, goes along with a second 'great transformation' that is directly connected with it: 'A consequence of functional differentiation that is just as important is the far-reaching shift in observation to *second-order observation*, to the observation of observers' (Luhmann, 2013b: 102; emphasis in the original).

In a fully modern society, all function systems function with second-order observation. This is how they operate and generate their discourses, institutions, and professions. Luhmann's distinction between pre-modern and modern society is quite sharp. The crucial shift that constitutes modernity not merely consists in the 'differing out' of function systems, but, within these systems, in the eventual emergence of communication that operates pervasively as second-order observation. In a sense, the project of modernity was indeed 'finished' for Luhmann with the switch towards a routinely operating second-order observation. Here, I will discuss only two examples very briefly.

In the economy, *markets* and *prices* manifest second-order observation (Luhmann, 2013a: 116; 2012: 225; 2013b: 102). Prices, and thus economic value, are determined by the markets. Market value and prices are constructed by observation values evolving within the markets. The value of a product is an effect of how the market sees it. The price of my house depends neither on the quality of the building nor on my estimation of it, but on what the market says it is worth. In order to find out its true value, I would have to sell it – and thereby see how others observe it.

In recent decades, the financial system and its second-order observation mechanisms, such as its ranking and rating institutions, have generated much more value than the actual economy. There is considerably more money today in financial products than in goods. These financial products are all grounded in what may be called an intensified form of second-order observation. They project or estimate, i.e. they observe, economic values, risks, etc. and trade or market these observations (Esposito, 2011). In effect, the financial markets are a second-order observation system that has outgrown the economic markets which it observes – and which themselves are already second-order observation systems.

With respect to the academic system, Luhmann points to secondary literature as a phenomenon of second-order observation (Luhmann, 2013b: 102). In order to understand Hegel, for instance, and to communicate one's understanding of him, and to be eventually regarded as a Hegel expert, one needs to study the academic secondary literature on Hegel. Of course, one would still be expected to actually have read the *Phenomenology*, and one would have to at least pretend that one did so by quoting relevant passages here and there, but one can only effectively produce connectivity with Hegel scholarship, and publish one's work on Hegel in academic journals, and receive a grant for one's Hegel studies, by thoroughly addressing the contemporary academic reception of Hegel – i.e. the secondary literature. One is expected to perpetuate the proliferation of the self-referential academic Hegel discourse when writing an academic paper on Hegel, and not to share one's idiosyncratic impressions of one's observations of Hegel *an sich*.

Today, about 20 years after Luhmann's death, the academic system has undergone its own 'great transformation' as well. Similarly to the traditional market economy which submitted itself to the observance by the more powerful financial system with its ranking and rating operations, the academic system, too, has produced increasingly powerful rating and ranking mechanisms. Today, it is not merely the secondary literature – the academic market, so to speak – that counts for establishing academic value and professional reputation. Instead, increasingly institutionalized second-order observations of the academic market, in the form of rankings of publication venues and academic organizations, citation statistics, and indices, have become most significant. The 'peer review process' has become what the financing system is in the economy – a powerful market observation industry which constructs the value of communication. If this paper is selected by peer review for publication in the relatively highly ranked journal that it is being submitted to, no-one will have to read it (and few will do so) in order to know its academic value. Instead, one can fully rely on the observation of its observations by an institutionalized academic reviewing (i.e. observing) and ranking system. In a truly modern academic system professional academics function as second-order observation specialists.

At this point the question may arise if all this is really new and if second-order observation is indeed an exclusively modern phenomenon. If not, Luhmann's identification of it as a decisive feature of global modernity might not be warranted. On several occasions Luhmann actually points out that second-order observation as such is not strictly modern and has a long history. He readily admits that it already existed in the ancient world, for example in Israel and in Greece, in the form of, for instance, prophecy

and philosophy (Luhmann, 2013b: 49). Priests or sages outlined cosmological structures and dictated ethical prescriptions in the form of 'factual descriptions' (*Sachbeschreibungen*; Luhmann, 2013b: 102). If one wanted to know what the case was and what was good and bad, one could turn to such generally binding observation authorities and observe them. 'Knowledge prescriptions' were provided 'by excellent positions of observation: by sages, priests, the nobility, the city' (Luhmann, 2000: 85). According to Luhmann, such earlier second-order observation monopolies in effect constructed 'a common given world [...] in the form of nature or creation' and thus established 'cognitively or normatively narrowly limited programmes' (Luhmann, 2013b: 102).

Contemporary second-order observation, however, radically breaks with those monopolies, and this break manifests the breakthrough to the radical diversity of proper modernity. Modern second-order observation is anchored within functional differentiation and is therefore as multiple as it is ubiquitous. The difference between the monopolized and narrowly limited second-order observation authorities of the past and the highly varied and pervasive second-order observation mechanisms of today (such as the rating processes in the financial system and the peer review process in academics) is, for Luhmann, so essential and 'so stark that one can speak neither of decline nor of progress' (Luhmann, 2000: 85). Modern systemic second-order observation is an altogether new social phenomenon.

The novelty of contemporary second-order observation consists first and foremost in what others would call a postmodernist characteristic. With the emergence of multiple concurrent second-order observation mechanisms, 'society thus loses the possibility of a binding representation of the world' (Luhmann, 2012: 87). In other words, the 'common given world' provided by traditional religious or secular observation authorities 'in the form of nature or creation' is now thoroughly 'dissolved' (Luhmann, 2013b: 102). Along with this dissolution of a generally accepted world order, 'direct trust in reality' is 'dissolved' as well (Luhmann, 2012: 291). Religious, political, and ethical master narratives lose their privileges. The discourses of science and religion, for instance, become increasingly contradictory, but manage to coexist by attaining validity in different spheres. Similarly, the separation of state and religion allows for a more fundamental diversification of secular and sacred laws and moralities. Each different function system develops its own codes and accordingly constructs its own realities and its own values, or 'eigenvalues', to use the strange German-English expression often found in Luhmann's texts. A relatively stable body of knowledge about the world in general is replaced by more and more particular sets of vocabularies. Luhmann summarizes:

As a result, this situation has profoundly unsettled the semantics with which society reproduces meaning worth conserving. The confidence in established forms has dissolved, resuscitation efforts have proved vain. Society appears to be trying out new eigenvalues that promise stability under the conditions of heterarchy and second-order observation. (Luhmann, 2012: 188)

The dissolution process brought about by the proliferation of second-order observation along with functional differentiation does not mean that trust or confidence in the validity of values is altogether undermined. It only means that universally valid values

are hard to come by. A religious believer may still trust his or her religious faith religiously, but will have to take into account that it may not be sufficiently reliable to sustain an academic career or guarantee success in a court of law. Instead, one has to acknowledge the eigenvalues of each respective function system – and the validity of the eigenvalues is constructed by system-specific second-order observation. In this sense, confidence in priests, for instance, can be said to have been ‘dissolved’: while many people still trust priests with regard to the eigenvalues of the religious system, they no longer consult them about the eigenvalues of other systems, or at least consulting them in academic or legal matters will not help much since priests do not hold ‘excellent positions of observation’ in these systems and therefore their observations or ‘representations’ of reality are not legally or academically binding – and thus cannot become academically or legally real.

The extraordinary importance of second-order observation lies, according to Luhmann, in their decisive and indeed exclusive role in constituting reality in contemporary society; as he points out rather apodictically: ‘Function systems [...] can construct reality only in this manner’ (Luhmann, 2013b: 102). The exclusive role of second-order observation in constructing reality is, once more, due to the fact that the relevant values of a system are the eigenvalues produced by itself and its own communication. That economic value is market value means simply, or tautologically, that value in the economy in the form of market prices only makes sense in an economic context. Economically, the *priceless* value that anything may arguably have ‘as such’ is irrelevant and cannot be taken into account. Thus, just as the bank that issued them guarantees the value of the bank notes in my pocket, and not the material substance that they are made of or my personal appreciation of them, their economic reality is, and can be, only constructed through established economic second-order observation mechanisms within a function system – and not through first-order observation. Even if a piece of green paper in my wallet is much more precious to me than the \$100 note right next to it, its real economic value may be close to nothing. Only the authoritative second-order observation mechanisms of function systems have the power to construct the reality of eigenvalues. Luhmann writes: ‘In the mode of second-order observation, the observed observer guarantees the reality of his observing (first- or second-order). For one can, indeed must, renounce accessing an underlying, unobserved reality that is the way it is’ (Luhmann, 2013b: 102).

The same exclusivity of systemic reality construction can be found in all other contemporary function systems. This essay will have real academic value if and only if it passes the peer review process and is published in an indexed and ranked journal. Only then can I list it in my publication list when applying for contract renewal, a sabbatical, or the confirmation of my ‘research track’ appointment. And if it is published in *Thesis Eleven* its real value will be higher than if it is published in *Soziale Systeme*. If I subject it only to first-order observation by sending it to a few friends, its academic value is close to nothing, even if these friends should like it very much and be among the ‘best’ Luhmannians currently alive.

Through the coupling of the intimacy system (love, friendship, personal relationships) with the mass media system in the form of the so-called social media the perhaps counter-intuitive fact that here, too, reality is constructed through second-order

observation has become rather obvious. Social media have taken on the shape of a sort of 'peer review system' of private life. While already in earlier modern times the reality of an intimate or personal relationship had been associated with the achievement of *recognition*,² the social media have finally, it seems, revealed that recognition is not so much a spiritual or ethical form of dialectical intersubjectivity, as it had once been assumed, but rather a communicative exposure to mutual second-order observation. When one's social life is performed on Facebook or Twitter, it becomes clear that modern forms of intimacy are tied to mechanisms of establishing the value of one's relationships by observing how one is observed by one's peers. Social networks function as a forum that organizes the mutual second-order observation of peers. Similarly, I am supposed to love someone not because I am married to her, but because I understand that she loves me too, and thus we love one another. Rather than, for instance, to construct intimate relationships within the parameters of family structures of societies based on stratified differentiation, the modern model of personal relationships applies a second-order observation structure: intimacy, as the construction of recognition, is an effect of being able to see that one is seen in a way one likes to be seen. Highly organized second-order observation intimacy markets in the form of the new social media fulfil precisely this function: they enable individuals on a massive scale to observe how they are observed and, on the basis of this kind of recognition, to establish a real personal life.

These three examples of reality construction through second-order observation in the economic, the academic, and the intimacy system show how what in traditional terms may be called epistemology and ontology are tightly intertwined in Luhmann's theory. In his essay 'Cognition as Construction' Luhmann outlines the Kantian background of his radical constructivism. For Kant the cognitive structures of reason make reality accessible and shape its appearance to us. Epistemology, as an analysis of the structures of 'pure reason', provides methodological access to an ontological account of reality. By understanding how reason operates, we understand how we observe. Cognition constructs the reality of the phenomenological world by observing it. Structures of cognition or observation in turn constitute the *transcendental* conditions of the possibility of experiencing reality.

For Luhmann, the sociologist, other than for Kant, the idealist philosopher, cognition, or observation, is not primarily intellectual; cognitive structures are not structures of reason, but structures of communication or social structures. To describe these structures of cognition or observation accounts for a type of sociological epistemology. However, since social cognition constructs social reality, Luhmann's social epistemology is at the same time also a social ontology. In other words, by describing the structures of social observation, Luhmann also describes how and which social realities emerge. Since second-order observation is the core form of observation in modern society it constitutes nothing less than the core *transcendental* principle of Luhmann's social epistemology and ontology. Therefore his theory of modernity could also be called a *critique of second-order observation*.

Despite their somewhat similar constructivist approaches, Kant and Luhmann still differ decisively with respect to the above mentioned 'postmodernist' characteristics of Luhmann's theory. Not only is modern society, for the latter, not so much built on reason as it is on paradoxes, but, as mentioned, it has also lost 'the possibility of a binding

representation of the world' (Luhmann, 2012: 87), since forms of second-order observation are systems specific and thus incommensurable with one another. A common reality, as Kant envisaged it to emerge out of the proper use of reason, is replaced in Luhmann's theory of modern society by 'heterarchical' multiple realities which are subject to continuous change and contingent upon constantly evolving social conditions (of observation).

System specific second-order observation leads, for Luhmann, to 'an immense increase in complexity' (Luhmann, 2013a: 112). Again, this can be easily seen in the cases of the economy or of the academic system. The emergence of the financial markets has drastically increased the complexity of an already highly complex economy while the peer review system has sped up the development of highly complex publication and evaluation processes in the academic system. Here, as many professional academics will be able to affirm, due to the increased complexity of the academic communication system, one tends to spend more time now with all kinds of formal and informal submission and evaluation procedures than with actual teaching or research.

The increase in social complexity along with more complex second-order observation processes brings another postmodernist aspect of Luhmann's picture of modern society to the fore, namely its radical contingency. If social realities and eigenvalues are decoupled from any presumed 'underlying, unobserved reality that is the way it is' (2013b: 102), then it becomes 'possible to reconstruct the entire world in the mode of contingency or of other possibilities of being observed' (2013a: 112). Second-order observation produces highly dynamic ratings and rankings which are open to constant renegotiations. Permanent 'innovation' is built into the process of second-order observation and new forms of observation replace old ones on a daily basis. The speed with which information technology develops accelerates such social change. No ranking is stable, no financial product maintains its value over an extended period of time, and one has to alter one's social media representation every day. New function systems or sub-systems (such as the social media) evolve quickly and fundamentally change the set-up and experience of social reality as a whole. Thereby the contingency of all eigenvalues becomes tangible; different possible reality constructions open up on all sides and put one another into question. 'If measured against traditional expectations', Luhmann says, one could speak of a pervasive ontological and epistemological 'relativism' or 'pluralism' (Luhmann, 2013b: 332).

The second-order observation phenomena in the economy, academics, and social media outlined above (the accelerated autopoietic evolution of the finance system, the emergence of a sophisticated peer review system, and the global spread of social media) have become much more pervasive and visible in the past two decades than they were during Luhmann's lifetime. This shows, I believe, not only that Luhmann was correct in identifying second-order observation as a key feature of modernity and as integral to fully developed functional differentiation, but also that it is one of the concepts that is most relevant for understanding, and potentially criticizing, ongoing social developments in the 21st century. Its significance has become more obvious after Luhmann's death.

As a sociologist, Luhmann was perhaps most interested in one general question arising from his diagnosis: How can modern society, under the condition of the radical

contingency of multiple reality constructions arising from many synchronic systems-specific second-order observation processes, establish stability (Luhmann, 2013b: 332)? Given the ‘heterarchy’ of multiple highly dynamic systems rationalities and, indeed, systems realities, how can the various social sub-systems maintain their autopoietic reproduction and continue to function more or less efficiently? In his monographs on specific function systems he often addressed this question and tried to explain why such an ‘unlikely’ course of social evolution still allows the respective function systems to thrive or to newly emerge and develop. This sociological question, however, is not a major concern for me in this paper. Instead, I will now look at some existential consequences of second-order observation. I will pose the question what it means to live in a society which operates to a great extent in the mode of second-order observation.

Living with second-order observation

Luhmann’s works are not silent on the existential aspects of his theory, although remarks on this issue are often brief and not further elaborated. In *Theory of Society*, for instance, Luhmann states that ‘the modern individual is expected to be an observer who observes his own observation: a second-order self-observer’ (Luhmann, 2013b: 270; translation modified). Second-order observation is thus not merely a systemic procedure which we have to submit ourselves to once in a while; it is a pervasive mode of individual observation, and thereby of reality construction, that we have to adopt in shaping up our social persona, or personae, within all social systems at all times.

As outlined above, identity formation through second-order observation has become particularly relevant in the context of the social media which came to full fruition only after Luhmann’s death. During his lifetime, Luhmann hardly addressed this social sphere which was only just evolving. Instead, he looked to the more traditional mass media (print media, TV, film, etc.) and stipulated that there ‘one learns to observe observers, in particular [...] how they themselves observe’ (Luhmann, 2000: 60). When watching a movie or reading a novel one observes the observation of observers and is invited to adopt their mode of observation. In the new social media, this is no longer merely an open invitation, but actually a condition of participation. One observes, for instance, the selfies – the materialized second-order self-observation per se of today – of others on such sites and then produces similar selfies and posts them as well. Without such formative projections of oneself one cannot truly participate in such media. The formation of one’s social personae, or, to use a Hegelian term, *Bildung*, consists in the exercise of shaping oneself under the conditions of a medialized and pre-formatted second-order self-observation.

It should be noted that it has come to public attention by now that the medialized formats of second-order self-observation have a serious impact beyond the existential experience of an individual. In politics, as the recent American election has shown, social media have taken on a major role in constructing the public personalities of the candidates. In this way, they not only serve the function of supplying the individual with an identity for him- or herself within the boundaries of a private or intimate peer group, but with a society-wide political image. As if commenting on the election of Donald Trump as president of the USA, Luhmann noted: ‘To become leader (*Führer*) is possible

only for someone who is capable of manipulating how he is being observed' (Luhmann, 2013a: 119). The political application of such 'manipulation',³ or probably more correctly, of such successful irritation of one's observation by others, cannot be discussed appropriately in the limited range of this essay, and therefore I will return to the issue of second-order observation as experienced in the life of the individual and not as a constitutive element of the functioning of the political system.

Two illustrations may elucidate the experience of second-order observation in the life of an individual. The first illustration is John Maynard Keynes' thought experiment of a second-order observation beauty contest (Keynes, 1936: 156). Elena Esposito succinctly summarizes the point of this peculiar contest:

It is not a case of choosing those [faces] that, to the best of one's judgment, are really the prettiest, nor even those that average opinion genuinely thinks the prettiest. We have reached the third degree where we devote our intelligences to anticipating what average opinion expects the average opinion to be. (Esposito, 2013: 4–5)

When, for instance, preparing a paper for submission to a journal, we had better not be guided by what we 'authentically' identify as most important and proper when choosing a topic and a writing style. It would be equally problematic if we only considered what other academics may 'authentically' find interesting and which style they might personally really like. Instead we must figure out what the present academic discourse demands – as personified by the 'blind' academic reviewers, which are asked to be blind in precisely the way outlined by Keynes: they are not supposed to make a judgment on the basis of a personal bias (neither their own nor a presumed one of others) but on behalf of the academic discourse they serve.

As academics, we have to submit our work to the kind of second-order beauty contest imagined by Keynes. The peer review process serves the function of, in reality, 'anticipating what average opinion expects the average opinion to be'. Therefore, when intending to reach an audience with one's academic publications and to make a living as an academic one cannot but actively shape one's communications, i.e. one's papers, one's reviews, and one's applications, in line with the current academic 'inauthentic' anticipations of academic 'beauty'. This inevitability is, existentially speaking, what one has to come to terms with in the life of an academic.

To fully appreciate the 'inauthenticity' involved in the academic beauty contest one must realize that the critical identification of this inauthenticity can, paradoxically, only be communicated within the academic system by perpetuating this very inauthenticity. An article published in *Thesis Eleven* which theoretically, and critically, exposes the inevitable inauthenticity of an academic system built on second-order observation will at the same time contribute to the autopoiesis of this 'corrupted' academic system. Speaking in Luhmannian terms, an academic will not only on a theoretical and a functional level, but also on an existential level, have to 'autologically' come to terms with the fact that his or her critique is at the same time a performative affirmation of the system in and against which it is communicated.

The second illustration is the case of the birth of the picturesque from the spirit of German romanticism. When travelling through eastern Saxony in September 1800, the

writer Heinrich von Kleist was deeply impressed by the beauty of the rural scenery. In a letter to his fiancée Wilhelmine von Zenge he wrote: 'Every farm is a landscape', and, in another instance, that once, when enjoying a panoramic view from the top of a hill, the land below appeared to him 'just as a completely enclosed painting' (Anon, 1979: 140–1; my translation).

Interestingly enough, around 1800 the perception of a landscape, in the words of the contemporary writer Ludwig Tieck, 'as the most beautiful painting' was a by no means unique or original but rather a 'stereotypical observation' among intellectuals associated with German romanticism (Trauzettel, 2014: 100). In this way, this generation of poets, artists, and philosophers who supposedly delved deeper into their authentic innermost self than anyone else before discovered an aesthetic perception that by now may well signal the proximity of kitsch, namely the perception of something as resembling an artistic representation, or as *picturesque*.

The discovery of the picturesque around 1800 indicates not merely the emergence of simply another aesthetic trend, but also signals the advent of pervasive second-order observation. When von Kleist overlooked the fields of Saxony he saw them, not without enthusiasm, through the lens of the landscape paintings by some fellow artists which he had earlier seen somewhere else – although not in a proper art museum because the institutionalized second-order observation which museums manifest in the art system had not yet been established at the time. He did not perceive the landscape 'as such' but rather in the form of an aesthetic model that he had brought with him in his conceptual rucksack. Von Kleist's mode of observation betrays a reversal of a first-order observation of the world and its representations. When looking at a painting – a portrait of a person that we know, for instance – someone used to first-order observing may exclaim: 'Yes, it looks exactly like her', and thereby measure the quality of the image by the degree of its correspondence with the original. Von Kleist, however, measured the quality of the landscape he saw by its degree of correspondence with the observations of other artists that he had observed – he looked at it in the mode of second-order observation.

Von Kleist's account illustrates a significant paradox: The romanticist writer expresses his authentic feelings in the form of second-order observation. His authenticity emerges out of and is conditioned by inauthenticity. The intensity of von Kleist's experience of 'nature' is generated and mediated by second-order observation. As an early tourist, he is overwhelmed by the beauty of the original sight if and when it matches its aesthetic copy which was produced, presumably, by a unique act of aesthetic creativity.

Luhmann noted a parallel between the genesis of touristic sightseeing, the emergence of new copying technologies, and the semantics of authenticity:

The strange expression 'sightseeing' was introduced at the same time as photography and the rotary press. Without reproductions there would be no originals [...] And the fact that this reflexive culture [...] produces its counter-conceptuality of 'authenticity,' 'actualness,' 'spontaneity,' etc. just serves to confirm that what is involved here is a universal phenomenon which includes self-reference. (Luhmann, 2000: 86)

A unique *sight* one desires to experience ‘first-hand’ is created through its depiction. Once one repeats the experience of seeing it personally, however, one necessarily does so in the mode of second-order observation. The very fact that it is a sight implies that it was seen as one by others. The first-hand experience of a unique sight thereby, paradoxically, both confirms the validity of a sight as special (people must go there to see it because it cannot be seen anywhere else) and deconstructs it as inauthentic in the sense of not being a sight specifically for me (it presents itself to me as a sight by virtue of having been seen as a sight by others before). The simultaneous experience of the sight as authentic and inauthentic only kindles the further desire to experience ‘pure’ authenticity next time around (at another sight, perhaps). Thus, along with the birth of the picturesque from the spirit of romanticism, a desire for authenticity is borne out of the inauthenticity produced by artistic representations of unique experiences. This is, at least from a Luhmannian point of view, how we ended up with a whole ‘age of authenticity’, to use a famous phrase coined by Charles Taylor (2007).

Given this analysis, to demand of individuals to be original and pursue authenticity creates a paradoxical double-bind, just like the demand to ‘be natural’. By following it one violates it as much as by not following it. The prevalence of communication based on second-order observation generates a quest for authenticity while simultaneously making it a mission impossible. Consequently, we not only have to come to terms with a society without happiness, taste, or solidarity, but also with one without originality and authenticity. Such coming to terms can pose quite an existential challenge. The figure of the genuine pretender which I now finally turn to is an attempt to deal with this challenge.

Genuine pretending is a term introduced by Paul D’Ambrosio (2012). He and I use it as a *Leitmotif* in our (2017) study of the early Daoist ‘classic’ *Zhuangzi* to explain a Daoist way of life. Put very briefly, it indicates the ability to take on various social roles and to play them well and with ease so that one can potentially enjoy life, or at least avoid pathological afflictions. In this way, the ‘pretending’ element of genuine pretending indicates – just as the word ‘pretending’ can refer to child play – the capability to perform roles ‘for fun’, i.e. without any essential and enduring commitment or attachment to them. On the other hand, the ‘genuine’ element of genuine pretending refers to a complete lack of hypocrisy in such role performances. A playfully pretended role does not imply cheating or contrivance; it is not performed with ulterior motives, and, most importantly, experiences are real and actual. When a child in play genuinely pretends to be sad, it will, to a certain extent, feel sad, but this sadness will evaporate when the play is over. An example of genuine pretending adults can relate to is watching a movie. The tears or the laughter of the audience are genuine and ‘spontaneous’, but after the movie these emotions do not linger on very long. We do not identify with them and do not take them personally. In fact, as Aristotle famously pointed out, such engagement in genuine pretending can have cathartic and thus healthy effects.

D’Ambrosio and I think that Daoist philosophy developed the attitude of genuine pretending in response to the social pressures of an ancient Chinese role or relational ethics which demanded strict behavioural and emotional conformity to roles in the family (or the clan) as well as to professional or administrative roles. Confucian values and texts are specifically important for formulating ethical prescriptions of sincerity in

enacting one's socially ascribed identity, and the *Zhuangzi* often engages in satirical and other criticisms of Confucius and the moral and socio-political teachings he is taken to represent. As a Daoist text, it promotes a philosophy of a radical selflessness which regards all constructions of individuality and personhood as subject to constant transformation. Thus, any essential commitment to socially ascribed roles along with the formation of a rigid self-conception is discouraged.

From a Luhmannian perspective, modern world society is based on functional differentiation and is structurally incompatible with pre-modern Chinese society (which, arguably, represents a type of society in which stratified differentiation and centre-periphery differentiation are more or less equally prominent). Therefore, ancient Chinese family roles and roles in today's global function systems belong in thoroughly different social frameworks. However, from an existential perspective, similar questions may arise for individuals in both types of society: How does one deal with socially constructed identities and the demand for commitment to them that dominant ethical regimes may enforce?

Just as in an ancient Chinese context a Daoist approach may have allowed individuals to understand the mechanics of social constructions that informed social identity formation at the time, a systems theoretical approach may allow one today to see how social identities are shaped by contingent role playing under conditions of second-order observation. If so, an individual may realize that, on the one hand, such identity formations cannot be avoided in society, while, on the other hand, also realizing that they are in their *entirety* social constructs. In other words, there is no essential or authentic selfhood in our social identities, and striving for authenticity presents an absurd challenge. Rather than taking the semantics of the 'age of authenticity' seriously, one can theoretically understand how this chimera is constructed and why it is functional in the context of pervasive second-order observation.

The insight into the existential absurdities and productive paradoxes involved in a society operating on the basis of second-order observation allows one to accept playing social roles while neither 'faking' them nor identifying with them. Instead, one can ironically affirm their inherent incongruity by theoretical and practical detachment: one fully is what one is socially, for instance a professional academic, but one does not 'reify' such social identities by identifying them with '*one-self*'. Such an ironic enactment of incongruity between social roles and an individual self is not devoid of self-irony, and thus not devoid of humour and fun. This brings one back to the Daoist philosophy of the *Zhuangzi* and its application of humour as both a therapeutic method, on an existential level, and a critical method on a socio-political level. However, such deliberations lead beyond the scope of this essay and are better left aside for a more comprehensive treatment in a different format.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Research on this article has been supported by a Multi-Year-Research-Grant on “Daoist Philosophy in Contemporary Contexts: Strategies of Sanity in Today’s World” provided by the University of Macau.

Notes

1. In this way, Luhmann’s project may seem quite different from that expressed in the famous thesis from which this journal derives its title. However, for Luhmann, who conceives of society as a system of communication, any change of society’s interpretation of itself is social change, and vice versa.
2. When an earlier power point version of this paper was presented as a lecture, Agnes Heller commented that the concept of recognition was missing from my Luhmannian analysis. This section may serve as a short response to her remark.
3. One has to be very cautious with applying this term since Luhmann actually opposes the use of this concept in his theory of the mass media (see Luhmann 2000).

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