

COLLISION

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The Missed

A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics*, the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.



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ABSTRACT

You meet someone new; you like them; you send them to your Facebook page. But how accurate is this representation of you? We all want to look our best, which is why we are drawn to the ability to fudge things a bit online. How does this projection of who we are distort us into who we want to be? Facebook allows us to hide our flaws that are all too visible in real life. We can embellish or correct what we said earlier, edit out what we don't like about ourselves, and only show photos where our chin is down and the lighting is blown out just enough to hide the bump on our nose. Our prospective employers can even turn to Facebook to assess our desirability. So might the constructed aesthetic of Facebook affect our approach to ethics – to interacting with other people? Does the way we design ourselves on Facebook directly impact the other people in our lives? Is each of us really just a rough draft that needs immediate editing? What about Facebook makes it possible to achieve genuine beauty?

KEYWORDS

Facebook, construct, beauty, fan, ethics

Fakebook

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Facebook is a lie. The aestheticization of you that turns you into *mere* aesthetics. Your doppelganger is not Lea Michele, and you are so not prettier than she is. You do not have 799 close friends. You do not “live life to the fullest, and let what the haters say not bother you,” or else why break up with someone by changing your relationship status to single? 77 people dislike this.

Facebook is about constructing you. The you you want people to think you are. It’s about the aesthetic of you: what makes you desirable to other people. Societal standards measure this according to your physical beauty. But we all can’t be Kelly LeBrock, perfectly created on a computer by two geeks with bras on their heads.

Or maybe we can. Maybe they were onto something.

Oscar Wilde proposed that “by beautifying the outward aspects of life, one would beautify the inner ones.”¹ Facebook gives us the power not just to construct our own aesthetic but to thereafter control it. To

constantly tweak our thoughts, feelings, and experiences in a way that we can never do in the outside world. To edit, to filter – and yes, even Photoshop – ourselves until we are the stars of our own soap opera, entitled “My So-Called Life.” Only this time, even if we are Brian Krakow, we can morph into the über-desirable Jordan Catalano.

On Facebook, your beauty no longer rests literally on your head and shoulders. Aesthetic judgments of you take into account what you think, how you feel, what you like or dislike, how you came to be this person – what you post. In life, you might dress like a slob, work a boring job, and suffer perpetual bad hair days. But online, you don’t have to. Facebook tricks you into equating your personal aesthetic with the *order* of your profile page. Beauty by design.

Facebook reduces the sensorial experience of you by removing the sound of your voice, the touch of your skin, the smell of your perfume, the mannerisms of your bubbling personality. You become a cardboard cutout. Pixels, frozen in time, blips and phrases, icons and symbols. Fragments of you slotted into a profile. An Aristotelian kind of beauty – that is, a symmetrical kind – arises when you can quantify your life into well-laid-out posts, a sleek timeline of photos like a biographical artwork.² Your ordinary life now possesses a design that corrects every event into something more pleasing, more accessible, more grandiose. As you scroll down your page, a selective history of your best thoughts, your funniest quips, and oh yeah, that exotic trip to the Cayman Islands, works to enhance your desirability.

Facebook even does away with the social rankings of the outside world that normally lower desirability. Factoids like your loser job are displayed in a tiny font, easily overlooked; usurped by your latest status updates in a larger font, photo blocks of your friends, playable playlists of your cutting-edge music. The focus of judgment switches from your physical attractiveness and moneymaking capabilities to factors that you can control.

Even the proportions of the page keep the attention on you. Your profile picture is always bigger than your friends’ pictures. Your status updates are in a larger font than your friends’ comments, which can even be truncated into a collapsible link. Life becomes design, inherently beautiful because of its pleasing symmetry. And you reap the benefits: Facebook even autotunes you into the smart, funny, relevant, well-put-

together person you aren't. You *achieve* beauty through Facebook's layout: its beauty beautifies its inner content.

But who we are quickly becomes bastardized into who we want to be: celebrity versions of ourselves. And boy, do we act like it. Picking and choosing who's allowed into our elite inner circle, who's allowed to read our deepest thoughts, get our inside jokes, comment on the most exciting or mundane goings-on of our day. *And who is not.* A hierarchy is formed. A barrier. A proscenium arch that creates distance from friends and turns them into fans. Yes, Tina Darling, there are even actual fan pages. Strangers can subscribe to your page and tune in to watch because these are the days of our lives. Your page is inundated with heated debates, based on a fleeting thought you posted on your wall over lunch. You – who posts pictorial evidence of your own alcoholism – have the ~~right~~ duty to publish daily affirmations, telling your friends how to live their lives because people do care what you have to say. Your wall is actual proof.

The flaw in Facebook's valorizing daily life is that it also fabricates its importance. (Isn't Facebook different from Duchamp? Isn't it just plain vanity, where Duchamp is the opposite?) Nobody cares what you had for breakfast. In the outside world, you edit yourself constantly, answering "Fine" to every "How are you?", but online, something edits out your editing mechanism. You say anything and everything, and nothing you say is of any consequence because everything is. Every thought has the same shape, symmetry, and size. There is no inflection that would normally reveal how we should rank offhanded remarks in relation to, say, the death of your cat or your wedding engagement. The importance is built into the symmetry, so you start to believe that whatever you say *is* important – or can be – or should be. You don't have camera crews exploiting your every move for some reality show, but you do have a Facebook page – which shows you what it feels like to have adoring fans. A friend's "happy birthday" post is but a speck in the white noise that consumes your page, buried under the myriad of other nameless, faceless "happy birthday" posts.

A site that touts the ideals of bringing people together cements its popularity through exclusivity. Facebook started as a site that you needed a special invitation to join from someone who was already special. From the very beginning, it banked on our latent desire for celebrity status. To become desirable, you must be elite: a circle of friends with you at its center. For people to enter the circle, they must first be approved and

accepted by you. You decide what is seen on your page. You pose the topic of conversation. You allow the dialogue to continue, and you delete someone's comment when you deem it too combative for your tastes – or more accurately, your aesthetic. When necessary, you remove someone's presence from your world altogether. You block them into oblivion where they can no longer see or search for you; in all respects, they don't exist to you. With one click, you have the power to make people cease to exist! Now if that's not the illusion of omnipotence and megalomania, I don't know what is.

Facebook by design generates the delusion that you are the center of the universe. News flash – you're not; not even if Rihanna follows your feed; not even if you are Rihanna. But that didn't stop the Catholic Church, and it sure as hell won't stop you. As your circle builds, so does your ego. And the quantitative aspects of Facebook's design only perpetuate this delusion. Numbers become important: you have more friends than someone else – someone who is lesser because they have fewer friends. More people Like your posts. Unlike those of someone lesser, whose posts garner few Likes or no Likes, no further conversation, no relevance, no contribution. The more pictures you have, the more events you're invited to, the more followers you have, the fuller a life you lead. I am > you. You are < me. Something that was once intangible – the way your friends feel about you – Liking someone, Liking their words, and *how much* Liking that involves – now has a measurable unit. The more units you have, the wealthier you are. It is a unit of acceptance.

We like having a number that denotes how people feel about us, rather than the ambiguous and fluctuating feelings of flesh-and-blood human beings. To find out how a person really feels, we must make an effort – talk face-to-face. But that just makes you vulnerable; being vulnerable in front of someone gives them power.

Levinas said that all interactions and the ethical decisions they involve are modeled on the face-to-face encounter. The experience of seeing someone's face in front of you is equivalent to that person saying, "Don't kill me. Don't hurt me." Meeting face-to-face gives someone the power to harm you, to make you laugh or cry – and it burdens you with the responsibility of not hurting them.³ By interacting online, we remove ourselves from these responsibilities. We protect ourselves; we take away a person's power to hurt us; and we eliminate the necessity of ethics.

Even our way of creatively representing ourselves on Facebook – an aesthetic act – affects the way we treat others – an ethical act. The decision to alter your aesthetic – let’s say, by changing your relationship status back to single – can be an ethical choice as well, especially when you do it *in lieu of* breaking up in person, knowing full well that everyone on your friend list will be promptly notified that “You have changed your relationship status to single.” Including your girlfriend. And she may be the last to know. Even removing your wedding ring is not as publicly hurtful as a slight alteration on Facebook can be. Post the wrong pic with the right bong hit or exposed body part, and you may have ruined someone’s life. Am I right, Kate Moss, Anthony Weiner? Do the consequences matter if your numbers go up? If people Like it, does that make it okay? What kind of person treats their “friends” like this? We no longer think about others’ feelings because we’re not really dealing with them. We treat them like the hollow cardboard cutout that they are. Facebook allows us to maintain our relationships with the minimum amount of work. It’s too time-consuming to meet everyone for coffee. Hearing the emotion a person intends in their words is much too tedious when you can just project your own sarcasm onto a tweet and continue that fight you’re having for no reason.

And when we really do, by some horrible (mis)happenstance, actually come face-to-face, we have become so ethically de-skilled that we put our lives on hold to check our lives online. Your phone notifies you of every post with a gleefully obnoxious sound, so that you can re-enter the celebrity game at a moment’s notice. There is no need to listen to the person sitting across from you. You skimmed their page today. Twice! Commented three times. You are such a good friend. Real conversation is redundant.

The quality of face-to-face interaction goes down as we care less about each other in the moment and focus more on maintaining our by-design aesthetic. We can’t give each other the time of day anymore? Is this what we’ve become? Well, have you looked around the street lately? Of course you haven’t; you’re too busy staring down at your phone. There we are, hunched over like Neanderthals, eyes glued to the phone in our hands, our thumbs – thank God for those opposable thumbs – typing away, hoping our peripheral vision keeps us from bumping into a bus –

Instead of enjoying the lived human experience with actual sense perceptions – we document it. We squash it into a gif, caption, archive.

Experience is a rough draft that needs immediate editing. Instead of telling the whole story, we would rather tell the best story, starring the best version of ourselves that is too hard to live. It's our John Malkovich. That's why Maxine told Lotte, "Only in the Malkovich." She was better in the Malkovich. Sometimes life needs a little dressing up in order to be bearable – or do I mean beautiful? I suppose even Mona Lisa needs a frame. Sigh.

• Notes •

¹ Wilde, Oscar. "The English Renaissance." Quoted in Ellman, Richard. *Oscar Wilde*. New York: Knopf, 1988, 164.

² "The chief forms of beauty are order and symmetry and definiteness, which the mathematical sciences demonstrate in a special degree." Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1078a.

³ Several of Levinas' essays are preoccupied with this idea, including several chapters in: Levinas, Emmanuel. *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

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