DISRUPTING THE GENDER BINARY: DISCIPLINE AND STRUGGLE ON MYSPACE

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ABSTRACT

This project offers a critical overview of one of today’s most interesting phenomena online: MySpace. In it I engage in a Foucaultian analysis of this popular social networking site to see the ways in which MySpace resembles and acts as a disciplinary mechanism which contributes to the generation and perpetuation of normative identity discourses.
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Chapter 1. Introduction

MySpace: What is it?

MySpace is a social networking site used by teenagers, young adults as well as aging men and women around the world (but especially in the U.S.) which allows its users to create profiles, generate a network of friends (existing and new) as well as to share photos, music, videos, blogs, and basically anything that can be uploaded into cyberspace with other MySpace users in their networks.

Created by Tom Anderson and Chris DeWolfe in the summer of 2003, because of its commercial success it was sold to Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation in the year 2005. With over 80 million users and 200 million expected by July 2007, MySpace is changing the way teens and young adults all over America interact with each other.

MySpace counts with a very simple and easy-to-use interface which allows anyone to become a member of its family in a matter of minutes. In order to create a profile, users are invited to fill out different categories which include the usual “name”, “age”, “relationship status”, “gender”, among others. Users may also fill out “blurbs” which allow the user to write more extensively about themselves, people they would like to meet, their favorite movies, books, TV shows, etc. On top of this, MySpace encourages its users to upload photos, music, videos as well as to create their very own templates which serve as backgrounds to their profile pages.

However, MySpace goes further than just providing a space for individuals and their networking needs; it has also become a site for self-promotion. MySpace Music hosts profiles for thousands of up-and-coming bands that use the website to upload as
many as four different songs and get exposure online by allowing its users to be a part of their “network of friends”, listen to their songs and be updated on the whereabouts of the bands. Even already-famous bands such as The Red Hot Chilli Peppers and Foo Fighters have their own MySpace pages, which they use as a very effective public relations tool to communicate with their fans and promote their products. (http://www.spacemisc.com/myspace-articles/). As New York Times author Saul Hansell puts it: “[MySpace ] has tapped into three passions of young people: expressing themselves, interacting with friends and consuming popular culture” (“For MySpace, Making Friends was Easy, Big Profit is Tougher”).

Moreover, as a commercial enterprise, MySpace has become an immense resource for the marketing industry which has been quick to realize the enormous advertising potential that this popular website has. Record companies have also jumped in the MySpace wagon and currently use it to scout and discover new, unsigned bands according to their popularity and number of views that their homepages show on MySpace.

How is MySpace A Modern Technology of Power?

For the most part, contemporary society teaches subjects to value the identification categories and labels that western culture promotes. In fact, it seems as if the only way that subjects can become intelligible to themselves and to others, is through a process of acceptance and self-recognition in the limited numbers of categories that are presented to them.
Categories and labels alike have become naturalized to the point where individuals think of them as mere descriptors of ‘inherent’ qualities that they carry with themselves since birth- as opposed to the normative, socially constructed, disciplinary mechanisms that they really are. In terms of gender categories, this means that subjects will learn to identify with either ‘femaleness’ or ‘maleness’ according to their genitalia, instead of realizing that ‘acting like a woman/man’ is a mere set of performative acts. Ours, Michel Foucault would say, are ‘docile bodies’ molded in infinitesimal detail to comply with hegemonic discourses of power, which mark bodies (and conducts) to reflect and interiorize them to the point of naturalization.

How does power achieve its goals? Foucault looks at a variety of institutions, such as the school, the factory, the Church, the family, the clinic and the prison, starting from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Foucault traces the production of discourses of power that still today mold our consciousness. Power, in this model, is ‘positive’ and does not solely repress but instead produces; it seeks knowledge, creates ‘truths,’ and locates them inside medico-juridical and scientific discourses which, ultimately, legitimize them.

In this project I argue that despite current debates regarding the status and legitimacy of institutions, disciplinary power’s strategies’, procedures and tactics are as pervasive today as they were when these institutions first emerged. Gilles Deleuze’s criticism of Foucaultian theories of power maintains that the decline of traditional institutions supposes the end of disciplinary society; in its place, modern subjects live in what he calls ‘societies of control’ (where power works upon the environment in which bodies move and not upon bodies themselves). I argue that Deleuze’s criticism does not,
in fact, negate Foucault’s arguments, but instead it constitutes an expansion of these to fit modern-day technologies and practices, for instance the internet and sites such as MySpace. By means of surveillance techniques as well as normalization and examination procedures, MySpace contributes to the classification of subjects as well as to the perpetuation of hegemonic discourses: MySpace is, therefore, a current example of a disciplinary and normative environment which works as a veritable institution of power in contemporary society.

Basing my analysis on Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, I examine the production of gender-normative discourses on MySpace. This site offers its members the opportunity to create their online profiles and presents them with a number of fields. Among those required for registration is gender, for which MySpace only offers two options: male or female. The sexual orientation category (which is not required) also contributes to upholding normative discourses of power; not surprisingly, MySpace also only offers the traditional categories of heterosexuality, homosexuality and bisexuality.

In this regard I propose that MySpace’s format itself guides its users to produce gender and heteronormative identities. However, as we will see in Chapter 5, subjects find ways to re-appropriate this site’s space to perform alternative gender identities as well as non-traditional sexualities. Even though these subjects cannot escape the binary male/female upon registration, they are able to articulate their own gender and sexuality in other sections of their profile page and even play around with the required fields to generate transgressive identities. I contend that the opportunities that subjects find in places such as MySpace to enact and voice their struggle are in compliance with Foucault’s theories of power in which he states that the ability to ‘fight back’ is at the
heart of any relationship of power; ‘freedom’ is, according to Foucaultian theory, a requirement for power to exist. Thus, some of MySpace’s subjects have found in this site’s normative and disciplinary environment not only a place of contestation but even a pedagogic space in which to argue against the very categories that MySpace perpetuates. However: do they succeed in their endeavors and perform veritable transgressive identities or, will power inevitably re-appropriate these for itself and normalize them? There is no simple answer to this question. While it is true that subjects may in fact produce more labels and discourses of ‘truth’ by voicing their struggles and attempting to define themselves through the same language which power uses to categorize, classify and normalize individuals, we have to take into account the moment of transgression, the small ruptures that subjects create in their struggles which can result in, at least, practical ruptures of hegemonic discourses which may allow for a wider popular understanding of the body, gender and sexuality in the future.

This thesis is divided into six chapters, starting with a brief introduction and followed by a review of the academic literature that pertains to the subject matter of this project. I have divided my research into three basic categories: Theories on Power, Gender and Performativity, Theories of Ideology and Ideological Analysis of Mass Media, and Cyberculture Critical Studies. The first category explore the works of important twentieth-century intellectuals, such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Erwin Goffman, whose theories provide the basic framework for my analysis of MySpace as an institution of power and a site of contestation and struggle against gender and sexual normativity.
The second category deals with authors who have used Foucault, Butler or Goffman in their own intellectual endeavors as well as other authors whose work is concerned with ideological interpretations of contemporary media products (and as such will help me understand more fully all of the implications of a popular social phenomenon such as MySpace).

The Cyberculture Critical Studies category of the literature review is concerned specifically with the advent of the internet, specifically with the creation of online communities and identities. Since cyberspace and cyberculture are relatively new fields of study in academia these works act as a useful precedent of how we might want to explore and interpret the endless possibilities that the World Wide Web has to offer.

Chapter 3 provides a comprehensive overview of MySpace’s profile structure which involves a detailed introduction to the categories and fields that prospective members are invited to fill out when creating online identities. Through a short analysis of the most basic type of profile that can be created on MySpace, I have attempted to demonstrate MySpace’s extreme normativity and its disciplinary nature. According to this site, critical identification criteria include a subject’s gender, their zodiac sign, their marital status and their plans of procreation. This pivotal chapter represents the foundation of what will be, in Chapter 4, a detailed Foucaultian analysis on MySpace and how it contributes to the categorization and classification of subjects in terms of hegemonic identity discourses.

As mentioned above, Chapter 4, “MySpace as a Technology of Power in Contemporary Disciplinary Society,” engages in Foucaultian analysis of MySpace as a modern-day institution of power. Due to the decline of traditional institutions (upon
which Foucault founded much of his theory), some authors such as Gilles Deleuze propose that contemporary society is no longer disciplinary but instead, it is a society of control. Using MySpace as a case study, I will argue that we in fact, still live in a disciplinary society and if anything, power’s mechanisms of surveillance, normalization of judgment and examination have only become more efficient with the development of new and ubiquitous technologies such as the internet.

Finally, Chapter 5, analyses non-traditional MySpace profiles, in order to show how individuals find in this space a place to struggle against dominant identity categories. More specifically, it illustrates (with the help of Butlerian theory) how subjects use their profile pages to perform alternative genders and sexualities while at the same time engaging pedagogical discourses which seek a wider understanding of sex and gender categories.
CHAPTER 2. Literature Review

Can MySpace be considered an Institution? If so what type of institution is it and how is power materialized in it?

Currently the most popular social networking site on the internet, MySpace counts with over 70 million users, and 200 million users are expected by July 2007; MySpace is changing the way teens and young adults all over America interact with each other.

An online social networking site used by teenagers and young adults, as well as aging men and women around the world (but especially in the U.S.); MySpace allows its users to create profiles, generate a network of friends (existing and new), as well as to share photos, text, music, videos and blogs with other MySpace users in their networks.

The aim of this chapter is to make review the literature which pertains to the analysis of MySpace as an instance of construction and performance of gender/sex identities, social behaviors and proliferation of discourses of power in the image/text/sound mediated space of the internet. To this end I have decided to divide my bibliography into three general categories: Theories on Power, Gender and Performativity, Theories of Ideology and Ideological Analysis of Mass Media, and Cyberculture Critical Studies.

The first category in my bibliography is comprised of Foucaultian and Butlerian literature which I will use in my analysis and interpretation of MySpace profiles. Under the second category of literature I have reviewed books and publications which explain or take Foucault’s and Butler’s theories and apply them to their own subject matters. This group is important to me because it will help me better understand the theorists I want to work with, as well as to learn how their works can and have been used to interpret diverse
cultural objects. Also, some of the literature under this umbrella is concerned with ideological interpretations on popular culture objects or reflections on contemporary society and culture and will provide me with a wide range of perspectives as to how to understand and analyze contemporary media products.

Finally, I will be looking at a third group of literature which I have called Cyberculture Critical Studies. This is a category of literature which focuses on internet studies, more specifically on the creation of online communities and identities in cyberspace. Cyberculture Critical studies literature is important because most of the theories that I will use to analyze and interpret my case studies were not written in the context of new information technologies such as the internet, thus, it is important to have background information on this technology and to understand how the theories I plan to use have been appropriated by writers today in order to try to explain current phenomena such as MySpace.

Theories on Power, Gender and Performativity

The emphasis of this project will be both the analysis of MySpace’s profile structure as well as the interpretation of a few profiles in order to understand how MySpace is both, an institution and a technology of power in contemporary society as well as how it is sometimes used by subjects as a transgressive space where they may struggle against hegemonic gender discourses and practices.

Firstly, Michel Foucault, whose theories I will use in order to establish how and to what extent MySpace has become an Institution of power in contemporary society. In this regard, Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, *Power and Knowledge*:
Selected Interviews and other Writings 1972-1977 by Michel Foucault as well as The Foucault Reader, Foucault’s essay *The Subject and Power*, and finally The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, are the most relevant literature since they provide a comprehensive look at this author’s theories on discipline, subjectivity and power.

*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, is pivotal in my analysis of MySpace as a contemporary institution of power. In this book, Foucault analyzes the creation of the modern penal system and juridical discourses of power arguing that institutions serve a normalizing function in society, through various types of procedures such as examination, classification and surveillance. Institutions also generate discursive practices which perpetuate certain structures of power in society, while they exclude and silence other discursive possibilities which might prove counterproductive to these structures.

Of particular importance are Foucault’s notions of power. He understands power as being at the same time both global and individualizing. “Power is pervasive throughout the social body to regulate at all times. At the same time, it represents a political anatomy of detail supervising all individual movements and gestures.” (Deflem, WWW) Power, claims Foucault, seeks to render everybody visible.

In his essay, “The Subject and Power”, Foucault explains that power, which is present in everyday life, “categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects.”(781) One could even go on to say that the individual is not so much a subject of communication but an object of information.
Power, in Foucault’s model, is not based upon the control that elites may have over the masses; rather, it is embedded in a complicated social network and it becomes internalized by the individual and localized in institutions. Most of the technologies of described in *Discipline and Punish*, such as the Panopticon, are still in place today.

Representing a “system of centralized policing and exhaustive surveillance that makes all visible and itself invisible” (Deflem, *Power/Knowledge* WWW). Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon is an architectural design which Foucault called a “technology of power.” It:

incorporates a tower central to an annular building that is divided into cells, each cell extending the entire thickness of the building to allow inner and outer windows. The occupants of the cells . . . are thus backlit, isolated from one another by walls and subject to scrutiny both collectively and individually by an observer in the tower who remains unseen. Toward this end, Bentham envisioned not only venetian blinds on the tower observation ports but also mazelike connections among tower rooms to avoid glints of light or noise that might betray the presence of an observer. (Barton and Barton, WWW)

Originally designed for prisons, the principle of the Panopticon could easily be applied to schools, psychiatric wards and any other public space where crowds could gather, in order to keep a watchful eye on them. Both, spaces and bodies were distributed in order to give each individual his own place, to “establish presences and absences, to know where and how to locate individuals, to set up useful communications… to be able at any moment to supervise the conduct of each individual” (Foucault, *Discipline* 143).
The Panopticon fulfills each of these requirements; it was created at a time where it was necessary to render individuals and things visible, to organize and survey in order to classify them in both, globalizing and individualizing ways.

According to Foucault, the Panopticon, was originally conceived “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.” Foucault goes on to say that Bentham believed power should be visible and unverifiable: “Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at any moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so” (201). As a result, the Panopticon provides “an apparatus of total and circulating mistrust” (158), where “each comrade becomes an overseer” (152). This state of total and permanent visibility dissuades the subject who, to put it in Bentham’s words, not only loses power but almost loses “the idea of wrong-doing” (154).

The Panopticon was an architectural figure originally designed by Bentham as a new kind of prison. Not only does prison put both criminals and crimes on display, but it is also a visibility in itself: “it is a system of light before being a figure of stone” defined in panopticism “by a visual assemblage and a luminous environment… in which the warden can see all the detainees without the detainees being able to see either him or one another” (Deleuze, Foucault 32).

Foucault’s views on power and surveillance, nonetheless, are not restricted to the Panopticon. He himself recognizes that:

the procedures of power that are at work in modern societies are much more numerous, diverse and rich. It would be wrong to say that the
principle of visibility governs all technologies of power used since the

In *The Means of Correct Training*, Foucault explains how power functions; “it
separates, analyses, differentiates, carries its procedures of decomposition to the point of
necessary and sufficient single units” (Foucault, *Discipline* 170). In order to do so, power
makes use of “simple instruments; hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment and
their combination in a procedure that is specific to it, the examination” (170).

Foucault’s thesis on examination, which, “introduced a whole mechanism that
linked to a certain type of the formation of knowledge a certain form of the exercise of
power.” It did so in three ways: “The examination transformed the economy of visibility
into the exercise of power.” This means that, while power itself is invisible, it renders
subjects completely visible and “it is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able
always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection.” The role
that examination plays in this is that it constitutes the technique by which power holds its
subjects “in a mechanism of objectification” (187).

The second way is that “the examination also introduces individuality into the
field of documentation.” Examination, then, not only places subjects inside a field of
visibility and surveillance, it also “situates them in a network of writing; it engages them
in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them” (189). The subject, be it a
school boy, a patient at a clinic or a soldier in the army, will go through numerous
examinations that seek to categorize and individualize them: “The correlation of these
elements, the accumulation of documents, their seriation, the organization of comparative
“fields” makes it possible “to classify, to form categories, to determine averages, to fix norms” (190).

Finally, “the examination, surrounded by all its documentary techniques makes each individual ‘a case’” (191). That is to say, the individual himself is a case so long as he can be measured, categorized, described and compared with others so as to know whether he should be normalized, excluded, corrected or trained.

Among Foucault’s most important critics, Gilles Deleuze, postulates that we no longer live in disciplinary societies, but instead in societies of control. Control, according to Deleuze, “does not act on the body so much as the environment through which the body moves” (Bart, 15), and he affirms that:

The numerical language of control is made of codes that mark access to information or reject it. We no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals have become ‘dividuals’ and masses, samples, data, markets or ‘banks.’ (15)

Deleuze’s interpretations of Foucault’s theories are well worth revising in this chapter given his attention to modern technologies in the context of the information society. In this regard, any analysis of MySpace and the internet from a Foucaultian perspective might be enriched by Deleuze’s adaptation of Foucault’s theories.

Deleuze dedicates a whole chapter of his book *Foucault* to Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. He begins by establishing that the subject matter of *Discipline and Punish* is a new concept of power which Foucault managed to find and articulate.
Deleuze goes on to explain Foucault’s concept of power, which he does by negating more traditional postulates of power. It would not be pertinent to this chapter to describe all of these postulates, but I will briefly describe some of them to enable a better understanding on Foucault’s theory of power.

To begin with, Deleuze touches on the problem of defining power through the postulate of property; power, according to Foucault is not a form of property owned by a class, “it is less a property than a strategy” (Deleuze, *Foucault* 25). Power is not the privilege of the dominant class; it is “the overall effects of its strategic positions.” In brief, Deleuze argues, “power is not homogeneous but can be defined only by the particular points through which it passes” (25).

Deleuze also speaks of the postulate of localization and how Foucault’s notion of power is not that of the State. Societies, he argues:

> can be defined as ‘disciplinarian’; but discipline cannot be identified with one institution or apparatus because it is a type of power, a technology, that transverses every kind of apparatus or institution, linking them, prolonging them, and making them converge and function in a new way.

(26)

We arrive, then, at a new topology of power “which no longer locates the origin of power in a privileged place, and can no longer accept a limited localization… power is local because it is never global, but it is local or localized because it is diffuse” (26).

As for the postulate of modality, Foucault’s power is neither ideological nor violent: “Power does not come about through ideology, even when it concerns the soul; it does not necessarily separate through violence and repression, even when it weighs in on
the body.” Power should be understood as “a relation between force and force, ‘an action upon an action,’” and its function in a disciplinary society is “to allocate, to classify, to compose, to normalize” (28). Power is a producer of truth.

Let’s leave postulates aside for now and focus on Discipline and Punish. Deleuze explains how the prison comes to be an environmental formation (the prison environment itself) and a form of content, the content being the inmate (31). However, in the context of the eighteenth century, the prison or the word that defines it, does not refer back to its original signifier but to “completely different words and concepts, such as delinquency or delinquent, which expresses a new way of articulating infractions, sentences and their subjects” (31).

According to Deleuze, penal law undergoes a major change in the eighteenth century because it starts to be aimed at the defense of society as opposed to vengeance or at the restoration of sovereign power. The laws are “signs addressed to the soul and mind which establish mental associations between the crime and the punishment” (32). Thus, a code is created.

Prison, on the other hand, is a new way of acting upon bodies. While penal law concerns everything that can be articulated into a system of language which “classifies and translates offences and calculates sentences”, prison is “concerned with whatever is visible.” Prison puts both the criminal and the crime on display but it is also a visibility in itself, “it is a system of light before being a figure of stone” defined by panopticism “by a visual assemblage and a luminous environment… in which the warden can see all the detainees without the detainees being able to see either him or one another” (32).
With regard to Panopticism, Deleuze explains that Foucault defines it either in its concrete form ("as an optical and luminous arrangement that characterizes prison" (34)), or abstractly. The abstract formula, says Deleuze, is no longer "to see without being seen" but to impose a particular conduct on a particular human multiplicity" (34). The only condition that Deleuze asks the reader insist upon is that "the multiplicity is reduced and confined to a tight space" (34).

At this point it is useful to introduce the concept of "diagram" in Foucault, which speaks to a new and informal dimension, as opposed to the formal distribution of space in the prison. Deleuze describes the diagram as a map, "a cartography which is coextensive to the whole social field... defined by its informal functions, it is a machine that is almost blind and mute, even though it makes others see and speak" (34). A diagram is "a spatio-temporal multiplicity." According to Deleuze, Foucault uses this notion "in connection with our modern disciplinarian societies, where power controls the whole field" (34). An example of a diagram in Foucault’s work is that of the city infected by the plague, where every little detail in town is strictly regulated and controlled.

With regard to the Panopticon, Deleuze defines it as "the pure function of imposing a particular taste or conduct on a multiplicity of particular individuals, provided simply that the multiplicity is small and confined." Neither the forms (education, care punishment, production), nor the formed substances (schoolchildren, factory workers, prisoners, etc) are taken into account by it, to the point where "by the end of the eighteenth century the Panopticon transverses all these forms and is applied to all these substances." Power exists "as a pure disciplinary function" and Foucault denominates this "the diagram" (72).
In the second part of this project I will illustrate one of the ways in which power is materialized in MySpace, through the perpetuation and proliferation of heteronormative discourses within profiles. One of the most important categories that subjects use to define themselves are gender/sex categories. The definition of a gender/sex category in a MySpace profile (as well as in other social practices) does not end when someone marks a box which reads “male”, “female”, or “other.” Gender is a performative category, and subjects “perform” gender in “real” life as well as in the profiles that they create online.

Erwin Goffman’s notion of social performativity will help inform my understanding of Judith Butler work on gender performance. Butler’s work is central to my analysis of MySpace as an institution and technology of power and especially how power materializes in it. As I said, Goffman introduced the notion of performance in his work on human social behavior, a notion which then Butler uses to explain the constructedness of the concept of gender (as well as the body). In this thesis I deploy critique of gender performance (Butler) in order to demonstrate how power gets inscribed in bodies through discursive practices that may be translated into audio, text and images in a MySpace profile.

Goffman’s work in The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life represents a microanalysis of human behavior in social situations and how we appear to others. To this end, Goffman uses the metaphor of the theatre and introduces concepts such as “backstage,” “impression management,” “teams,” and “performances” to illuminate his descriptions and analysis.
In his book Gender Advertisements, Goffman explains that every object in a society produces signs that inform us about them. “Natural” or “animal” objects are said to give off natural indexical signs and Goffman claims that in man these signs are called “expressions”. However, “expressions” are not by any means “natural.” On the contrary, they are part of a vast array of symbols that we have learned to read, express, fake (as well as to read behind these “fakeries”), in order to communicate to others our “truths.”

Goffman goes on to say that “we routinely seek … information about those of an object’s properties that are felt to be *perduring, overall, and structurally basic*, in short, information about its character or ‘essential nature.’” In doing so, he says, we “presume that objects have natures independent of the particular interest that might arouse our concern” (7).

Goffman understands that traits that are commonly perceived as “natural” are, in fact, not; furthermore, he believes that “expression” is not instinctive but “socially learned and socially patterned.” Not only this, but expression is particular and socially bound, and it is patterned after what the actor thinks the viewer wants to see. In this sense, “the notion of essence, character, structure is, one might argue, social since there are likely to be an infinite number of properties of the object that could be selected out as central ones” (7). Consequently, subjects will pick and choose those actions which they believe will allow them to ‘perform’ their character best according to social settings and audiences.

Goffman argues that one of the most deeply seated traits of humans is gender, that is, the notion of masculinity and femininity which seem to us as one of the most basic characters of ‘human nature’. Individuals learn not only when, but also how to express
themselves as male or female. Moreover, “in learning this they are learning to be the kind of object to which the doctrine of natural expression applies… we are socialized to confirm our own hypotheses about our natures” (7).

Goffman thus argues that gender is not a “natural” category but is instead a social construction. An illuminating paragraph in the chapter “Gender Display” of his book Gender Advertisements is worth citing substantially:

What, the human nature of males and females really consists of, then, is a capacity to learn to provide and to read depictions of masculinity and femininity and the willingness to adhere to a schedule for presenting these pictures, and this capacity they have by virtue of being persons, not females or males. One might just as well say there is no gender identity. There is only a schedule for the portrayal of gender. There is no relationship between the sexes that can so far be characterized in any satisfactory fashion. There is only evidence of the practice between the sexes of choreographing behaviorally a portrait of relationship. And what these portraits most directly tell us about is not gender, or the overall relationship between the sexes, but about the special character and functioning as portraiture. (8)

In this sense, societies portrayals of males and females do not (as we are made to believe) depict gender (since there is no such thing as “gender identity), but instead what they show is socially agreed-upon performances of gender which make sense only in relation and by opposition to each other.
In her book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler explores the notion of gender performance which seems to coincide with Goffman’s depiction of the display of gender. However, Butler takes it one step further by denying any allusion to “human nature”. For Butler, it is not only gender that is culturally constructed but so is the sexed body itself. She denies the notion of a pre-discursive body as a “politically neutral surface on which culture acts.” Instead, she claims that “it is already clear that one way the internal stability and binary frame for sex is effectively secured is by casting the duality of sex in a prediscursive domain” (11).

According to Butler, and very much in line with what Goffmann has to say, gender is performative. This means that gender constitutes the identity that it is professed to be. Butler explains that “gender is always a doing” and quotes Friederich Nietzsche who claimed that “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; the ‘doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything.” Butler then concludes that there is no ‘real’ or ‘natural’ gender identity hidden behind the expressions of gender: “That identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (33).

Gender, therefore, is not something people ‘have’ nor is it something people ‘are’ either. Goffman argues that gender is one of the fundamental traits that we have constructed to characterize and define people. Butler goes one step further and claims that “‘persons’ are only intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility” (22). Butler believes that there are certain regulatory practices of gender formation and division that work towards the constitution of identity and she wonders, as Goffman does, “to what extent is ‘identity’ a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience” (23).
If, as she believes, we are only persons inasmuch as we are gendered persons, then we might have a clearer idea of why it is so important for the establishment to keep gender categories untouched. If “‘identity’ is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of ‘the person’ is called into question by the cultural emergence of those ‘incoherent’ or ‘discontinuous’ gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined” (23).

In The History of Sexuality, Volume I, Foucault explains how since the eighteenth century, numerous mechanisms and technologies of power started working toward the production of a general “truth” about sexuality. This truth was expressed through regulatory practices which generated “coherent identities through the matrix of coherent gender norms” (Butler, 23). What this means is that certain practices were “normalized” by opposition to other practices which were deemed as abnormal and non-acceptable.

Given that our society is founded upon a white, patriarchal, heterosexist structure, the effort made to perpetuate these hegemonic structures should not be surprising. According to Butler, central to the view that a society produces identity concepts of sex is the fact that “sex appears within hegemonic language as a substance, as, metaphysically speaking, a self-identical being” (Butler, 24). In other words, if you are a biological woman, you better perform the category of ‘woman’. In any case, most of the times in western society we assume that there are always-only two possibilities of performance: male or female.
Butler goes on to say that for Foucault, “the substantive grammar of sex imposes an artificial binary relation between the sexes, as well as an artificial internal coherence within each term of the binary.” As a result, “the binary regulation of sexuality suppresses the subversive multiplicity of a sexuality that disrupts heterosexual, reproductive and medicojuridical hegemonies” (Butler, 26). Gender is thus defined mainly by contrast with the opposite gender and this formulation itself presupposes a restricted definition of gender within the binary male/female.

**Theories of Ideology and Ideological Analysis of Mass Media**

As I mentioned at the beginning of this Chapter, the second group of literature concerns those works which comment or use some of the theories that I want to use in my analysis of MySpace, as well as literature that pertains to ideological approaches to the analysis of contemporary culture. Most of these works have not been written with the internet in mind, but still explore concepts of identity, self and subjectivity in a critical fashion which will prove helpful in my own understanding of the particular medium and subjectivities that I have chosen to analyze.

**Concepts of the Self**, by Anthony Elliot is a book which explores modern and postmodern concepts of the self. Of particular importance to my project is Chapter 1: “Self, Society and Everyday Life,” which deals with Goffman’s theories on presentation of the self; Chapter 3: “Technologies of the Self,” in which Elliott engages with Foucault’s theories on power and technologies; Chapter 4: “Self, Sexuality and Gender,” particularly the section based upon Judith Butler’s theories on gender performance; and finally Chapter 5: “The Postmodern Self” which inquires about the differences between
concepts of the self in modernity and postmodernity and “the recognition that the self is already a rich plurality of contending discourses, practices, images, fantasies and representations: a plurality constituted and reconstituted by contemporary social, cultural and political processes” (140).

My thesis is a cultural studies project, and as such entails extensive research and reading on subjects such as ideology, culture, power and subjectivities. Most of the books that I have reviewed for this section are not directly related to my topic, but are important because they will help provide a broader understanding of our culture through different theoretical debates and points of view. Most of these books are theoretically based while others use ideological critique to analyze specific cultural or media products. In both cases, revision of these texts are of significant importance to my project because in order to understand a cultural phenomenon such as MySpace, it is important to know what has been said before of other cultural objects of study as well as understand what tools may be used in its interpretation.

In *Ideology*, Cormack affirms that societies are organized around “a preferred self-image” which basically means “the way in which society is described by its dominant groups” (12). This author speaks of “society” as the frame for ideological construction; a concept of particular importance in the twenty-first century given the decline of the concept and strength of nation-states and the escalating influence of multi and transnational corporations.

Cormack prefers to talk about “dominant groups” as opposed to “ruling classes.” This distinction is important because Cormack’s term includes different types of groups and not only those defined by “class”. In the context of my project, Cormack’s argument
is important because I will look at how certain concepts of gender, sex and the body are hegemonic in contemporary society and shape our conceptions of each other. For Cormack: ideology serves the purpose of maintaining an established system or order of things which perpetuates the dominant groups’ power over the rest of subjects.

In addition, Cormack argues that the production of meaning which results from the interaction between linguistic and social practices is key because it frames behaviors and provides spoken (and unspoken) norms of conduct (perpetuated and established in the forms of rituals). Further, he emphasizes the way we define ourselves through language and given that language is itself a social construct, then it follows that our own self images are “socially derived” and “heavily charged” (Cormack, 13) by ideological concepts. We shall see in Chapter 4 just how important, and above all, constraining language is to subjects who attempt to become intelligible in a society where no words can define them.

In The Concept of Ideology, Jorge Larrain explores the nature and bases of ideology and provides a historical account of the development of this concept. Larrain explores “ideology” from four different points of view: ideology as false consciousness or as a “world-view;” ideology as subjective and psychological or as an objective and social phenomenon; ideology as a specific element of society’s superstructure or as tautological with culture; and finally ideology as something related or completely different as science (Larrain, 11).

Ideology and the Image, as the title reflects, is concerned specifically with the relation that images (still and moving) have to ideologies. Its author, Bill Nichols talks about our perceptions of the world, including the physical world, figurative images as
well as perceptions of the self. In the second chapter Nichols is concerned with the analysis of images, the nature of icons and the relationship between images and ideology. He uses a variety of examples to illuminate the theory and does extensive analysis of still images from an ideological point of view. This chapter is of particular importance to my analysis of MySpace user’s profiles because I will be looking at a cultural object presented to subjects on a screen (visual element) and in the screen there are more visual components, such as photographs and videos.

John Fiske has written several books on media and popular culture as well as communication studies. His approach to understanding and interpreting media and cultural objects is basically ideological, and he attempts to give communications students the tools to critically understand and interpret media products.

His book *Introduction to Communication Studies* provides the reader with a range of methods of analysis of communications products in Western Society. Fiske strives to generate critical awareness in students of communications so that they may tease out the underlying meanings in seemingly simple and innocuous cultural products. Of special importance for my project are Fiske’s chapters on “Signification”, “Semiotic Methods and Applications” and “Ideology and Meanings.”

Fiske’s *Reading the Popular* and *Understanding Popular Culture* were published simultaneously but separately because of the similarity of their topic and the differences in their approaches. Both books are concerned with popular culture in English speaking countries and the theories upon which Fiske bases his analysis are mainly European in origin: Bourdieu, de Certeau, Barthes, Hall and Bakhtin.
Reading the Popular is more textually based than Understanding Popular Culture, in the sense that it is divided into several chapters in which Fiske engages with analytical observation of specific cultural phenomena and the sites where people create popular culture.

Understanding Popular Culture, on the other hand, is more theoretical and political, moving from the theory to the readings. In it Fiske tries to create a theory of popular culture in capitalist societies. Both books are important to my project because MySpace is, obviously, a cultural object as well as part of a very important, new media. Looking at Fiske’s examples and understanding how he uses theory to analyze cultural product will be very useful to my own analysis of MySpace.

Fiske argues that “popular culture has to be, above all else, relevant to the immediate social situation of the people” (25). Crucial in his analysis is the idea that popular culture is not imposed upon people but instead, created by them. MySpace is a prime example of such a thing, having been created by two recent college graduates who started a website hoping that new, unknown musicians could upload their music and their “fans” could talk amongst each other about them. Now MySpace is a social and cultural phenomenon which is not only worth millions and millions of dollars but is also changing the way teens and young adults in America relate and socialize with each other. “Popular culture… stems from within, from below, not above. Popular culture is the art of making do with what the system provides” (25).

Media Matters, also by Fiske, is a book which asks about the possibility, in a postmodern world, to separate media events from non-media events. In the course of this book, Fiske analyses different popular TV sitcoms such as Murphy Brown, The Cosby
Show and Married with Children in order to talk about subjects such as gender and sex, race and class, power relations among other important cultural studies issues. Among the topics which I find most useful for my personal analysis of MySpace profiles are those related to gender and sexuality as well as notions of hyperreality and simulacrum which Fiske borrows from Jean Baudrillard and are extremely useful when trying to understand the “nature” of subjects who generate identities online: “We can no longer work with the idea that the “real” is more important, significant or even ‘true’ than the representation” (3).

Another important contribution that this book makes toward my project is Fiske’s appropriation of the term discourse, which he recognizes stems from Michel Foucault’s theories but which Fiske adapts to American culture. Fiske argues that the United States “is a multidiscursive society, as it is a multicultural one, and any analysis of its culture must be as concerned with discursive relations as with discursive practices” (4). This an important concept in terms of my project, especially in Chapter 4 which deals with Foucaultian theory and institutions of power. This chapter will focus on the discourses that permeate MySpace, based upon Foucault’s theories but supported by Fiske, since he has adapted Foucault to fit a culture as complex as the American culture.

**Cyberculture Critical Studies**

The rapid emergence of the internet and cyberspace as a pervasive kind of information technology has triggered the imagination and thoughts of many scholars who have written books concerned with the effects of information technologies on our world and social identities.
**Critical Cyberculture Studies** is a compilation of essays which tries to provide readers with a basis for the future of critical studies in cyberculture. Editors and contributors warn against the dangers of engaging in strictly disciplinary work and instead encourage a flexible approach to cyberculture studies which would allow scholars to keep up with the fast-paced environment of cyberspace.

“Connecting the Selves”, by Heidi Figueroa Sarriera talks about the creation of identities online from a poststructuralist point of view. Figueroa Sarriera criticizes the trend to use traditional social psychology in the analysis of online identities, since this analysis is based upon the premise that there is a coherent and stable identity in a human being. Figueroa Sarriera talks about the capacity for self-referentiality in a subject. This capacity is what allows a person to distinguish their own “self” from the “other”. However, when a self is a “virtual” self, and the former embodied subject becomes disembodied, how does he/she create identity?

Figueroa tries to explain the generation of identities online in the light of the Actor Network Theory (ANT). ANT states that any act that a subject gets involved in “are generated in networks that pass through and beyond the body… Identity is the byproduct of a network at a very specific moment” (102).

“Bridging Cyberlife and Real Life: A Study of Online Communities in Hong Kong”, by Anthony Fung, seeks to understand why cyberlife and ‘real’ life continue to exist simultaneously, using Hong Kong as a case study. Fung argues that most work today on online communities tend to understand them from a point of view of “imagined communities,” a lot of the communities in Hong Kong that he has studied, are actually connected not only through the internet, but are also connected geographically. This
means that these communities are not just virtual but they are also “real” and “closely connected through real-life identities” (130). (Which is also true of a lot of MySpace “friendships”).

Fung raises two important questions in his essays that apply to my research topic: “Are cyberlife and real life connected, and, if so, what is the impact of these communities on the real social life of the gamers? In what forms and contexts is the real life of the communities connected to the cyberlife of online communities?” (131).

In this sense, I wonder to what extent are the identities created for a MySpace profile consciously designed by the individual to represent an ideal (Imago) of him/herself? To what degree are the gendered identities displayed on MySpace profiles made of very conscious choices that the “actor” picks in order to define him/herself. Are these choices even really choices, or in a Butlerian sense, are they only “choices” in a small sense, to the extent that they are choices from what is limited for us to pick from?

“The Construction of Cybersocial Reality,” by Stine Gotved is concerned with how little is still known about online life and its patterns of sociality. Even though there are numerous studies, mostly based on ethnographic accounts of certain online communities, Gotved still believes that we are far from understanding online life. He proposes that we look at cybersocial reality as a triangle composed of three basic categories: culture, structure and interaction and asks the reader not to consider technology as something completely “new,” since technology is everywhere surrounding our daily lives. In the case of online communities, technology acts as their basic condition and framing: “the technology intervenes at the level of agency” (169).
However, he claims, the triangle that comprises the three basic categories that we mentioned above is more complex than just the connection of these three categories. There are also a Triangle of Time and a Triangle of Space which contribute to the complexity of social relations on cyberspace and they are very particular since the cyberspace environment is different that real life environment. So, all in all the triangle is comprised of culture, social structure, social interaction, technology, as well as their place within space and time. The triangle design “establishes the frames of a metatheory in the area of cybersocial life, based on cultural sociology and the relatively few cross-disciplinary empirical studies of this phenomenon” (176).

David J Phillips’ work on the internet has been influenced by Foucaultian work on discipline as well as Goffman’s theories on self-presentation and identity management. Phillips’ essay “Cyberstudies and the Politics of Visibility” is about visibility and identity online and asks questions about trust and intimacy, community, representation and context. He proposes that a research project which looked to answer these (and other) questions, should be separated into three parts. A first part would look, both historically and empirically, at how individuals manage context, place and identity. A second part would look at technologies of mediation and visibility, and try to understand how they have and continue to shape social practices. Finally, a third part would be about how technology has become part of our daily lives and suggest “points of intervention in these processes and historical forces so that future developments in media might be more likely to support liberatory activities” (219).

Phillips suggests that one way of looking at the role of technology in the construction of identities, is through the concept of panopticism (222). However, he
admits that technology should not only be understood at this level, but also take into account the ways that new information technologies allow for the blurring of boundaries.

Finally, in “Finding the Quality in Qualitative Research” Nancy Baym takes a critical stance with regard to the way much of the research on internet and cyberculture has been done up to date. She stresses the fact that many internet scholars don’t believe that the “old rules” apply to internet studies, since it’s supposedly a “new” environment. Another problem that she has encountered is the lack of background research that these scholars do when they write their own papers and therefore wrongly believe that whatever it is they are writing about is a new discovery or phenomena. A third problem she encounters is that data collection is not done rigorously enough.

Baym stresses that “old theory” while perhaps not a “perfect fit” for an analysis of the internet environment, is still very much applicable to it: “but new technology does not reinvent the social world. Old structures have not simply collapsed and been replaced by new ones in the wake of the internet” (83). Yes, she claims, online relationships do develop differently than face-to-face relationships but “relationship are still built on attraction created through common interests, ease of interaction, and running into one another in public spaces, even if those spaces are now digital rather than terrestrial. Theory may be refined, but it does not need to be reinvented” (83).

Composing Cyberspace, an anthology which addresses issues regarding social implications of emerging technologies of information, is arranged around subjects of identity construction, community and knowledge. Chapters 1, 2 and 3 of this anthology will be of importance to my project because they discuss issues of identity construction, gender and cultural identities online. Chapter 1 is titled “New Windows of the Self” and
includes an essay by Sherry Turkle; “Identity in the Age of the Internet” which is relevant to my project. Turkle talks about how a culture of simulation “is affecting our ideas about mind, self, body and the machine.” She asks the readers to look at cyberspace in a large context, a context that embraces both the “real” and the “virtual,” or better yet, a context which blurs the boundaries between these two spaces: “In the real-time communities of cyberspace, we are dwellers on the threshold between the real and the virtual, unsure of our footing, inventing ourselves as we go along” (Turkle in Holten, 6).

Turkle, one of the earliest scholars to do work on identity in cyberspace, is also the author of Life on the Screen. This book is a reflection on the construction of online identities, particularly in MUD environments. In its introduction Turkle reflects on the postmodern subject as a very difficult concept to grasp, while growing up in the sixties and seventies. However, with the help of modern technologies and computers, the concept of the unitary self as an illusion becomes intelligible in tangible ways:

In my computer-mediated worlds, the self is multiplied, fluid, and constituted in interaction with machine connections; it is made and transformed by language, sexual congress is an exchange of signifiers; and understanding follows from navigation and tinkering rather than analysis.

(15)

In The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit, Turkle explores computers and the ways that people have learnt to interact with them, not as mere tools but as integral parts of our social lives. Even though this book was written two decades ago much of Turkle’s work still applies to present day technologies and social practices because computers have become such pervasive and ubiquitous sources of social
interaction. The Second Self is a reflection on technology and how it changes our actions and thoughts about the world and about ourselves. Turkle asks her readers to “look beyond all the things the computer does for us… to what using it does to us as people” (3). This sort of reflection is crucial to my project because I wonder how MySpace not only allows its users to construct their identities online, but how in the process of constructing this identity, it also affects and shapes its subjects and the world in which we live.

Don Ihde’s book Bodies in Technology is a philosophical account of how our worlds and bodies are affected by various information technologies. Ihde, like most of the authors I will cite in this project, agrees with the concept of culturally constructed bodies as opposed to biological bodies. He claims that we are our bodies in the phenomenological sense, but we are also our bodies in a social and cultural sense. These two dimensions of the body (phenomenological and social/cultural) are now transcended by a third dimension: the technological. In a way that is reminiscent of Donna Haraway’s Cyborg Manifesto, Ihde believes that the synthesis between the “body” and technological instruments, make it more possible to “overcome the classical phenomenologist’s’ apparent strong distinctions between a “lifeworld” and separate “worlds of science” (xvi).

Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto,” argues that, by the end of the twentieth century we have all become cyborgs. Haraway’s definition of a cyborg is “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction” (Haraway, 149). Haraway’s feminist critique of cyborg identities envisions and encourages a non-naturalist world: the virtue of cyborgs is
that, being creatures of a post-gender world they allow for transgression, blurring and re-drawing of boundaries.

Haraway also questions the unity of women as a “whole,” as she discusses the well-known topic of identity and the problem of exclusion through naming. Do race, sex, gender or class provide for the basis of the essential unity of a subject? Because of her discussions of notions of the cyborg and her attempts to re-flow power relations and identities in the era of technological information. Haraway’s work in this essay provides for a very interesting and rich foundation for my thesis project,

Faced with the literature on the construction of online identities, I have come across many works that base their arguments on the cultural construction of the body and use feminist and women studies theories to explain bodies in cyberspace. One such book is Material Virtualities: Approaching Online Textual Embodiment, in which Jenny Sunden explores how gender is created and negotiated in a particular textual environment. Sunden tries to explain how bodies can be created through textual practices and bases many of her arguments on Judith Butler’s theories on gender and sexuality, which is certainly very useful to my project since I will be using these same theories in my own analysis of bodies and gender on MySpace.

All of the literature reviewed above addresses questions about the construction and generation of online identities, from a variety of critical points of view. Because the internet is still relatively new and MySpace is only a couple of years old, there are only a few sources that address it directly. The importance of reviewing the literature on online identities that is available right now is to know and understand what sort of work has been done so far on this subject, what approaches different authors have taken in order to
analyze and interpret online texts and the theories that they have so far applied to their particular studies.
CHAPTER 3. WHAT’S IN A PROFILE? – A Preliminary Analysis

Signing up to become a member of MySpace is a very easy task and virtually anywhere in the world (over the age of 14) with basic computer skills and internet knowledge is capable of creating a ‘legitimate’ account. Legitimacy in this space is conferred to those who claim to be older than 14 years old; this is the only requirement to join the network. In order to sign up and create a profile, though, there is no need to provide any proof of age (or of any of the information the member discloses) which means that MySpace mainly relies on the word of their members to authenticate their information. MySpace could be said to be, then, a space of fantasy and illusion for those who create their own profiles and attempt to get closer to their own imago, as well as for those who fantasize with the subjectivities that they encounter, which they trust to be ‘real,’ but might not be.

Registration requires 3 steps. To begin with, one needs to fill out a number of required fields which include the following: 1) email address, 2) password, 3) first name, 4) last name, 5) country, 6) postal code, 7) gender, 8) date of birth, 9) preferred site and language. At the end of the list of required fields, prospective members are also required to mark a box which indicates that they agree to MySpace’s Terms of Service as well as their Privacy Policy.

Potential members have no option but to fill out all of the fields presented to them, according to the options that they are granted by MySpace. At this point it is worth noting that the ‘gender’ field only offers two choices for the user, either male or female. In this case the category “gender” is used as an indicator of the sex of the subject: if prospective members mark the “male” box then that means, at the very least, that they
have male genitalia and if on the other hand, they mark the “female” box then we call all assume that the member has female genitalia. I will come back to this later in my analysis; for now, let’s just say that gender on MySpace is equated with the biological sex of the person. Thus, we begin to see, as Butler would argue, how discourses of compulsory heterosexuality and gender normativity are not only present, but also perpetuated in MySpace as early in the process of becoming a member, as the first step in the creation of a profile.

Following the gender field, prospective members need to fill out their date of birth. While providing this information is mandatory, MySpace asks its prospective members for permission to show their birthday on their profiles. In a culture that glorifies youth, MySpace creators understood that not everyone may be willing to disclose their age to the whole world, and gracefully lets their members choose whether they want their social network to find out their age. Why? Maybe because in a society where asking someone’s (especially a woman’s) age is considered bad manners, where youth is a virtue and aging, a curse, it is not surprising that some people might prefer to remain “undated.”

During registration, prospective members are encouraged to upload and share photos in their profiles; however some users choose not to upload any pictures. In these cases, MySpace adds a default image depicting the silhouette of a person, in the place where a member’s profile picture should be.

Finally, the third and last step of registration is inviting others to join the subject’s network of friends. MySpace enthusiastically prompts its members to ask others to join their network and start building new social relations (as well as maintaining old ones) through their site.
As an experiment, I created a ‘fake’ MySpace profile keeping it to a basic minimum, the reason being that I wanted to find out which categories are the regarded (by MySpace) as the most elementary for the construction and intelligibility of an individual’s identity. The results were surprising although not astonishing; they confirmed my suspicions that MySpace is a very normative space which encourages a sexual economy and contributes to perpetuate hegemonic discourses about gender and Family. Figure 1.1 shows what the most basic profile on MySpace would look like:

‘Julia’s’ profile is an example of the most basic profile any MySpace member could have. The information that appears next to the space where her picture should be
comes from the fields that she was required to fill when she first became a member. According to this, Julia is a twenty-six year old female, located in Washington DC, U.S.A, and the last time she logged into her account was on March 7th 2007.

The top left hand corner of the profile page is reserved for Julia’s first name (in bold letters), a space for her profile picture (still waiting to be filled) and her most basic information: gender, age, location. Below this space, there is a box filled with different ways that members can get in touch with Julia. Some of the ways that Julia may be reached are by sending her a personal message (like an email) or through an instant messaging system which allows MySpace users who are online to chat on real time to other members. Other forms of interaction with Julia present in this particular box are to add her as a “friend” to one’s own list, to forward her profile to someone else or to add her to an existing group on MySpace. On this space subjects may also block Julia from their profile or rank her profile picture (provided she had one AND she had asked for it to be available for ranking).

Below “Contacting Julia,” is another space denominated “Julia’s Details.” At this point, and because Julia only entered the required fields, “Julia’s Details” only show three descriptors: Status, Zodiac and Children. Two out of the three descriptors have been added by MySpace as default answers, since, in reality, Julia never provided any information with regard to her marital status or her desire to have or not to have children. MySpace’s default answers for these questions, which no MySpace user can avoid (just like the ‘gender’ question) are that, until proven otherwise, Julia is single and does not want any children. It is worthwhile noting that, even though MySpace does not advertise itself as a matchmaking website, the most privileged and unavoidable information that
appears on anyone’s profile is their gender, marital status, procreation plans or Zodiac sign! Add to this the optional nature of showing one’s age, and we start to realize that maybe we are now in a technology of power which renders its members subjects to an online sexual economy, disguised as a social network.

On the right hand side of Julia’s profile page we have “Julia’s Blurbs,” “Julia’s Friend Space,” and “Julia’s friend’s comments.” “Julia’s Blurbs” is divided into two parts: “About me” and “Who I’d Like to Meet.” Both sections appear in Julia’s profile page, empty, waiting to be filled with text, accusingly and loudly silent. What does a profile with no picture and no personal information say about a person who signed up to a social networking site? To some, it might scream indifference. To others it might even be a statement against these kinds of sites, a refusal to allow definition through a few paragraphs of vacuous clichés. However, as much as ‘Julia’ might want to avoid classification, she cannot ever really escape it. In MySpace’s eyes if nothing else, she is still a single female who doesn’t want children as well as a member of some Zodiac sign, with all of the labels and characterizations that being one entails.

“Julia’s Friend Space” is empty, except for Tom, MySpace’s creator and President. “We are taught that corporations have a soul, which is the most terrifying news in the world,” (Deleuze, *Postscripts*, 2) and it is true. Following modern conceptions of the corporation, Tom presents himself as a friendly, young man from California who welcomes you to the world that he helped create. MySpace members are his clients, his company will profit from each and every single new addition to the network. However, this is not how Tom wants to be seen. He is approachable, only an email away. His pictures are on his profile, just like every other member’s profile in the network.
Members immediately feel identified with this stranger who, despite being one of the most powerful people in the internet business today, is gracious enough to be in their personal networks and to show himself as the human being (not the unreachable millionaire) he is.

It is clear by the analysis above that as members of MySpace, we are guided in the construction of our online identities, if only because we are told which information is relevant and worth disclosing, and which is not. The categories discussed so far are all heavily charged with meaning; they are not just signifiers that match up to one single signified: To be either male or female implies an enormous set of expectations, norms, attitudes and culturally constructed meanings which most people in western societies will interpret to match their own experiences. The same goes for someone’s marital status, and of course, numerous books have been written about the meaning of each one of the zodiac signs. Obviously, the four basic categories that MySpace thinks are pivotal in the construction of anyone’s identity will not be interpreted by themselves or in a vacuum. A single twenty-three year old woman will be judged differently than a single thirty year old woman, and in turn this woman will not be read under the same light as a single, thirty year old male.

Categories, Categories, Categories….

Once a member creates their basic profile page, they may choose to update their profiles by adding more information about themselves. Every member’s home page has an “edit your profile” link which leads the subject to another page where they are provided with more fields to fill out. Some of the fields are open-ended allowing for more
freedom of expression and creativity in subject’s definitions of themselves. Most fields, however, are multiple choice so that members need to subscribe to one of the series of choices that they are presented with.

While the categories and options that MySpace offers may be perceived as mainly descriptive, they are, in fact highly normative and a reflection of western society and its values. Some types of information or personal characteristics are more semantically charged and thus privileged over others; they appear to say more about a subject than less normative categories do. We have learned that we can infer a lot more about a person if we know their gender, race, religion or even what University they went to, than by learning if they prefer vanilla ice-cream over chocolate. Categories such as gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity are heavily charged with meaning that has been historically constructed to the point were they seem pivotal in our understanding of each other. Commonly perceived as very basic descriptive categories, what most people do not realize is their incredible normative power. I will further expand on this point as I go through the list of categories and descriptors that MySpace offers its members.

The “Other”

As we begin to look at the categories that MySpace presents its members with, we will see that some of the categories that are structured as multiple-choice have an “other” option, and some do not. The question of “otherness” in this respect deserves acknowledgment because it is heavily charged with meaning. Meaning, as we will see shortly, can be derived from both, the presence of a space for the “other” in a category, and from its absence; it may also come from the subject’s choice of marking the “other”
in a category or by neglecting to fill out that category completely. Most of the fields which allow for an “other” answer are fields which are not required and members may choose to leave them blank. I suggest that when a member of MySpace chooses to mark the “other” option of a certain category, it means that they consider that particular category to be an important descriptor of their identities; however, they cannot find a satisfying answer among the choices that they are faced with.

On the other hand, there are those who choose not to answer to certain categories at all. I believe that when subjects are offered a category with a set of possible answers, including an “other,” and chooses not to mark any of the possible answers, they are making a political statement (whether consciously or not). Their silence might mean that they do not find the particular category relevant to the construction of their identity; it could also be that they refuse to define themselves in the terms presented to them, or that they cannot identify with any of the options provided. In this case, however, the subject might choose to mark the “other” option. Refusal to do this might be read as one of the small micropractices that subjects could engage with if they ever wanted to struggle against the normativity of certain categories that we have been historically subjected to identify with.

Before I begin to analyze the fields and categories that MySpace offers its members as meaningful identity categories, I will say that for the purposes of the present project I have decided to focus especially on those which relate to questions of gender and sex as well as the open-ended categories which allow users to expand more on their personalities, personal interests and views. Let us now take a look at some of the fields that MySpace offers its members in their site’s “Edit your Profile” section:
Interests and Personality

- Headline
- About Me
- I’d like to Meet
- Interests
- Music
- Movies
- Television
- Books
- Heroes

“Interests and Personality” is the only section which allows users to write open-ended answers to the categories. The ‘Headline’ field is usually used by members to write some quotation that they like, and it goes next to the profile photograph, giving it a very privileged space in the whole profile page.

Both the ‘About Me’ and ‘I’d like to meet’ fields show on members’ profiles regardless of whether they are filled out or not. Needless to say, it is strange to find profiles that lack some sort of information or description of the subject’s character on both these spaces. In ‘About Me’ a member is allowed to express, in their own words, anything they want to say about their personality and character, without the constraints characteristic of multiple choice fields. The same goes for ‘Who I’d Like to Meet,’ which allows members to be specific about the type of people that they would like to meet through MySpace. This space also allows members to clearly state, not only the type of person that they would like to meet but also their reasons for being on MySpace, which may or may not be (according to them) to date, make friends, network, etc.

The other open-ended fields, such as ‘Interests,’ ‘Music,’ ‘Movies,’ ‘Television,’ ‘Books,’ and ‘Heroes’ are meant to provide some extra insight into the subject’s personality and character. Almost all of these fields refer to activities related to mass
culture and entertainment which is indicative of the great importance that contemporary society places on the media. As a signifier, the name of a TV show has endless meanings according to who reads it and what their own likes and dislikes are. As life-long consumers of mass cultural products, we attach different meanings to them that go beyond the product itself. There is, in my opinion, no “naivete” when writing down, for the world to see, what our interests are, our favorite movies or TV shows and what music we listen to. As they create profiles, subjects not only think about who they believe they are but they also think about who their audience will be and how they will be interpreted by their viewers.

Following the open ended sections, MySpace members are also invited to fill out a plethora of other multiple-choice fields. These are the fields that I find particularly interesting for the purposes of this project given that they are offered to subjects as helpful descriptors when, in reality, they contribute to the perpetuation of the limited normative stereotypes and categories which have historically been constructed to define and classify individuals. Ranging from sexual orientation, gender, religion, ethnicity to annual income, businesses and education, MySpace is a technology of power through which its participants classify, categorize and define themselves.

In total, MySpace introduces thirty four different fields for their members to fill out. Most of these are not required, which means that there is no obligation to respond to them. However, a close look at these and to the answer choices provided by MySpace will impart further insight as to what definitions and labels have become the most telling about subject’s life and character, in contemporary society. Categories such as gender, sexual orientation, and race (to name a few) have, in time, become the most ‘obvious’ or
‘normal’ descriptors of any subject in Western society, to the point that the arbitrariness and constructedness of their meanings have been completely forgotten and naturalized. For example, even though feminist theory has come a long way in asserting gender as a cultural construct, gender as performative action; to be or to define oneself as one gender or the other (not to mention that the binary male-female is itself limited and does not acknowledge other possibilities), means to accept the limitations that either one of these categories entail and to subscribe to the meanings that are attached to them.

Basic Information

Under the heading “Basic Information,” members are asked to fill out the following fields:

- Gender
  - Male
  - Female
- Date of Birth
- Occupation
- City
- Country
- Region
- Postal Code
- Ethnicity
  - Asian
  - Black/African Descent
  - East Indian
  - Latino/Hispanic
  - Middle Eastern
  - Native American
  - Pacific Islander
  - White/Caucasian
  - Other
- Body type
  - Slim/Slender
  - Athletic
  - Average
  - Some extra baggage
More to love!
Bodybuilder

- Height
- I am here for:
  - Dating
  - Serious Relationships
  - Friends
  - Networking

According to *Roget's New Millennium™ Thesaurus*, the word “basic” means elementary and may be used as a synonym to other adjectives such as capital, central, inherent, intrinsic, key, necessary, vital, etc. It follows, then, that the most basic information about a person is that without which it would be almost impossible to “know” the person; the information that makes up some sort of underlying structure in the subjects which makes them “who they are.”

In contemporary America, it seems, the most essential information about a subject is their gender (and only if inscribed under the male-female binary), their names (first and last, allowing for interpellation), their occupation, specific location, ethnicity, body type and height. Although I will not go into all of these categories in detail, I would like to mention a few of them to make a point about the arbitrary nature of the choices presented to MySpace members and how they contribute to the perpetuation of normative discourses with regard to certain categories such as, for example, sex and gender.

With regard to the question of gender, MySpace creators offer their members only two options: male or female. There are more than just a few assumptions that MySpace made when creating their website. To begin with, it assumes that sex equals gender. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler explains that there is no causal relation between sex and
gender. She says that if we assume (just for the purposes of this explanation), the stability of binary sex:

it does not follow that the construction of ‘men’ will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that ‘women’ will interpret only female bodies. Further, even if the sexes appear to be unproblematically binary in their morphology and constitution (which will become a question) there is no reason to assume that genders ought also to remain as two. (10)

So, from the very beginning, MySpace’s discourse on identities in contemporary society is characterized by gender normativity, or the assumption that subjects interpret, identify and pledge to either “femaleness” or “maleness” according to their bodies’ anatomical constitution. Furthermore, the possibilities for any other gender are negated and members are literally forced to identify with one of the two traditional genders, either male or female, since there is not even an “Other” option to mark in case members struggle with an answer. MySpace also assumes (by placing these fields under the umbrella of “basic information”) that these are the categories that best describe subjects and that the subjects themselves would agree that their gender or sex is one of the most important characteristics of their existence, without which they could or would not be intelligible to others or even themselves.

Other fields presented under the “Basic Information” heading are “Body Type” and “Height.” Under “Body Type” members can choose from six different alternatives which range from slim/slender, to athletic, average, “some extra baggage,” “more to love!,” and “bodybuilder.” Of particular interest is how MySpace uses euphemisms to avoid offending its members. If one weighs more than “average” then one carries “some
extra baggage” and if one is overweight, one is not “fat” but feels the need to justify it by clicking on the comedic (and also apologetic) “more to love (exclamation point)” option.

Finally, MySpace asks its members to state the reason why they decided to join their social network. Apparently, there are only four reasons why anyone might want to join MySpace, and two of them involve the conscious insertion of subjects in a sexual economy. The options are the following: “dating,” “serious relationship,” “friends,” and “networking.”

Background and Lifestyle

The “Background and Lifestyle” section of a MySpace profile proposes the following fields:

- **Marital Status**
  - Swinger
  - In a relationship
  - Single
  - Divorced
  - Married

- **Sexual Orientation**
  - Bi
  - Gay/Lesbian
  - Straight
  - Not sure
  - No answer

- **Hometown**
- **Religion**
  - No Answer
  - Agnostic
  - Atheist
  - Buddhist
  - Catholic
  - Christian/Other
  - Hindu
  - Jewish
- Mormon
- Muslim
- Protestant
- Scientologist
- Taoist
- Wiccan
- Other

- Smoker
  - Yes
  - No
  - No answer

- Drinker
  - Yes
  - No
  - No answer

- Children
  - I don’t want kids
  - Someday
  - Undecided
  - Love kids, but not for me
  - Proud parent
  - No answer

- Education
  - High School
  - Some College
  - In College
  - College graduate
  - Grad/professional school
  - Postgrad
  - No answer

- Income
  - No answer
  - Less than 30 000
  - 30 000 – 45 000
  - 45 – 60
  - 60 – 75
  - 75 – 100
  - 100 – 150
  - 150 – 200
  - 200 – 250
  - 250 – higher
“Background and Lifestyle” fields imply, in most cases, choices that members have made for themselves and not, as may be assumed of some of the categories under the “Basic Information” umbrella, inherent characteristics assigned to them by birth. Once again, we need to pay special attention to the arbitrariness of the fields and information that MySpace values as pertinent to accurately “describe” a person’s character. Three out of nine of these categories allude to either sex or the institution of marriage, which as we already know, have a strong connection with each other in a heterosexist society like ours.

At the onset, MySpace members are asked what their marital status is. Subjects may be “swingers” (the most ‘radical’ of the options provided), “in a relationship,” “single,” “married,” or “divorced.” Beyond these options there is nothing else, according to MySpace, though I cannot help but wonder: what about widowers, for example? The absence of a “widower” option may be related to the fact that MySpace’s audience is a young audience, not very likely to be widowers yet. However, what about those who are and how does this exclusion affect them? We have seen how certain categories are “embellished” with euphemisms, such as the “Body type” category; yet, death or the possibility of death has been completely omitted here, another testimony to the celebration of youth and the reluctance of our society to acknowledge old age and the finite nature of our lives.

In second place, MySpace invites their members to state their sexual orientation. The fact that this field is found under the heading “Background and Lifestyle” implies that a choice can be made with regard to sexual orientation, as opposed to, for example, gender categories which on MySpace are naturalized and equated to the biological body,
from which there is no escape. With regard to sexual orientation, according to MySpace, one may be bisexual, gay/lesbian, straight, not sure or choose not to answer. The first three choices allude to the straight/gay binary which is so prevalent in modern society. The fourth choice “not sure” is a bit more complicated. I suggest that this answer may be interpreted as border-line apologetic, in the sense that the person who is not able to identify with any of the options offered to them, may experience certain discomfort by admitting to their uncertainty or their inability to define themselves through one of the more normative categories. “I’m not sure” implies a desire or wish to eventually be sure and ‘fit’ into one of the options provided.

On the other hand, I find the choice not to answer this particular field to be political and transgressive since it suggests that the subject either refuses to identify with the gay/straight binary or declines to give his/her sexual orientation the privileged importance that MySpace ascribes to it; by doing this rejects the meanings and labels that come with the interpretation of such categories.

MySpace also asks their members to disclose if they plan to be or are already parents. Members may opt from five alternatives which include “I don’t want kids,” “someday,” “undecided,” “love kids, but not for me,” and “proud parent.” The inclusion of such a category on MySpace is indicative of the prevalent sexual economy in a society whose members have grown up surrounded by the heteronormative discourse of the Family as the basic unit of society. I suspect that members of MySpace who are interested in finding a partner through this network would be interested in information such as this, and I also presume that women’s answer to this specific category would be more deeply scrutinized and judged than men’s, given the normative ‘mother’ function
historically attached to women and against which all females (and their femininity) are still judged.

Conclusion

What do subjects give up and what do they gain through their voluntary insertion into the social network known as MySpace? In the process of creating a profile, subjects are forced to subscribe to the limited fields and categories that are made available to them in order to generate their online identities. In order to become a part of this social network, members are faced with a number of categories, which under the guise of useful descriptors serve the function of perpetuating certain hegemonic discourses in contemporary society. As a result, for example, subjects are forced to provide an “answer” to the question of gender, and if they do not identify as either a male or a female, then they can either pick one, or be excluded from this network.

Nevertheless, as we will see later on in this project, there are subjects who do not identify with the gender binary and will still join the network because of what they may gain from participating in it. For example, subjects who regard themselves as “transgender” may have to give up the freedom to deny identification with the male/female binary in order to register, but they can use the rest of the space in their profile page to express their own feelings on this matter. Consequently, even though MySpace is indeed a normative and disciplinary space on the internet (as Chapter 3 concludes), we will see by the end of Chapter 4, how it provides a space for struggle and resistance to certain groups who appropriate MySpace in order to promote their own personal causes and complaints against hegemonic discourses of power.
CHAPTER 4. MySpace and Power in Contemporary Disciplinary Society

In this chapter I will argue the ways in which MySpace constitutes a highly normative and disciplinary space, basing my analysis in Foucaultian theory. I will argue that despite the inclination that modern theorists, such as Gilles Deleuze, have to foresee the decline, crisis and end of the institutions which acted as the cornerstones of Michel Foucault’s disciplinary societies (and thus, to predict the end of disciplinary society as described in Foucaultian theory); contemporary societies, though changed by technology, are still, disciplinary. Using MySpace as a case study, I suggest that although society today is very different than in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and even though it may be true that many of the traditional institutions, such as the Church and the Family are in the midst of a generalized crisis, there are, nonetheless, structures and practices in contemporary society which adhere to Foucault’s notion of disciplinary society with its technologies and institutions of power.

Societies of Control: The End of Disciplinary Society?

In his essay “Postscripts of the Societies of Control,” Gilles Deleuze argues that Foucault’s disciplinary societies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were based upon vast spaces of enclosure through which all individuals had to pass during their lives. Institutions such as the Family, the School, the Barracks, the Factory, sometimes the Hospital, and even possibly the Prison, represent, in Foucault’s work, closed environments in which power acts through the concentration, distribution and order in
space and time of the productive forces of men in order to achieve effects that would be
greater than the sum of its component parts (1).

However, Deleuze argues that “we are in a generalized crisis in relation to all the
environments of enclosure – prison, hospital, factory, school, family… everyone knows
that these institutions are finished, whatever the lengths of their expiration periods.”
Instead, he continues, the disciplinary society which was always characterized by
institutions and closed environments is nowadays being replaced by what he calls
“societies of control.” In disciplinary societies, power both constitutes and molds bodies
while assigning to each body a ‘unique’ individuality through which the subject can then
be categorized and normalized. In societies of control, power no longer acts upon the
body but instead, it acts upon the environment in which bodies move. According to
Deleuze, in societies of control:

…what is important is no longer either a signature or a number, but a
code: the code is a password, while on the other hand disciplinary
societies are regulated by watchwords. The numerical language of control
is made of codes that mark access to information or reject it… Individuals
have become “dividuals,” and masses, samples, data, markets or “banks.”
(2)

Does it matter, however, if the spaces are enclosed or if power now acts on the
environment through which bodies move and not on the bodies themselves? I would be
careful with both of these assertions. Disciplinary societies in the eighteenth and
nineteenth centuries depended on enclosed spaces because they did not yet have the
technologies to survey people in public spaces (and even with a lack of these
technologies they managed to do a good job at controlling people).

Foucault’s analysis of the town infected by the plague is a good example of
power’s pervasiveness in society. The town is not subject to the Panopticon’s gaze (if we
think about the Panopticon as a physical, architectural figure), but it is still strictly
regulated and controlled. Foucault denominates this “the diagram.” Thus, the mix of
observation, classification and normalization, which characterizes Foucault’s institutions
of power, is still very much alive in the information society of the twenty-first century,
regardless of the spaces bodies occupy (be it on the streets, in school or cyberspace).

I propose that certain practices in contemporary society still bear an uncanny
resemblance to those practices that Foucault studied in his works. Following these lines I
suggest that MySpace may be interpreted in Foucaultian terms both as an institution of
power as well as a technology of power: An institution, not only because it has its own
rules and regulations but also because it produces and reproduces discourses of power; a
technology, since it exists in the realm of cyberspace, on the internet, and also because of
the disciplinary mechanisms that it deploys to render subjects visible, thus turning them
into objects of information, through surveillance techniques as well as normalization and
examination procedures. (Foucault, Discipline 200).

To begin with the analysis of MySpace as an institution and technology of power,
we should start by asking: to what extent does MySpace qualify as a space of enclosure?
This type of space is, according to Foucault, “a place heterogeneous to all others and
closed in upon itself. It is the protected place of disciplinary monotony” (141). A typical
space of enclosure is the factory, with its gates and walls, timetables and bells, where
each worker knows his place as well as his duties. MySpace, on the other hand, does not exist in the physical world; it has no materiality, no walls or gates guard its entrance and there is no such thing as a traditional timetable that subjects need to follow in order to be there.

However, it is vital to acknowledge the changes that society has seen since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as the advent of virtual reality, a relatively new phenomenon which scholars are only beginning to explore. Does the fact that I cannot physically touch MySpace mean that it is less of a real space than, for example, a park or the street? What does it mean to say that one is on MySpace? Their material body is not physically in there, but when members log into MySpace and go from profile to profile they are not only in the net, but also in a specific address and place that exists online and has its own virtual walls and boundaries. Subjects “go” to MySpace by typing www.myspace.com, and get their own “key” to it through their email address and password. MySpace’s walls are, however, very permeable and members are free to go in and out of it as they please, as well as to travel by clicking on links, to other spaces in the net that are not necessarily a part of it. Nevertheless, it is clear that the space where MySpace exists is much freer and open than traditional spaces of enclosure, if only because almost anyone is free to join and subjects are free to go in and out of it as they please.

Does this mean, then, that MySpace does not qualify as part of a disciplinary mechanism in contemporary society? According to Foucault, “the principle of ‘enclosure’ is neither constant, nor indispensable, nor sufficient in disciplinary machinery. This machinery works in a much more flexible and detailed way,” and he goes on to say that
“disciplinary space tends to be divided into as many sections as there are bodies or elements to be distributed” (143). This characteristic of disciplinary mechanisms emerges on MySpace, a place which holds a separate profile page for every single one of its over eighty million users, and each of these users may be reached by the click of a mouse. MySpace organizes an extremely detailed and analytical space for its members. As a social network, it extracts value from the number of people in the network but it also extracts value from all the information that these people disclose.

MySpace advertises itself as a great way to stay in touch with old friends, as well as make new friends. Used by millions of Americans and others around the globe to find people they have lost touch with; it is, in short, a very efficient way “to establish presences and absences, to know where and how to locate individuals, to set up useful communications, to interrupt others, to be able at each moment to supervise the conduct of each individual, to assess it, to judge it, to calculate its qualities or merits” (143). In this regard, it would be interesting to know what it means to be a teenager today, in America, and not be on MySpace. What does the refusal to join the most popular social networking site online mean and how does it affect youngster’s social lives these days? It is not the task of this particular project to answer these questions, but it would be interesting to see, from a social studies point of view, how MySpace affects the behavior and socializing skills of its millions of subscribers.

Foucault’s work was written many years before the advent of the internet; yet, it is still a very useful heuristic when it comes to analyzing contemporary phenomena such as the colossal spread of, for example, surveillance technologies or online social networks. Society has, indeed, changed and while this is not a project about traditionally
enclosed institutions such as prisons, or schools or factories, it is a project about a modern-day, disciplinary institution/technology of power which exists in virtual space. The fact remains that power seeks knowledge; power feeds on information, and both society and technology keep getting better at obtaining, organizing and classifying both of these. We have already seen the numerous categories and fields that members may fill out when they create their profiles on MySpace; details are important, but at the same time, it is worth asking why some details matter and others are not worth mentioning. Power is embedded in social webs and is maintained and perpetuated in the discourses of truth that it historically creates. MySpace’s profiles constitute a reflection of contemporary society’s definitional categories, those that have become “necessary” to know in order to define ourselves. Some of these categories include gender/sex and sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, religion, among many others. Each of these categories as well as their meanings are cultural constructs that exist as part of discourses which serve the function of categorizing, individualizing and normalizing individuals: “each individual has his own place and each place its individual” (143).

Using Foucault’s analytical framework and the characteristics that he ascribes to disciplinary mechanisms, I will demonstrate in the pages to follow, why MySpace constitutes both an institution and a technology of power in contemporary society,

**Surveillance**

According to Foucault, disciplinary societies are characterized by their surveillance mechanisms. Panopticism speaks to the idea of a state of total, complete and permanent visibility, which induces subjects to be constantly aware and self-conscious of
their actions. With regard to Panopticism, Deleuze explains that Foucault can either define it in its concrete form (“as an optical and luminous arrangement that characterizes the prison,” (Deleuze, *Foucault* 38) or abstractly. The abstract formula, in Deleuze’s eyes, is not “‘to see without being seen’ but to impose a particular conduct on a particular human multiplicity” (34), however, the only condition that he asks the reader insist upon is that “the multiplicity is reduced and confined to a tight space” (34).

Deleuze’s critique of Foucault’s panopticism theory is based, as I mentioned before, on his belief that modern societies are no longer disciplinary societies but instead, societies of control. Disciplinary societies are based on a system of enclosures where “the individual never ceases passing from one closed environment to another, each having its own laws” (Deleuze, *Postscripts* 3).

In “The Return of Panopticism: Supervision, Subjection and the New Surveillance,” Bart Simon argues (in agreement with Deleuze) that most environments of enclosure today are in a state of “generalized crisis,” the instability and fluidity in institutions today, means that we should “decouple the imagined relationship between seeing and being seen [since] there is no longer… a direct line of sight in the production of the panoptic space” (15); discipline, as a form of power “relies primarily on enclosures, be they material, cultural or physical. Control however, encourages mobility in an attempt to manage the wider territory and not just the social space of enclosures (15).

I believe that Deleuze’s argument does not negate Foucaults’ but that instead, it expands upon it to fit today’s landscape. For instance, we might be inclined to think of MySpace as a mechanism of control as opposed to a disciplinary mechanism. MySpace
does encourage mobility, not only within its own space but also to other sites on the.  

However, it is important to remember that Foucault did not intend for his readers to take the Panopticon literally, in its original and physical form. Foucault argues that Bentham did not “merely imagine an architectural design calculated to solve a specific problem” (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 148). Even though the Panopticon was originally conceived as a physical entity, Foucault made it very clear that it should not only be thought of as a “dream building” but as a “figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use” (Simon, 9). What matters with regard to the Panopticon is its ability to render subjects visible at all times, and this (as we shall see) is one of MySpace’s main features.

Foucault’s views on power and surveillance, though, are not restricted to the Panopticon. He recognizes that:

…the procedures of power that are at work in modern societies are much more numerous, diverse and rich. It would be wrong to say that the principle of visibility governs all technologies of power used since the nineteenth century. (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 148).

Regardless of the specific name we would like to give it, a technology such as MySpace, with its personal questions and attention to detail, not only renders subjects visible at all times, but also manages to organize them into an analytical space which also categorizes and individualizes them. MySpace members have access to their network’s profiles all the time; it is a space that never closes, and it is as ubiquitous as the internet. Subjects can monitor their peers whereabouts from anywhere in the world as well as reach them almost for free, through private messages, online chat, bulletin posts, notes on
their “walls,” and a plethora of other options that MySpace has to offer. It is true, however, that subjects may only see what others want them to see, and members are solely responsible for the information, texts and pictures they choose to share on their profiles. Here lies an important characteristic of MySpace versus other disciplinary mechanisms: MySpace members want to be looked at, they want to be located, they want others to know what they look like and what they have been up to. The disclosure of their personal information is completely up to them and they can say as much or as little as they decide. However, a quick look at randomly selected MySpace profiles will show that more often than not, subjects are willing to reveal themselves to others and to be visibly constantly available.

What is at play here, then, is not a hierarchical kind of surveillance, where one or a few individuals with the power to see without being seen, watch many others. In this case, each and every single subject who becomes a member of MySpace shines a spotlight over his head, and becomes susceptible to observation; at the same time, he also has the ability to observe others in his network, to be “the gaze” which constantly polices and judges others’ behavior.

Normalization of Judgment and Gender Categories on MySpace

In the essay “Types of Self-Surveillance: from abnormality to individuals at risk”, Paulo Vaz and Fernanda Bruno place special importance in Foucault’s notion of normalization of judgment as opposed to the Panopticon. With regard to the Panopticon, Vaz and Bruno explain that it may be conceived as a technology in two ways: “an architectural arrangement [which] substitutes human surveillance by an opaque but
visible tower” and “because it renders power automatic by promoting self-surveillance” (275). The problem with this conception of self-surveillance is, according to Vaz and Bruno, that it supposes a compliance with power through “anticipatory conformity”. This means that, as opposed to Foucault’s interiorizing of the gaze, we would try to act “according to what power expects from us, but we would only do so because we would be aware of the possibility of being observed”, in fact, “we would act differently if given the opportunity to escape power’s eye” (275).

As a result, “self-surveillance would be experienced as surveillance of an internalized, but identified, other upon us” (275). If this were true, however, this would mean that the disciplinary society would in fact be a totalitarian society. However, Vaz and Bruno argue that “anticipatory conformity” is diffused by two of Foucault’s main arguments on power and the subject. On the one hand, the former is not repressive but productive, and on the other hand, the latter is historically produced. This is where the notion of normalization of judgment comes into play, because it is the bridge which connects internalization of power and identification with it.

To what extent have individuals internalized the discourses that power has historically legitimized in contemporary society, and how much do they conform to these because they have no other choice? Having already taken a close look at the required and non-required fields presented to MySpace users, it immediately becomes clear that there are certain types of information that are privileged over others, such as discourses of gender/sex, race, ethnicity, class, beauty and age, together with discourses of mass media consumerism which are favored over other categories in terms of self-identification.
A clear example of how MySpace contributes to the perpetuation of hegemonic discourses of power is the question of gender in their profile editing section: There is no choice with regard to the question of gender on MySpace. To begin with, the term ‘gender’ itself leads to confusion because it equates gender with biological sex. Gender, is a cultural construction, (as is the sexed body, Butler would argue) but in MySpace it isn’t: Gender equals sex and there are only two sexes: male and female. The confusion between terms contributes to perpetuating gender normative discourses in contemporary society, where a person born with male genitalia is inherently supposed to identify with the male gender and its attributes, and a person born with female genitalia is also intrinsically supposed to associate herself with the female gender and its traits.

Furthermore, most individuals would never contest this binary and even if they wanted to, it is required that prospective members choose between the two options in order to create a MySpace account. The question of “gender” on MySpace is treated as the most basic piece of information subjects may provide about themselves; in fact, it is asked even before their name. Most people would assume that it is only natural to ask this question first, however, we should be careful when making assumptions such as these. The fact that the question of “gender” has become so important in the definition of our identities, should make us immediately suspicious; we should ask ourselves why it matters so much to be able to locate ourselves in either masculinity or femininity in order to become intelligible beings.

Do these categories fulfill a merely descriptive function in contemporary society? Things are not as innocent as they appear. These apparently descriptive categories are, in reality, radically normative, in the sense that each one of the options that we pick implies
adhesion and acceptance of whatever signifieds have been attached to the category. The fact that something as abstract and complex as ethnicity, race, or sexual orientation may be simplified to a few options in a multiple choice question, is proof of how much individuals have internalized and accepted the meanings that each option entails. Power’s success in the production and propagation of discourses of “truth” that guide our thoughts and actions, is reflected in our inability to ‘understand’ or ‘know’ each other unless we fit under a number of pseudo-descriptive categories. Not only do these discourses tell us how to think, what sort of information to privilege and which to discard, but also, they instruct how to make information intelligible, how to interpret and give it meaning.

Classification, Examination and ‘Subject-ion’

MySpace members’ acquiescence to be identified through certain categories produces, as Foucault would say, subjects who are not so much subjects of communication but objects of information. MySpace members become subjects of power since they have been successfully categorized, marked by their own individualities, attached to their identities and have accepted and interiorized a law of truth which not only makes them intelligible to themselves and to others, but also limits their possibilities of being:

For the disciplined man, as for the true believer, no detail is unimportant, but not so much for the meaning that it conceals within it as for the hold it provides for the power that wishes to seize it (Foucault, Discipline 140).

As subjects of power on MySpace (and in the ‘real’ world also) our subjection resides in our own individualities which are formed by our adherence to culturally
constructed categories charged with all sorts of meanings and “truths.” Details matter, and “discipline is a political anatomy of detail” (139): the more categories that exist, the better a subject is able to “define” himself; the more individualized he becomes, the easier it is for power to classify, group and track him down.

Having discussed surveillance and normalization of judgment on MySpace, let us now turn to Foucault’s final instrument of power: examination. Examination procedures constitute the culmination of the first two instruments of power because they are “a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish” (184).

On MySpace, examination takes the form of statistics and numbers. At a personal level, MySpace informs its members how many times their profiles have been accessed by others, as well as how many people they have on their social network. I wonder how members evaluate these numbers and if they compare themselves with their friends and their own profile views and extent of their networks. I assume that members may get some sort of validation from a high number of “views” and feel “desirable” or “popular” by reference to this number. Also, even though this particular statistic is not available for others to see, it is possible that MySpace members might ask each other and later compare themselves to the “norm.”

Other ciphers that show on MySpace profiles include the number of friends that a member has as well the number of comments that a person has received on their “wall,” (not to mention the option that users have to allow to be ranked by others based on their profile picture). It escapes the aim of this particular project to look at these ciphers and establish what an average number of views, friends or comments might be on MySpace;
nevertheless I suppose that among teenagers especially, these values might be of special importance in the assessment and validation of their image and that of their friends: What is the social prize for having a high quantity of views? What would the punishment be for a low one? What are the social meanings that MySpace subjects extract from these figures? Unfortunately I cannot offer any precise or exact answers to these questions, since they would involve a much more social/psychological type of work than the one that I have embarked upon in this thesis. I can only say, however, that these numbers are not mere descriptors but are instead heavily charged with meanings and therefore with consequences. Just the fact that these statistics would be important enough to appear in anyone’s homepage or public profile indicate our society’s infatuation and obsession with competition and “popularity.”

Going back to the concept of examination, Foucault argues that it is the technique by which power holds its subjects “in a mechanism of objectification” (187). In MySpace, as much as in the ‘real’ world individuals are likely to become or be judged by numbers and statistics. Subjects’ ‘normality’ depends highly on the categories that they choose to identify with and the amount of individuals that share the same categories. Numbers and statistics are therefore an enormous part of the examination procedures because they provide a basis to judge normality versus abnormality. Foucault argues that in the past, the power to document and tell stories about ourselves was reserved to a small group of people: “To be looked at, described in detail, followed from day to day by an uninterrupted writing was a privilege” (191). However, in disciplinary societies, this privilege “is no longer a procedure of heroization” but instead, “functions as a procedure
of objectification and subjection” (192). MySpace provides subjects the opportunity to show themselves to the world, to plan and perform on a world-wide stage their humanity.

**Confession, ‘Truth,’ and Discourse (and Silence)**

This in turn leads us to consider Foucault’s notion of confession. In *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Foucault argues that even if we sometimes feel as though we live in a very repressed society, this is hardly the case. In fact, he says, since the eighteenth century onward we have witnessed a powerful “incitement to discourse” (17) which prompted subjects to talk (in specific spaces) about their sexuality. Through numerous mechanisms, such as religious confession, psychiatry, psychology, among many others, subjects were, (and still are,) encouraged to talk, to confess their secrets and desires. According to Foucault:

> The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, its seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, ‘demands’ only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constrain holds it in place, the violence of a power weights it down and it can finally be articulated only at the price of a kind of liberation. (60)

While many might find the opportunity to represent themselves on the World Wide Web enormously liberating, in terms of Foucaultian power this might not be the case. If we thought of power in a traditional way, and not according to Foucault’s theories, we would be inclined to think that power is repressive and negative. In reality,
argues Foucault, power is positive and it produces discourses. To some extent, however, it encourages its repressive ‘mask’ since this notion leads subjects to feel that by talking they struggle: “Confession frees, but power reduces one to silence; truth does not belong to the order of power but shares and original affinity with freedom,” however, “truth is not by nature free…but its production is thoroughly imbued by relations of power” (60); talking then generates information, knowledge and discourse.

Confession, Fouacult goes on to say, is a ritual of discourse in which a power relationship unfolds. In order to confess subjects need someone to confess to. This ‘someone’ “is not simply the interlocutor but the authority that requires confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile […]” (62). To whom do MySpace members confess? The answer is simple: they confess to each other; they are at once judges and also judged. MySpace members are well aware of the others’ gaze upon them. On their profile page they are the actors who perform their identity to an in/visible audience. More often than not, members know who their audience will be (their friends) and, in terms of making new connections with strangers, who they would like these strangers to be. As a result, I suggest that none of the elements (textual, aural, visual) that compose subjects’ profiles are arbitrarily or naively portrayed, since subjects want to be interpreted in a certain way and they also want to be accepted by their piers. I would like to clarify, at this point, that even the most transgressive, the most contestatary and anti-establishment-seeming member of MySpace is still trying to get the approval and acceptance of those that they believe share their ideals while, on the other hand, they also want to be judged by those who disagree with them, as a way of struggle against hegemonic discourses.
In the twenty-first century, the need or desire to publicly speak our truths has augmented, and so have the spaces that provide such opportunities. MySpace offers its members a variety of tools to help subjects confess their ‘truths’, not only through text and language but also through music and photos. Up to this point I have basically focused on the categories that MySpace presents its members to help them create their profiles. MySpace also allows for music, videos and pictures to be uploaded to its site, all of which are signifying elements that subjects’ feel help transmit, creatively, a ‘better’ idea of their selves and of their lives. Blogs can also be a part of a member’s profile. In a blog, subjects may write and post anything they want, such as their thoughts and feelings on a subject, stories or poems, questions, etc. thus contributing, to borrow Foucault’s term, to an incitement to discourse. Discourse, on MySpace, is not only found in words and text; discourses and meanings are created and interpreted in the intertextual relation that results from the combination of text, music, video, photographs, colors, numbers and comments.

However, in a space where subjects are so obviously encouraged to speak their ‘truths;’ what are the discourses that are not mentioned? What is it that cannot be discussed on MySpace; what is it that does not even seem relevant enough to be mentioned? What ‘categories’ were ignored by MySpace creators; what ‘lifestyle choices’ did not make the multiple choice options list and why?

Silence, Foucault believes, is not the absolute limit of discourse:

There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of
them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required of either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses. (27)

Silences on MySpace can be easily located in the fields offered to identify its members. Once again, I will take as an example the gender category which only recognizes the traditional binary male/female. Even if, today, academia has succeeded in acknowledging the existence of other options, the hegemonic discourse of normative gender is still enforced and perpetuated in sites such as MySpace. The omission of even an “other” choice in the field’s possible answers, speaks loudly of the reticence of contemporary society to accept alternatives to the normative binary. The same argument could be said about most of the other multiple choice fields offered to MySpace members, including for example, the sexual orientation field which also only acknowledges the traditional hetero/homosexual binary and offers subjects the chance to avoid answering the question, but does not allow them to say or specify what alternative sexuality they might identify with.

Conclusion

Is MySpace, then, a modern disciplinary mechanism, a technology which contributes to the production and perpetuation of hegemonic discourses of power in contemporary western society? Is it more of a control mechanism than a disciplinary one? Deleuze’s argument which denounces the fall of the traditional institutions and as a result
predicts the decline of Foucault’s disciplinary society seems to me more of an expansion of Foucault’s argument than a negation of it. As I mentioned before, Foucault clearly acknowledges the fact that, for instance, the Panopticon should not be interpreted only literally as an architectural figure, but mainly in terms of its consequences and effects. It may be true then, that MySpace does not function exactly like Bentham’s Panopticon. I am aware that, as opposed to a specific technology such as the Panopticon’s tower in the prison where the inmates are subjected to the gaze against their will, it is everyone’s own choice to participate or not from MySpace or any other social network online. It is also in each member’s hands to create the profile they want and to provide as much or as few information as they deem necessary.

As a result, to an extent, we might be inclined to say that MySpace is not really a disciplinary mechanism since, in the end, it remains the individuals own choice to participate in it or not. To make this assumption would be to confuse Foucault’s notion of power. Although at times we might be inclined to think that power acts upon us vertically, tricking and forcing subjects to act as it expects them to act, the truth of the matter is that the more a subject internalizes power, the more willing and less suspicious he is to provide information about himself as well as to monitor and judge other subjects’ information. MySpace members may release their information knowingly and freely, but this still does not make them any less subject to the effects of the normative discourses that plague this space; it does not make them any less compliant to the perpetuation of these discourses either, and it certainly does not make their information any less documentable than if they were unwilling to disclose it.
Foucault makes it clear that while the western idea of power traditionally recognizes it as negative, juridical and repressive, this is no longer the case:

[the western idea of power] is incongruous with the new methods of power whose operation is not insured by right but by technique, not by law, but by normalization, not by punishment, but by control, methods that are employed on all levels, and in forms that go beyond the state and its apparatus. We have been engaged for centuries in a type of society in which the juridical is increasingly incapable of encoding power, of serving as its system of representation. (89)

The type of power (as well as the mechanisms that help perpetuate it) that characterizes disciplinary societies is still, I believe, very much in play in contemporary society. Whether we want to describe ourselves as a disciplinary society or a society of control is beyond the point, especially once we realize that the mechanisms of control of contemporary society serve the same functions as disciplinary mechanisms. As I said before, Deleuze’s argument does not negate, but in fact expands Foucault’s argument and moves it a step forward in hopes of a more accurate analysis of contemporary technologies.

MySpace acts as a microcosm of contemporary society and culture, contributing to the perpetuation of many hegemonic discourses of truth and western narratives. Power relations are embedded in social networks, and MySpace is, literally, one of them. MySpace, then, acts as a tool for the continuation of such discourses of truth and the production of knowledge through techniques of surveillance, self-surveillance, normalization and examination.
CHAPTER 5. Profile Analysis: Transgender Phenomenon

What is the potential for political struggle in MySpace? How do subjects manage to subvert the limited categories of identification that MySpace provides? Despite the fundamentally normative categories that members are exposed to, a great number of MySpace users find ways of using the technology and tools available on this site to create and perform alternative genders and sexualities which do not fit into the traditional gender/sex binaries.

On MySpace, profiles are constructed not only with the help of the standard fields that this site provides, but also through the creative use of other elements on subjects’ personal pages, such as the title of the profile, open-ended sections like “About Myself” or “Who I’d Like to Meet,” as well as images and music. In previous chapters we have seen how MySpace’s profile categories are very disciplinary, restricting subjects’ choices to a few normative categories and a set of limiting answers to choose from-- as in the case of “gender”. However, users who do not identify with either one of the options provided, although obligated to provide an answer to this question, do not remain submissive: they use other spaces in their profile to express their preferred gender identity (if any). As a result, if one does a “search” on MySpace and looks for the words transsexual or transgender, for example, one can find countless examples of people who
have decided to subvert the gender normativity of MySpace and use this space as a site of struggle and contestation.

Here I will examine MySpace profiles that stray from the norms, through their ambiguity and reluctance to identify with either one of the normative genders, (and even with other more transgressive ones). To this effect it is important to attempt a definition of the terms “transgender” and “transsexual,” terms which will come up repeatedly over the course of the textual analysis of MySpace profiles. In general (and without any desire to oversimplify such an important and complicated debate), a transgender is a person who experiences gender dysphoria, meaning that they do not identify with the gender categories that have traditionally been assigned to their sexed body. A transsexual person also experiences gender dysphoria; however, s/he will go through medical treatments in order to physically change his/her body to adapt to his/her own gender perceptions.

In her essay “Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum,” Judith Halberstam discusses the debate between lesbian women and transsexual men about gender legitimacy. Is transgenderism a more transgressive and political stance against gender normativity than transsexuality? Are transsexuals inadvertently contributing to legitimate the binary female/male by acquiring, through operations and hormones, the ‘biological’ body of the gender they would like to be part of? Halberstam refuses to think of gender as a continuum, (androgyny-soft butch-butch-stone butch///transgender butch-FTM or in more simple terms: NOT MASCULINE ------- ---------------------VERY MASCULINE) (294) and her reason is that:

at the transgender end of the spectrum, the continuum model miscalculates the relation between bodily alteration and degree of masculinity; at the
butch end of the spectrum the continuum model makes it seem as if butchness is sometimes just an early stage of transsexual aspiration (295).

Halberstam also points out the historical tendency to “assign distinct gender identities to gender-ambiguous bodies” (296). Is a FTM transsexual a lesbian? Is s/he straight? What about the FTM’s partner? Is she a lesbian or is she a ‘normal’, heterosexual woman? The compulsory need that we, as a society have to categorize and classify everything into specific categories is visible even in the works of those who struggle to overcome normative gender/sex categories. The want to specify the heterosexuality of FTM’s partners, as opposed to lesbianism, has a conservative effect: “Lesbianism,” argues Halberstam, “from this FTM perspective, suddenly becomes a pathologized category contrasted to the properly heterosexual and gender-normative aims of the male transsexual and his feminine partner”. She writes:

while a distinction between lesbian and FTM positions might be an important one to sketch out, there is always the danger that the effort to mark territory of FTM subjectivity might fall into homophobic assertions about lesbians and sexist formulations of women in general. (297)

It is in this context that I would like to begin my analysis of Transgender Phenomenon’s profile. When it comes to locating himself in a gender position, this subject’s ambiguity is capable of producing a strong cognitive dissonance in his audience’s minds, through his refusal to classify himself in terms of “coherent” sex/gender/sexual orientation relations. Transgender Phenomenon’s profile states that he is a single and straight male from Decatur, Georgia; this according to some of the basic fields that are pre-determined on MySpace as descriptive features of subject’s personalities. But is he?
“Freak” or Miracle?

To begin with I will focus on the title of the profile itself. The subject identifies himself as a transgender, which means that he does not affiliate with the traditional gender binaries that MySpace has to offer. Even though MySpace’s gender-normative environment forces users to choose between either a male or a female identity in order to have a profile, Transgender Phenomenon uses the title of his page (located in the upper right hand corner of it) to blatantly express his refusal to insert himself in the conventional gender binary. Not only is the viewer immediately confronted with the word “transgender” but also with the word ‘phenomenon,’ a very complex concept in itself, because of the different meanings and interpretations that are attributed to it. A ‘phenomenon’ may be an abnormality, an anomaly, an exception to the rule and even a curiosity, but all of these words may be read in either a positive or negative light. A ‘phenomenon’ may be a spectacle, a sensation, a marvel but it can also just mean an event or an incident depending of the context in which it is used (philosophical discourse, medical discourse, colloquial discourse…) (Roget, http://thesaurus.reference.com/browse/phenomenon). A phenomenon, understood as an event is fluid, never static. Postmodern discourse privileges events and happenings, favoring the text over the work because the text is in constant motion and meanings are created in the interaction between subjects and texts. In this sense, we might interpret the use of the word phenomenon in this context as an assertion of the fluidity of this particular subject’s identity.
Transgenderism does not fit into the traditional gender category which relies mainly in the male/female binary. In itself, transgenderism is already an exception to the rule, and even today it is still regarded by many as an abnormality or even a perversion. In this sense a transgender person, in contemporary society, is very much a “phenomenon.” How is the viewer supposed to read this subject’s title? Is Transgender Phenomenon ironic and also aware of the status of his “gender” in contemporary society? Is he at the same time calling himself a ‘phenomenon’ in the sense of a ‘miracle’ or as something outstanding and exceptional and while doing that giving his transgenderism a positive valence? Is he a ‘freak’ or is he a ‘miracle”? Is he neither and uses his MySpace title to ironically point out that there is nothing “abnormal” about his gender?

Transgender Phenomenon plays with gender and sex categories on MySpace resulting in a very confusing gender/sex narrative to heteronormative eyes. While he subscribes to the “male” gender category and to the “heterosexual” sex orientation category, his “About Me” section tells a different story:

…Also, I happen to be a transman- not a FTM /MTF - I was born trans, and am a social male...[I suppose that makes me a TTSM]. I could go on and on about all of this, but you will have to wait until I publish if you want to read more about the intricacies of my labeling. (In general: be cautious about the wording of definitions among sex & gender categories-particularly among the psych, medical & trans community). Don't stress, I am not a traditional man- I am as queer as it gets...a man raised as a woman. I'm a visionary feminist; fighting for the rights of youth, womyn, transfolk, and men, in order to form a more Beloved Community. I give
and demand respect, or I don't deal with you on a personal level. I am a well respected school teacher, beginning my 10th year of teaching... 6th year at a faith-based school. I am referred to by students and faculty as Mr. Mac. Overall, I've had less respect among many in the "gay & lesbian" (queer) community. Many find it hard to date me because their "lesbian card" gets called into question; I guess that's why queer/bi women dig me more often...also, I almost never make the first move. (Transgender Phenomenon, WWW)

To begin with, Transgender Phenomenon defines himself as a person who was born “trans,” raised as a woman but defines himself as a social male. It is left unclear what Transgender Phenomenon means by being born “trans;” it very well might be that he was born an intersex person (whose parents decided to raise as a girl), or that he was born with female genitalia but never identified with the female gender and has found a comfortable space in ‘social maleness.’

This particular “About Me” section paints a very clear picture of the ways that MySpace, as a gender-normative and heteronormative space attempts to stabilize identities through the specific categories and options that it proposes to its members. Transgender Phenomenon uses his “About Me” space to further specify his gender identity, given the limitations of MySpace’s categories (there is, in MySpace, no option named TTSM). Regardless of what subjects may write about themselves, and however they would like to identify in terms of gender, MySpace forces them to subscribe to an either/or category. As a result, we begin to see a lack of correspondence between
Transgender Phenomenon’s own gender/sex/body discourse and the labels that he is forced to chose for himself in MySpace’s gender/sex/body discourse.

Heteronormative societies, such as ours, teach subjects that there are inherent or natural relations between bodies, genders and sexual orientations. For starters, genitalia and bodies serve as alibis for gender: female genitalia = female gender = sexual desire for men. Male genitalia = male gender = sexual desire for women. Subjects are also taught about ‘abnormalities’ or ‘perversions’ where individuals with a certain “biological” body (which automatically designates them in either the male or female genders), desire others of their same sex. These people are referred to as homosexuals. Thus, we arrive to our basic binaries: In terms of gender one is either a male or a female, and in terms of sexual orientation one is either gay or straight. Binaries such as these help subjects understand and make their identities intelligible to themselves and to others. This is why when confronted to a profile such as Transgender Phenomenon’s, it is easy to find oneself baffled and confused, trying to figure out how to make him fit into our basic categories in order to stabilize his identity.

If we were to assume that Transgender Phenomenon was in fact born intersex, then it would be easier for us to understand why he claims that he was “raised as a womyn” but now identifies with maleness. We could assume that he now lives his life as a heterosexual male who fully identifies with the male gender and performs “maleness” accordingly, even through his presumed heterosexuality. However, if in fact Transgender Phenomenon is not intersex, then it becomes even harder to stabilize his gender/sex identity because there is, in his discourse, a clear lack of correspondence between what
we could call his “biographical body” (the body he was born and raised in) and his discourse about his own body and sexuality.

Attempting to understand Transgender Phenomenon through the traditional categories used to define sex/gender orientations, would lead us to say that he could have been born and raised as a woman but experiences some sort of gender dysphoria which leads him to associate his gender with the male gender. If Transgender Phenomenon’s “biographical body” is that of a woman’s, and he now perceives himself as a man who desires women, then in terms of the traditional sex orientation categories, we might say that Transgender Phenomenon is in fact not straight, but gay. However, this is not what he states; Transgender Phenomenon identifies himself as a heterosexual, something which in a traditional and normative gender/sex/body narrative would not be possible. In a similar fashion, MySpace member “Zhora” (http://myspace.com/zohratranssexual), who identifies as a pre-op transsexual woman, also refuses to acknowledge the traditional relation between her biological body (male) and her sexual orientation (straight). Instead she chooses to define herself as a “STRAIGHT WOMAN who is INTO MEN ONLY,” thus rejecting the normative tie that links male bodies and male sexual desire to homosexuality.

Does Transgender Phenomenon try to make his identity confusing and complicated on purpose, by picking the stabilizing categories of “heterosexuality” and “maleness” and then mixing them with his biographical discourse of a body in which both sexes coexist? What does he mean by saying he was born “trans?” Does he mean that he is intersex (and if he is, why doesn’t he just use this word which is more accurate and more intelligible to describe the condition of being born with two sets of genitalia?)
or does he mean that he was born with female genitalia but never felt like a female, which leads him to think of himself as a “trans?” The latter option becomes more plausible once Transgender Phenomenon states that women are sometimes afraid of dating him because their “lesbian card gets called into question.” This might lead me to believe that Transgender Phenomenon was in fact born and still has female genitalia, and (as was already discussed), female genitalia and a desire for women, in a gender-normative and heteronormative society, equals homosexuality. Nonetheless, once again, there is some ambiguity to his statement: Is he talking about self-identifying lesbians who do not want to date this transgender social male, because it would make them question their own sexuality; or is he referring to straight women who are afraid of being labeled lesbians? Maybe he is talking about both, and in both cases we are faced with groups of people who have managed to find a clear niche in the more traditional and classifiable gender/sex order and are therefore bound by the limitations that these niches imply.

Regardless of what Transgender Phenomenon is biologically, however, his profile’s gender/sex narrative on MySpace remains unresolved and it is only rendered more confusing by the stabilizing categories of gender and sex orientation that he decides to subscribe to.

As a whole, Transgender Phenomenon seems to be very aware of the implications of his own gender/sex narrative. He notes that his assumed gender (TTSM) might not be easily understandable and promises to make his labeling clearer once he gets published. In a way, his narrative also fulfills a pedagogical function as he tries to generate awareness toward the traditional “wordings and definitions among sex & gender categories.” Maybe this is the reason why his gender and sex narratives lack
correspondence in accordance to normative body, gender and sex expectations. However, the pedagogical nature of Transgender Phenomenon’s profile is not rare on other queer profiles in MySpace. For example, Zhora’s page includes a whole section in which definitions of transsexuality, transvestism and transgenderism are provided, as well as the history of these terms, and some of the social (often negative) consequences that transsexuals in western society often have to entail.

Transgender Phenomenon’s profile is transgressive in a variety of ways: To begin with, he refuses to equate his biological sex to his perceived gender. He also refuses to match his sexual desire for women and his (possibly) female, biological body to the expected category of homosexuality. As a self-identified, non-traditional male who likes women, Transgender Phenomenon chooses to regard himself as a heterosexual, disregarding any supposed or assumed ties that the body might have to gender and sexual orientation (as does Zhora). In his narrative, the categories that are usually attached to each other in order to describe one’s sexual orientation, are not sex and sexual desire but instead, gender and sexual desire. In this way, a woman who self-identifies as a male and is attracted to women, would also be likely to identify as “straight,” while only women who also conform to their female gender and who desire women would be labeled as lesbians.

Butler argues that “the binary regulation of sexuality suppresses the subversive multiplicity of a sexuality that disrupts heterosexual, reproductive and medicojuridical hegemonies” (26). Gender is thus defined mainly by contrast with the opposite gender.

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1 See also Annac3’s profile (http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user_viewprofile&friendID=23306815). Anna is a pre-op M/F transsexual whose profile identifies her as a straight, female, and not—as would traditionally be expected-as a homosexual male.
and this formulation itself presupposes a restricted definition of gender within the binary male/female.

According to Butler, central to the view that society produces identity concepts of sex, is the fact that “sex appears within hegemonic language as a substance, as metaphysically speaking, a self-identical being” (24). Because, as subjects of power we are inserted in the midst of hegemonic discourses that generate limited normative perceptions with regard to the body, gender and sex, it is that at the moment of interpretation of a ‘different’ lifestyle, such as Transgender Phenomenon’s, we still feel inclined to play with the limited categories that hegemonic practices offer. We have tried to understand Transgender Phenomenon’s sexuality, body and gender in terms of the usual binaries: Biological male or biological female? Male gender or female gender? Straight or gay? Our attempts at stabilizing Transgender Phenomenon’s gender/sex identity through these categories, however, remain fruitless and the multiple possibilities, unresolved.

Nevertheless, as much as Transgender Phenomenon’s profile does not render him intelligible in the conventional way, he does make an attempt to become intelligible in his own terms. He argues that he does not identify as a FtM/MtF (female to male/male to female) transgender, and then creates his own particular category: TtSM (trans-to-social male). He then is quick to make sure that his audience knows that he is not a “traditional male”, and that in fact he is “as queer as it gets” since he is “a man raised as a womyn.” In this way, Transgender Phenomenon makes a statement against normative maleness and underlines those features that insert him in a category altogether separate from that of the “traditional male” (maybe this is what he means by “social male”). Transgender
Phenomenon wants his viewers to know that he is a queer, straight, male and yet, seems to play with the confusion that such a statement generates (perhaps in order to make his pedagogical point about gender/sex categories clearer). Could we argue, from this statement that what Transgender Phenomenon ‘is’ is a “woman-loving butch?” (Halberstam, 300). According to Halberstam, the distinction that butches need to make between lesbianism and butchness:

hinges on a distinction between sexual and gender identities. Lesbian, obviously, refers to a sexual preference and to some version of ‘woman-loving-woman.’ Butch, on the other hand, bears a complex relation of disidentification with femininity and femaleness and, in terms of sexual orientation, could refer to ‘woman-loving-butch’ or ‘butch-loving-butch’. (300)

However, Transgender Phenomenon never uses the word “butch” to describe himself. The reason for this may be that underlying the term “butch” is the assumption of a female biological body which marks the persons gender and only allows for categories in a sort of continuum such as the own that was borrowed earlier from Halberstam’s essay: androgyny-soft butch-butch-stone butch///transgender butch-FTM. The main difficulty that Transgender Phenomenon may have with regard to the term “butch” and the reason why he does not want to identify with it, is that he perceives himself as a man, just a man regardless of his biological body.

The difference between Transgender Phenomenon and “butch lesbians” may be illustrated by comparing his profile to Devon Hunter’s MySpace profile (http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendID=10318556)
4). Devon Hunter identifies herself as a “proud butch dyke” in her “About Me” section and chooses to mark “female” as her gender and “lesbian” as her sexual orientation. Even though Devon’s photographs portray a very manly-looking person who obviously chooses to perform masculinity as opposed to femininity (in terms of looks, at least), she still opts to categorize herself as a lesbian female, equating her biological body and her sexual desire for women to the notion of lesbianism. In this respect, her gender and sexuality are clearer and more intelligible to the normative viewer than Transgender Phenomenon’s, Zhora’s or Annac3’s. However, Hunter’s sexual orientation identity becomes less clear when looking at her “Who I’d Like to Meet” section, which includes all of the following:

Other DYKES, Lesbians, Leather Dykes, Butch Dykes, Bio Female
Boi's/boi's Boys/boys, Butch bottom's, Butch Daddis, Butch Top's and Transmen, Genderfluid People male and female in fact I just love everyone…is there a name for someone like me ??

It is clear, then, that both Transgender Phenomenon and Hunter struggle with defining their gender/sex identities, and I ask if they can even have one without a word to describe them: In a world where language precedes ‘reality’ and creates ‘reality,’ can a person exist who cannot be labeled?

Perhaps this is the reason why we find it so hard to understand or to interpret Transgender Phenomenon: our only tool is language, but hegemonic language only provides us with a limited number of words; words which have become categories; categories that are heavily charged with meanings and assumptions; categories which have strict relations to one another and are almost incomprehensible if detached from
these relations. Language and technology are the tools that Transgender Phenomenon uses to have his voice heard, but it is also obvious that language may be his worst enemy since the only way that he can attempt to describe himself is according to the words (and therefore meaningful categories) that are available to him and the rest of the English-speaking world.

Can Transgender Phenomenon speak? He obviously tries. Politically, he uses his MySpace page in a twofold manner: 1) For pedagogical reasons, to provide awareness and understanding against normative gender/sex binaries. 2) As an attempt to legitimize his identity. Transgender Phenomenon explicitly tells others that he deals and demands respect “or I don’t deal with you on a personal level.” This could be read as a reaction to prior negative encounters with intransigent people who cannot understand and will not accept Transgender Phenomenon’s lifestyle. If this assumption is true, it is a clear indicator of western society’s reluctance to acknowledge alternate forms of gender and sexuality, as well as the threat that these pose to those who are happily inserted into hegemonic hetero and gender normative discourses. Nevertheless, Transgender Phenomenon’s demand for respect is not only directed at the straight community, but also to the gay and lesbian community. He clearly states that he is a well-respected, well-adjusted teacher at a “faith-based school” (perhaps he highlights this in order to point out that he is in fact ‘normal’ enough to be accepted by religious institutions, and thus stresses his well-performed ‘social maleness’). He also mentions that, in fact, he feels more support coming from the heterosexual community and that many times the lack of respect comes from the gay/lesbian communities. These statements are Transgender Phenomenon’s way of recognizing that there are repercussions to his decisions and to his
refusal to conform to either hetero or homo-normative categories. Transgender Phenomenon’s is an attempt to speak, to have a voice and a place in a world that still struggles to accept (or even name) him.

This relates closely to Foucault’s arguments on power, normalization of judgment and categorization. Power, in this model, is embedded in social webs and:

…applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual and, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others must recognize in him. (Foucault, Subject and Power 781).

When, as subjects we connect labels to our identities, we immediately become subjected to the meanings that these labels have attached to them. To claim that one is “straight” or “gay” means that one also accepts whatever values and significations the label has. While labels and categories seem as merely descriptive features of our identities, it is important to question, as Butler does, “to what extent is ‘identity’ a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience” (23). In this sense, we could relate the lack of respect that Transgender Phenomenon feels from the gay/lesbian community to normative discourses about homosexuality perpetuated by homosexuals, which in their attempt to create a legitimate space for themselves may have fallen into the same type of gender/sex normativity against which they initially fought. Once again, Halberstam’s account on border wars and the debate between transgender butch lesbians and transsexuals helps illustrate the gay and lesbian community’s reluctance to accept Transgender Phenomenon’s gender/sex identities. Just like some transgender butch subjects may perceive FtM’s as “traitors and women who literally become the enemy,” it
might very well be that a percentage of female and male gay subjects perceive Transgender Phenomenon’s unwillingness to label himself as a homosexual and his keenness to identify as a heterosexual ‘social man,’ as a sort of treason to the ‘gay’ cause and an affirmation of heteronormative identities.

Transgender Phenomenon wants his voice to be heard and he wants his own, personal ‘identity’ to be legitimized and accepted by others. This brings us back to Foucault’s “History of Sexuality” and what he called the “incitement to discourse.” Society has, since the eighteenth century encouraged subjects to speak their truths, and power has provided individuals with several mechanisms and spaces where they are allowed to ‘confess.’ From the confessional box in Church, to the psychiatrist’s divan, to autobiographies, biographies, T.V. talk shows, blogs and now internet sites such as MySpace, subjects are driven to talk about themselves and to create narratives about their lives, from the most daily rituals to their innermost secrets.

Transgender Phenomenon has found in MySpace (which architecturally is an extremely normative and disciplinary space) a place to voice his struggle. He has taken the binaries offered to him and the ‘free’ space he has to write, to construct an identity that is very hard to read and interpret according to hegemonic discourses of gender and sexuality. In “The Subject and Power”, Foucault stresses and takes into account the struggles and resistances of individuals marking freedom as a necessary condition for the exercise of power over subjects. The exercise of power, then, is a way in which “certain actions may structure the fields of other possible actions” (791). It is therefore possible to speak of strategies, or “means destined to obtain a victory… the choice of winning solutions”. If a power strategy is “the totality of means put into operation to implement
power effectively or to maintain it” (793) then there must be other strategies that run contrary to this end: there is “no relationship of power without the means of escape or flight” (794).

Consequently, subjects find ways to disrupt the norms and to generate ruptures in the system, because “at the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom,” (Foucault, 790). However and sadly enough, most of the struggles that emerge from this freedom are usually eventually reappropriated by power, which manages to embrace the struggle and more often than not, strip it of its initial meanings.

In Transgender Phenomenon’s case he managed to appropriate for himself and his politics the space of MySpace². He manages, very successfully, to transform a highly normative environment such as MySpace into an extremely queer space in which subjects have to re-evaluate their previous assumptions about gender/sex categories in order to attempt to make any sense of it. However, in confessing, talking and debating his gender and sexuality, in his attempt to come up with a term that renders him an intelligible ‘subject’ he does just that: he becomes a subject of power who cannot understand or explain himself through any other mechanism than the already constructed categories of bodies, sexual orientations and genders.

Transgender Phenomenon’s struggle against hegemonic, normative discourses is very worthy and his profile is brilliantly ambiguous, raising very important questions

² See also Zhora’s profile (http://myspace.com/zohratranssexual) for more examples of sex/gender political struggle on MySpace as well as Jen’s a Boy’s profile (http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=430218), identified as a straight and married male who likes to perform femininity by dressing up as a woman on a daily basis. Both profiles include invitation’s to join gender and sexually transgressive groups in order to create more “open-minded” communities.
with regard to the relations that we have constructed between the biological body, gender, desire and sexual orientations. Nonetheless, it might also be argued that power has already started its re-appropriation process of Transgender Phenomenon’s discourse. It very well may be that the power that Transgender Phenomenon (and others like him) feel they have, in being able to opine, teach and argue, may be the illusion of power that Foucault talks about when he refers to repression as a kind of myth. Then, what may be at issue here, to put it in Foucault’s words, would not be the repression of sexuality, but the actual production of new ones (and with them the normative discourses, labels, and meanings which limit and prescribe them).
Chapter 6. Conclusion

MySpace is a modern-day institution and technology of power which not only produces discourses of truth and identities, but also contributes to the perpetuation of gender and sex normative discourses of power. Regardless of its relative ‘youth,’ MySpace is a phenomenon which currently pervades the lives of tens of millions of subjects in America, and as such, it is of great importance that its social and cultural implications be studied and understood. This project’s aim was to demonstrate how MySpace is an extremely disciplinary mechanism of power and to this end focused on sex/gender categories and performances to see how power functions in this particular technology.

It is vital to realize that it is precisely the categories which seem to us the most “natural” or “obvious” to talk about when describing ourselves, that we should be most wary of. Categories such as gender, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity and race are some of the most semantically charged and more imbued in relationships of power. For example medio-juridical, scientific, psychiatric and religious discourses all contributed to widely-held perceptions and beliefs with regard to the categories of gender and sexual orientation. While it may seem ‘only natural’ to answer a question that asks whether we are male or female, we should wonder not only how and why it came about that our sex and our genders became equated to each other, why are they such an important descriptor of our selves, but also what other options, genders and sexualities are being left aside by solely relying on the male/female binary.
However, as normative and disciplinary a space as MySpace may be, it still provides a space for struggle and resistance for groups who do not necessarily fit into its prescribed identity categories. One example of this is those subjects who do not identify with hetero or gender normative discourses of sex. “Transgender Phenomenon’s” profile provided a clear example of how subjects can use power’s own strategic tools and use them to create disruptions and alternate discourses that attempt to break traditional hegemonic ones. Nevertheless, and sadly enough, most of these attempts are likely to be re-appropriated by power. In Transgender Phenomenom’s case, even though he does manage to publicly make a statement against normative body/gender/sex categories by overturning the traditional ties between them, he is still inserted in a disciplinary mechanism which encourages subjects to talk and to seek ways to define themselves, contributing to their own categorization and classification: “each individual has his own place, and each place his individual” (Foucault, *Discipline* 143).

After working on this project I find myself asking many questions about online social networks in general and MySpace in particular as to their possible effects in contemporary society. MySpace is not only home to over 80 million profiles of teenagers and young people around America, but it is also a relatively new social phenomenon which has and continues to shape modern social behavior. This phenomenon begs for further interdisciplinary exploration.

In terms of gender/sex studies it would be interesting to see how subjects perform their gender identities on MySpace. How are femininity and masculinity enacted in this environment and how are queer identities performed? What are the gender/sex discourses that permeate MySpace, from the most traditional to the most transgresive? I would also
be curious to know if, in a few years, MySpace adapts its gender categories to fit and accommodate alternate genders and sexualities. In this regard, I would also try to find out which are the categories that are ‘added’ and which ones are not, and continue to expand on how power manages to re-appropriate struggle by institutionalizing it. In a way, the addition and creation of more labels does contribute to power’s individualizing techniques and it might just be that by demanding acknowledgment of non-traditional ethnicities, religions, genders, sexual orientations, etc, we may at the same time help create new normative discourses about previously un-categorized and un-labeled (and therefore less stigmatized) practices.

This project, thus, only marks the beginning of a personal exploration on MySpace and its disciplinary powers. Critical Cyberculture Studies are only in their beginning phases and much work needs to be done in order to understand all of the social, economic and cultural implications of a phenomenon such as online social networks. Power, Foucault never ceased to stress, is embedded precisely in social networks and it is through the relationships that form across them that it crawls, expands and is perpetuated in society.
WORKS CITED


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