

Self-Narrative as Self-Betrayal: Identity Production in Late Capitalism

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Self-narratives are not merely expressions of identity. They are sites of perpetual self-betrayal, driven by the structural demands of media-centric societies. Based on this diagnosis, and with a performative identity concept in mind (cf. Butler, Goffman), this contribution will argue that the act of narrating oneself is a compulsive search for something fundamentally absent: a coherent, stable self that never fully emerges. Yet this very failure, this continual “lack,” is precisely what sustains both the narrative drive and capitalism’s systemic reproduction of identity types.

Self-narrative operates as a dialectical trap: the subject narrates itself not to find identity, but to sustain the illusion that it can be found in the gaze or recognition of the Other (cf. Hegel, lordship and bondage; Lacan, mirror stage). This recognition, however, is inherently alienating. The self becomes split—what Žižek terms the parallax—between what it presents and what it feels internally as “missing.” In this gap lies the subject’s fundamental anxiety, an existential shortfall that capitalism exploits by offering endless symbolic supplements: consumer choices, curated digital personas, therapeutic confessions, and the promise that each new self-narrative will finally “complete” the subject. But this promise is structurally false—each act of narration is simultaneously an act of self-loss, as the subject reduces itself to a commodified spectacle, a product that others consume.

Central to this is the ethical dimension of the self’s betrayal. As Ann Kaplan’s “trauma culture” shows, the modern subject often justifies its fragmented identity through narratives of pain or victimhood, seeking validation in shared suffering. But in doing so, the self becomes dependent on external recognition that reinforces, rather than resolves, its alienation. By positioning itself as a “victim” seeking empathy (Azouvi’s transition from hero to victim), the subject externalizes responsibility for its lack onto social structures, yet simultaneously reproduces the very system that demands its self-narration as compensation. In this sense, self-narratives are not merely modes of self-expression—they are forms of labor. The neoliberal order transforms the process of narrating one’s life into a productive activity, where the “authentic self” is packaged, marketed, and sold as both entertainment and validation.

This contribution thus highlights the central paradox of self-narratives under capitalism: they promise reconciliation of the self but deliver perpetual fragmentation. They represent the subject’s attempt to find meaning, yet they remain trapped within a logic of production that requires their failure to sustain itself. Capitalism needs the subject to keep narrating, to seek recognition, precisely because what the subject seeks cannot be found—only endlessly deferred. Understanding self-narratives as forms of self-betrayal exposes the deeper ideological mechanism at play: the subject’s failure is capitalism’s success. To break this cycle, we must rethink self-narratives not as quests for closure but as sites of resistance—spaces where the self can confront its own incompleteness and the incompleteness of the big Other itself.