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## Young People and the „Post-modern“ Character

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### Introduction

In my remarks today I shall outline a new character type, one I have developed in recent years with the help of Erich Fromm’s own approach to character. This new character type, which I shall refer to as an „I-am-me orientation“ („Ich-Orientierung“), is strongly associated with those age groups and social classes, professions and life-styles, into which the so-called post-modern adaptation has made the deepest inroads. This post-modern adaptation is, in turn, strongly influenced by the new digital technologies and the horizons opened up by the new media. The upshot is that a reality that is newer, other, better than pre-existent reality can now be produced. The allure of an I-am-me life-style, an I-am-me value orientation, is a key aspect of the post-modern reshaping of reality.

Just as with the authoritarian character in which Fromm distinguished an active (sadistic) and a passive (masochistic) aspect, I differentiate between, on the one hand, an active post-modern type of personality that enacts and conceives life-style and reality as an event; and on the other, a passive type of personality that is attracted to participating in enacted realities and mass spectacles and to being connected with others. Since this new character orientation typifies how many young people see themselves, others, reality, their life-style and likely future, I hope by sketching this post-modern character orientation to shed a quantum of light on the question facing us today: *Quo vadis iuvenis?*

### 1. The post-modern I-am-me character orientation

The post-modern I-am-me character strives passionately to determine himself freely, spontaneously, autonomously, unconstrained by precepts or outside



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standards, and driven by a thirst for fabricated and generated reality. The prime mover is a post-modern *thirst for self-determined, I-am-me oriented fabrication of reality*, meaning the ambient reality resulting from one's own efforts, but also the reality that one is oneself by dint of self-creation—according to the maxim: „Except you make something of yourself, you are nothing!“ Given the characteristic thirst for an I-am-me oriented fabricated reality, this social character type may be said to have a post-modern *I-am-me orientation*.

According to this description the I-am-me oriented person is neither egotistical nor egocentric nor narcissistic nor subjectivistic. His main interest is not to gain an advantage or to exploit others. Occasionally he may be also egocentric, but primarily he is not interested in a self-inflation or to establish or secure his grandiosity. He just likes to be self-determining.

The conviction powering this character type is this: „Let no one tell you who you are. You are who *you* are.“ Only in the radical I-am-me oriented, spontaneous, and free self-affirmation and self-enactment can the authentic and the intimate be experienced by post-modern man. All is contingent. Everyone, everything, can and should be handled playfully. There is nothing that there isn't, so anything goes. And if anything goes, everything is okay. Nothing exists that isn't in a state of flux. Everything flows. No one has the right to lay down what is good or evil, right or wrong, authentic or false, in tune with reality or just an illusion. The only thing that counts is the I-am-me oriented fabrication of reality, after the maxim: „I am my own person“.

Just how passionately this *post-modern I-am-me orientation* is adhered to, can be shown by a comparison. To experience what fabricated reality is like today, all you need to do is flick on the television and do a spot of channel-hopping. Simply by pressing a button, you can generate a reality that differs fundamentally, as a rule, from the reality going on around you in the living-room. Those with a post-modern I-am-me orientation do this with great passion—by generating in free self-determination their own (and ambient) realities, they are, as it were, their own TV producer and program director. This yields a sense of identity: no matter what comes up on the screen, they are at once producer and program director.

Let me now look at the changes in the means of production that chiefly explain the rise of this new character type.

## **2. The post-modern I-am-me oriented character: psychogenesis**

The new horizons that are dramatically reshaping the way we live can be largely traced back to *digital technology* and the *electronic media*. They have delivered



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the key to transcending space and time in our day and age; to split-second transfer of knowledge and information; to freeing communication, entertainment, knowledge acquisition from the constraints of space and time; to mobilizing, globalizing, flexibilizing almost all production processes and the involved parties; to cracking the genetic code; and to advancing the scientific study of the universe. Let me specifically list some of the changes that have been wrought:

Digital technology and the electronic media allow *the bounds of space and time to be transgressed: we are no longer compelled to dance to their tune*. Irrespective of where we are, we can reach any one, anywhere (well, almost), any time; whether going about our daily jobs, placing orders, accessing know-how, upgrading our skills, seeking distraction or titillation, we can now turn day into night, Sundays into weekdays, holidays into normal working days. Captivated by perfectly simulated virtual displays, we are transported into the past or future, the Antarctic or the Seychelles, or else catapulted far into space.

Digital technology and the electronic media allow *reality to be structured in novel, different, better ways*. Whether it is the external reality surrounding us or the internal reality of body, mind and spirit, reality can be enhanced or embellished by means of full-immersion simulations or virtual worlds; it can be lent greater authenticity, upgraded into „hyper-reality“, to the point where the new media-crafted version quite upstages normal reality in terms of colorfulness, sensory richness, meaning, emotional depth, affective resonance, instructiveness, not to mention the charm and stimulation it is sure to exude.

Digital technology and the electronic media give us *autonomy from others while permitting us to connect with them as and when we choose*. The more we come to rely on others to achieve the existential goals we set for ourselves, the more likely it is that this reliance will be used to generate dependencies—in raising the young, in the education sector, in the workplace, in health care, and in our relationships with loved-ones. Here the new media hold out the prospect of quite different relationship patterns and near-remote models, the hallmark of which, to be sure, is greater personal and emotional autonomy, but also a stronger, albeit self-determined, sense of being connected via media-enabled contacts. Above all, the new media with their inbuilt interactivity spawn activities of a novel kind, which goes some way towards overcoming one-way communication flows or the passive consumption of data or merely passive entertainment.

Digital technology and the electronic media allow us to *shed the specifics of our own lives and devise a reality of our own making*; indeed, the new freedoms seem to generate in us a dramaturgical urge: to re-invent ourselves from the ground up in chat rooms, in MUDs (multi-user dungeons), or on Internet plat-



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forms. Many computer and „social“ games draw us in by letting our pre-existent sense of identity be set aside in favor of specific self-images of our own devising, thus bursting the bounds of the lives we lead.

Perhaps these few pointers on the psychogenesis of the post-modern I-am-me oriented character will have sufficed to show just how seductive this new orientation really is.

### **3. The post-modern I-am-me oriented character: active and passive types**

But self-determined fabrication of reality does not necessarily mean that all I-am-me oriented post-modern characters set out to *actively fabricate reality*. Another possibility is that they immerse themselves and *passively participate* in it. Therefore, within the post-modern I-am-me character orientation we must distinguish between active and passive types. Typical of post-modern characters of the active type is that they live out actively their I-am-me orientation, first by *fabricating reality* and then by supplying it to others; whereas their passive counterparts attain the same end by partaking *in fabricated reality*. Active post-modern characters are self-determined *suppliers* of fabricated reality; their passive counterparts, by contrast, are self-determined *utilizers* of fabricated reality. While the former find attractive the self-determined fabrication of experience and virtual worlds, the latter are drawn to a self-determined *immersion in virtual worlds*. In light of this distinction, I will now proceed to describe more closely these twin personality types.

#### **a) The active supplier of experience**

The active supplier of experience—or „active experiencer“, as I shall call him for brevity’s sake—comes across to himself as wholly self-determined, as someone who in each situation is wholly his own person, even though in each situation he is different. No longer does he have character; he is now all personality. For him the world is a stage, his own life a series of appearances on it. Walking on stage and portraying himself anew is the elixir of his life. For those in the audience, his authentic display of self-confidence stamps him as a leader. His subjectivism is no narcissistic self-inflation, but springs from enthusiasm at building up an unexpected and unconventional personality, even as he engages in ironical self-distancing, so much so that nobody can pin him down or know exactly where one stands towards him. He eludes all attempts to identify him—even if he has to resort to such expedients as deploying a counter-identity. There is nothing abiding, nothing laid down and fixed, nothing pre-assigned, nothing binding, nothing typical, nothing characteristic; no identity to which one can refer, rely



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on, fall back on; only the ephemeral experience of identity, in free, unconstrained, spontaneous enactment of self. „Change“ is his holy grail, therefore he seeks to shape everything anew and otherwise, even in his private life.

This is all true as far as it goes: in general terms—yet the active experiencer exhibits other *personality traits*, most of them *seen today in a positive light*, that merit highlighting:

- His life has the *character of a project*, indeed he looks on it as a series of projects; nor is this any less true of his career, where the various projects he undertakes, however, often have little common ground; as for his private life, its project-like nature is evidenced in a tendency to serial relationships.
- *Creativity* and *innovation* are keywords and core values in how he experiences himself: „creative“ for him is anything that bucks convention, defies possibility, is new, different, self-determined.
- Self-unfolding, self-development, autonomy, *self-determination* and spontaneity are also core values of the active experiencer, yet often serve to rationalize reckless, egotistical self-enactment, where only what’s in it for him counts.
- The active experiencer is *self-confident* to a high degree, extremely *gregarious*, accommodating, quick to *show interest*, good-natured; he can, without the least difficulty, go on talking about himself endlessly; his abiding concern is to be in the spotlight of attention.
- Relationships are to be *in no way binding*; sustained desire for intimacy is a non-starter. The preferred mode is for any ties to be business-like or else unconventional; expectations of dependability are repulsed.
- A proto-typical personality trait of the active experiencer is that he treats his own life, his own person, his work, other people, as all *fun and games*. He sees himself more as player than as worker. Since there is nothing with binding character for him, he invariably comes across as self-distanced to an extent. Nor does he bear a grudge.
- Despite his predilection for playful banter, normally he is quick to demonstrate a capacity for *hard work*; and he is good at making things happen.
- Because his motto is „anything goes“, it seems there is nothing that will elicit his disapproval: he can be *tolerant* to the point of indifference.
- His past interests him as little („what’s done is done“) as what his future holds; his *métier* is in experiencing the *moment*.
- He is drawn to whatever takes him beyond previous ways of being himself;



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and he is *open* to holistic, trans-personal, „unorthodox“ experiences, pursuits, life-styles, holiday escapades, modes of work. In his wish to grow beyond the point he is currently at, he seeks out *borderline situations* and displays a decided willingness to *accept risk*.

Naturally this thumb-nail sketch of the active experiencer would be incomplete without mentioning a number of *personality traits* which *come across as negative*:

- He finds it hard to have to rely on something being there or, for that matter, to tolerate dependency of any kind; any diminution in his vital forces—physical, mental, psychological—is a nightmare for him; his hope is to „die healthy at the age of 75“, as a 65-year-old business consultant put it, who had just switched professions yet again.
- He can't stand *being thrown on his own devices*; always he must have a stage, an audience, a platform, a challenge—that is, if he is to come across to himself as creative and exuding experience.
- Recognizing *problems*, calling them by name, is really not his thing, much less taking the bull by the horns; nothing could be more alien to him than a culture of dissent.
- Problems are solved with some show of authority and often in a *reckless and egotistical executive style*, which may appear authoritarian but really isn't; for the active experiencer is not into power games (that would be authoritarian). His high is to experience himself as active and self-determined in all he does—even if he has to set up his own firm: „Ego Incorporation“!
- Any attempt to get him to accept responsibility for his *errors*, or make amends for damage due to his own *failings*, will only draw a blank; his attention is sure to be on whatever can now be enacted, not on what went wrong in the past. He may not say it aloud, but he thinks it nonetheless: „What do I care for what they say I said or did yesterday!“

## **b) The passive utilizer of experience**

Thus far I have only given an account of the „active“ side of the post-modern personality. But we have seen that post-modern experiencers don't just consist of „alpha types“—they come in a passive version too. The passive experiencer is characterized by the selfsame focus on seeking relationship and identity by immersing in simulated and enacted reality. However, he makes no effort to actively position himself in the thick of things; his trick, rather, is to immerse himself in staged happenings of all kinds, markets and brand identities, simulated



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life-styles and cyber-worlds, the better to gain of sense of identity, to touch base with his feelings, to tap into vitality and exuberance, to experience himself as interested in others, as meaningfully related to them.

If the basic thrust of the active experiencer is toward free and spontaneous self-determination and celebration of self, that of the passive experiencer is toward *connectedness and networking*, having access, sharing in experience produced by others. A sense of togetherness--of „we-ness“, to use the fashionable phrase--is, for him, a core value: „Being connected sets free,“ is how Jeremy Rifkin puts it in his book *Access*. The passive experiencer, like his active counterpart, only *lives* when he is experiencing; but this has to come from being connected, i.e. interactively, not actively—by utilizing experience not of his own making, experience lined up for him by others, by tuning into this and dwelling in it. He has nailed to his mast the motto, „Be there or be square!“ His biggest fear is not so much being a loser, as not being where the action is, that is to say, shut out and cut off—whereas what the active experiencer most fears is not being able to call the shots, not having others dance to his tune).

The passive experiencer wants to have a good time; but the way a consumer does, where the flow is but one-way. What he is after is so called interactivity. Since interactivity can only be simulated—for example in some family sit-com on the television—he finds it quite natural to laugh along on cue with the studio audience. While the active experiencer will go jogging or work out in the gym, his passive counterpart prefers to get his sport interactively (but actually passive), by watching telecasts of the big sporting events or attending them as a spectator. This interactive being part of is akin to what he seeks from dramatization in films and musicals of psychological problems, or perhaps—on a more discriminating plane—he will participate „live“ in meditation courses, *immersing* himself in the togetherness of the group.

The passive experiencer, too, has a number of *positively valued personality traits* that are worth highlighting:

- Just because his passion is in being there, in being connected, in being part of the action, he is not good at making things happen on his own, he is no maker and shaker; rather his most pressing need is to be part of a benevolent team and *work in a collegial atmosphere*—indeed the current re-discovery of the family as a refuge and as a „good team to be on“ can largely be explained in terms of this personality trait, as can be the fact that many today are happy to refuse promotion or turn their back on a raise, just so they can stay with a tried-and-tested team where everyone gets on famously.



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- The need for being connected, for ready access to others, is also pivotally implicated in how the passive experiencer shapes his *relationships*. The familiar ways in which people seek to draw closer to others—such as exchanging confidences, sharing pleasures, intimacy, touching, seeking eye contact, giving vent to one’s feelings for the other, embarking on common projects, sharing one’s cares and worries, to name just a few of these ways—none of them generally looms so large for him. Relationship is experienced chiefly in terms of the urge, *cut loose from space and time, to be in touch with as many as he can*, and to keep these networks open so contact can be resumed at any time. To grasp this point, we only need look at our preferred media of relationship today—mobile phones, the Internet, e-mails, text-messaging spring to mind. In an instant, we find ourselves unwilling witnesses to some „urgent message“ that has popped up on our mobile. Mostly the message strikes us as entirely unremarkable, hardly worth the bother of passing it on in the first place; but that would be to miss the point, which was simply to keep in touch. Chat-rooms and platforms for online „communities“ make possible exchanges between people who have never set eyes on each other; what’s more, they do not exactly feel any need to, since being emotionally related is replaced by having contact. Contact is sought, not relationship. Shaping contact is in, shaping relationship is out.
- This sense of „we-ness“ that I mentioned above is worth taking a second look at. I am not saying that seekers of „we-ness“ are particularly concerned to be seen as caring, sympathetic or responsible, as the opposition of egoism and „we-ness“ might suggest. Rather what the passive experiencer is after is *connectedness*, the sharing of experience, the experience of the common, the common experience. Public events, festive occasions, are grist to the mill of active and passive experiencer alike.
- In the sense of „we-ness“ can be found yet another personality trait of the passive experiencer: it is not so much the *we* he values, but the fact that feeling is shared, that *all are joined in the act of experiencing it*. Experience, to be sure, is primarily and above all bound up with feelings, which are certainly permitted to the post-modern individual, though not as coming from within himself; rather—taking the case of the passive experiencer—they are supplied to him from without; his part is merely to feel along with them. When people simply plug into feelings supplied from the outside, instead of having feelings of their making, instead of experiencing feelings as welling up from within, they are sentimental. It is precisely such *sentimentality*, this possibility to participate in supplied feelings that goes a long way explain the lasting popularity of soap operas, gossip columns, romantic novels, catas-



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trophe reports, the very tabloids themselves with their talent for unearthing sensational stories, life-style evocations of every kind, and „touchy-feely“ virtual realities. The post-modern individual finds it hard to weep on the death of a loved-one; but he has no trouble shedding tears aplenty when some stranger dies, provided only that the manner in which this is portrayed, or reported, is sufficiently tear-jerking and that he can be carried away on a tide of shared feeling. Nor does the ability to feel along with staged and simulated feelings have much to do with sympathy as we know it. Still, this sentimental vein of his allows the passive experiencer to participate in, to open up to, a world of constructed feelings.

- One characteristic trait of the passive experiencer is his *fondness for mass events*. Whether it is a love parade or some great sporting highlight like the Olympic Games, the Soccer World Championship, a formula 1 racing meet, or an open-air rock concert with thousands of fans in attendance, such events are go-with-the-flow fantasy happenings, products of collective orchestration, the scale on which they are staged only heightening the quality of the experience.
- And there is another personality trait of the passive experiencer that only yields to closer inspection: however little the post-modern individual wishes to be *tied down* and thus be dependent, however much he sees himself as an individual in his own right, for him it is no less of a priority (nor in any way contradictory) to be part of a life-style, a movement, a milieu, a brand, in order that he should be *connected* (as opposed to tied down and be dependent). For a *sense of belonging* is one of the passive experiencer's basic „needs“. Nothing is worse, in his eyes, than to lose touch, to be excluded, to be no longer connected. This explains the reluctance of many young (and not-so-young) adults to move out of the parental home, or why joblessness and early retirement are a personal disaster for so many.
- Another—and rather dubious—personality trait of the passive experiencer is his tendency *no longer to distinguish between mine and thine*. Disquieting about this trait is that it can lead him to taking financial and other liberties, or to an inability to distance himself from being drip-fed by public or private benefactors. That the passive experiencer has difficulty knowing where and when to stop, is here particularly apparent. Of course this trait has its virtues too, as when he shares things on impulse, as if doing so was the most natural thing in the world, or as when he responds to common concerns and the dimension of community.

Naturally, the passive experiencer is not without a number of personality traits that leave a *negative impression*:



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- First up, he has a tendency to *avoid* anything that looks at all like *self-assertion, taking a clear stand, competing, being his own man*. He simply isn't ready to jeopardize his deepest wish: to be part of a team where all blend seamlessly together.
- This goes a long way to explain another of the passive experiencer's leading traits, namely a pronounced *aversion to conflict*. This he rationalizes in terms of the selfsame team spirit and collegiality.
- Again worth a special mention is his habit of *avoiding emotional and* (as a rule) *physical intimacy* and his *dread that others will make emotional claims on him*.
- His reliance on having access to others, on tuning into events from within a collectivity, on being connected achieved via virtual reality, carries as ballast a deep-seated *fear of boredom, of being cut off, isolated and excluded*, which always lurks in the background, threatening to overtake him, should contact ever be lost with a world he looks to for stimulation.
- Whatever we think of the *interactivity* so dear to post-modern man, we should never forget that on-line surfing, or playing computer games, can only be a *surrogate* for directly and *actively relating* to others, and that interactivity, at the end of the day, is but a kind of *fake pleasure* extracted from simulated, virtual worlds.

#### 4. The post-modern I-am-me orientation: quo vadis?

Finally, under the heading: *the post-modern I-am-me orientation: quo vadis?*, let me address a number of other critical issues that are posed by this new type of character. There can be no doubt that our highly industrialized societies, in which supply-and-demand markets have expanded into almost every nook and cranny, need this character in both its active and passive versions to function at all. Erich Fromm, for his part, never tired of distinguishing between how societies function and how human beings do. Characterological orientations that impede human functioning, i.e. the unfolding of our intrinsic potential, our vital forces, or are inimical to social life, he called „non-productive“, for the good reason that they alienate us from our own productive forces.

Looking now at the post-modern I-am-me character orientation through a psychoanalytic prism, we quickly note that post-modern man is alienated from the growth potential within him. The fact that so many today need fabricated realities in order to experience anything at all, refer to the inability of the post-modern characters to *live*—to live by expressing and actualizing his or her human potentialities. The more or less unconscious self experience of the I-am-me



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oriented person is marked by boredom, also a sense of isolation and exclusion, an inner listlessness. As a rule, it is only in nightmares that this propensity comes to the fore. Then he dreams that he is completely passive, stripped of power to shape his own fate, helpless, defenseless, enfeebled, tossed about by every situation. He senses that the boat of his life has sailed without him; that his actions are those of a lifeless, insensate machine or (worse) that he is threatened by such a machine; that his life has come to nothing; that he is being menaced by life-destroying forces or diseases. He dreams he is living in a desolate, bleak world, or alternatively—if the dream stages its own compensation—that he is living in a paradise where people are never alone, where there is no hunger, where all is harmony, contentment, pleasure and „wellness“.

Such nightmares and wish-fulfilling dreams tell us something, too, about the *unconscious* make-up of post-modern I-am-me oriented man. That he is not exposed to these in his waking states is assured by the vast range of options and supplies by which he can compensate his inability to live in accordance with the productive forces originating in him. As in all the socially conditioned alienations, so it is here too: as long as the I-am-me character as a social character orientation is predominating, the very thing that alienates us from ourselves and reality will continue to function, for most all of us, as the panacea we look to as compensation for our alienation. To the extent we succeed in restructuring ourselves as I-am-me oriented persons, or in accessing I-am-me oriented worlds of experience, we are aware of having good feelings, and indeed are free of telling symptoms; yet for all that, in Fromm's phrase, we suffer from a „pathology of normalcy“ (cf. Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society*, New York 1955, pp. 12-21).

But if, post-modern characters that we are, our goal is to live a productive character orientation and to become free from alienation, then we must reflect on how we can steer our lives into productive outlets. This will require us to grapple seriously with our own existential benchmarks:

- With our formative history to date—psychological, familial, social;
- With our emotional make-up, including affects, impulses, urges that are experienced as negative and threatening;
- With the question where our true talents lie, remembering it takes practice, hard work, discipline to get the golden egg of „enriched experience“;
- With the question how we actively shape and flesh out our friendly involvements, our sense of belonging, our solidarity; and with the question
- How far we can go in terms of satisfying our desires, foisting our own wish-list or ideals on others, confronting old age and death, and so on.



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However alluring we may find this *Brave New World*, to use the title of Aldous Huxley's novel, especially given the virtual and simulated media worlds now available, our capacity for self-determination and reality generation will only be pointed in a productive direction if, as we go about fabricating these realities, we retain a lively sense of what is real. This reality is by nature holistic; it includes the unconscious; and it takes its bearings not from what is technically possible, but from what is humanly possible.