Steve Jobs, Romantic Individualism,
and the Desire for Good Capitalism

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The Hollywood biographical drama *Steve Jobs* retells a story that first emerged in the 1980s, a story that over the decades has repeatedly offered the public details about Jobs' oracular marketing style, rock-star arrogance, and business successes, debates about the exact nature of his "genius," and a fascination with his bad behaviors. This essay explains how that story and its repetition tell us more about the culture than the man. Building on previous work about the rise of "romantic individualism" as an organizing mechanism for high-tech capitalism, this essay focuses on the latest outpouring of discourse about Jobs since his death in 2011, analyzing both its continuities with past cultural forms and what it is about the present moment that has intensified the discourse—especially the post-2008 crisis of confidence in financial capitalism. Among other things, the tale offers the appealing, if ultimately unrealistic, hope of a capitalism with integrity, of a one-percenter who deserves it.

Introduction

When Steve Jobs stepped down as head of Apple in August 2011, a stream of accolades began to flow. Upon his death, that stream turned into a flood. Against a backdrop of constant hagiographic soft news stories about Jobs, candles were spontaneously lit in front of Apple stores in China, Mexico, France, and other countries around the world, and discussion lists buzzed with deeply felt expressions of admiration. Clearly, many ordinary people found Jobs' story inspiring, or at least fascinating. Several documentaries were thrown together and broadcast in the fall of 2011, and one was shown in theaters (O'Connor, 2011; Sen, 2012). Taking a cue from all the attention, President Obama prominently mentioned Jobs in his January 2012 State of the Union address, and both Mitt Romney and Obama mentioned him during the presidential election debates. Since then, two separate big-budget docudramas about Jobs' life have gone into production, the first released to theaters in August 2013 (Stern, 2013), the second in October 2015 (Boyle, 2015). In spring 2015, a new round of publications including a new biography and new documentary appeared, resulting in a new wave of media coverage (Gibney, 2015; Schlender & Tetzeli, 2015). "The next Steve Jobs" has become a familiar meme, and almost certainly will be invoked, most likely by both sides, in political debates leading up to the U.S. elections in November 2016. In sum, the volume, breadth, and intensity of the cultural attention to Jobs in the 2011–2015 period has far exceeded that given to other CEO-celebrities, such as Bill Gates, Richard Branson, Martha Stewart, Jack Welch, and Mark Zuckerberg.

What are we to make of this? One of the key points of cultural studies was that, while the popular matters, the goal of analysis is neither to celebrate nor sneer, but to try to carefully tease out the causes and consequences of cultural forms, in a particular historical context for particular individuals and for the society, while allowing for their multivalent possibilities. The popular is never monolithic or self-explanatory. Neither dominance nor resistance is simple or singular.[2] In *The Net Effect* (Streeter, 2011), I argued that the countercultural inflections of computing that played a role in the emergence of the microcomputer and the Internet had a specific form, a set of cultural tropes and habits that I call romantic individualism. That form, in turn, has become part of the legitimating apparatus of contemporary capitalism—while also in some contexts leaving space for alternative views and possibilities.[3] I hope to show in this essay that much of what has been attributed to Steve Jobs, like the emphasis on technology as a medium for individual creativity, art, and expression, the oracular statements framed in plain or informal language, and the radical individualism displayed in both his public and personal life, neatly expresses the broader tendencies described in *The Net Effect*. The goal here is not to view the outpouring of storytelling and discussion around Jobs as false consciousness.[4] Rather, the point is to investigate the causes and consequences of the outpouring, of what Foucault might have called an "incitement to discourse" (Foucault, 2012, pp. 15–35),[5] to explore the sociopolitical work that it is performing. The talk about Jobs is as much effect as cause, and it tells us more about our culture than about the person.

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[2] Whether in its Gramscian tendencies, which emphasized the complex, processual nature of hegemony, or its Foucauldian tendencies, which emphasized the dispersed capillaries of power, cultural studies has always maintained that resistance does not emerge simply from oppression or a singular identity, and dominance does not happen because of a singular obvious mechanism of power such as class or ownership. As Stuart Hall (1998) put it, "Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance" (p. 453).

[3] For example, in the early 1990s, Internet-related romantic individualism played a role in reviving neoliberal economic policies worldwide (Streeter, 2011, pp. 119–137), whereas in the late 1990s, it played a role in calling into question some of neoliberalism's core assumptions, particularly regarding intellectual property and proprietary corporate behavior (Streeter, 2011, pp. 138–167).

[4] Repeated journalistic errors and misstatements (particularly overattribution to Jobs of inventions) are significant but should be understood as symptoms of underlying frames or patterns of interpretation, not merely as tools that pull the wool over the eyes of gullible audiences.

[5] Ever since Raymond Williams (1961) introduced the concept of "structures of feeling," diverse scholarly literatures have probed the relations of subjectivity, feelings, and affect to economic structure. Approaches range from Frankfurt school critical theory (Illouz, 2007) to affect theory (e.g., Chaput, 2010; Papacharissi, 2014; Ticineto Clough & Halley, 2007) to questions of authenticity and its ironies (Banet-Weiser, 2012) to Foucauldian biopolitics (Lemke, 2001). The discipline of sociology has long harbored a tradition of the sociology of emotions (e.g., Collins, 1990). My approach makes two contributions to the discussion: (1) an integration of traditional humanist approaches with a contemporary interest in the politics of passions and affect and (2) illustrations of the ways that passions have a history and a form, that contemporary formations of affect have connections to past cultural forms, that they have a traceable history with a causal relation to the present. Rather than exclusively trying to explain what is unique about the present, my work finds insight in connections with the past.

Building on *The Net Effect*, then, this essay argues that the recent narrative construction of Steve Jobs in the media as a creative entrepreneurial hero offers Jobs as someone who succeeded not by the use of rational calculation or hard work but by following his inner passion, by being "authentic" to his inner self. From Steve Jobs' jeans and sneakers to his rock-star arrogance and oracular marketing style, his life offers a raft of details that flesh out a favorite American tale: the tale of a guy who bucked convention, followed his heart instead of the crowd, and triumphed. In the contemporary historical context, furthermore, this story invites us to imagine a "good capitalism," a utopian form in symbolic contrast to the rapacious, speculative, financialized capitalism behind the 2008 economic crash. The Jobs story offers the optimistic vision of a one-percenter who might actually deserve what he had.

The Institutions of Business Celebrity

As is generally the case with cultural forms, the causes of the outpouring of discourse about Steve Jobs are multiple. Certainly one would expect some journalistic mention of Jobs upon his passing, particularly since he died at a time when Apple was at a peak of economic success, a stock market darling riding high on the success of the iPod and the iPhone. A facilitating factor probably was the easy online accessibility to reporters of Jobs' highly quotable 2005 address to Stanford's graduating class, on top of a long string of filmed and printed profiles going back to the 1980s; stories about Jobs were easy to write. The incredibly fortuitous publication of Walter Isaacson's official biography within three weeks of Jobs' death—with its substantial publicity campaign—was also key; the biography caught a wave, and then occasioned a mutually reinforcing circle of interests between the author, his publisher, and news outlets looking for a compelling soft news story.

But there is also a long-standing institutional machinery devoted to producing stories that celebrate CEOs. In *Demystifying Business Celebrity*, Guthey, Clark, and Jackson (2009) explain that the construction of business leaders as celebrities is a highly institutionalized, century-old system that arose in response to and remains in dialogue with populist criticisms of the power of modern corporations. It is not just CEOs themselves, but large numbers of publicists and related professionals inside and outside of corporations that share an interest in producing, and profiting from, business celebrity. (Intriguingly, the authors suggest that the Hollywood celebrity machine initially learned its tricks from such early corporate celebrities as Rockefeller, Edison, and Ford rather than the other way around.)

Business celebrities, they argue,

> are not simply well-known individuals who are attributed by journalists with actions or characteristics that lead to or exemplify business success. They are best understood as clusters of promotional activities, representational practices, and cultural dynamics . . . business celebrity consists of the orchestrated co-production, cross-promotion, and circulation of images, narratives, and personal appearances of such figures via a wide range of media platforms and channels. . . . If conditions are right . . . their individual actions, personal traits, physical presence, and/or private lives come to serve multiple and interconnected promotional and cultural/ideological functions in ways that reinforce their celebrity status. (Guthey et al., 2009, p. 36)

Guthey et al. describe the institution of the business celebrity as both an effort to legitimate concentrated business power by putting a human face on otherwise faceless corporations—and thereby contributing to the creation of what Marchand (2001) calls the "corporate soul"—and a key cultural form with which our society explores individuality and its problems.

At its crudest, the business celebrity system fosters the illusion that the fruits of corporate manufacture are the product of unique, talented individuals, not of global systems of manufacture—that is, of vast and intricately organized bureaucracies reliant on structured global inequality. The stories told about business celebrities tend to lend themselves to various degrees to a "great man" theory of history, at least implicitly. The dominant narrative structure is to interweave stories of a business leader's career successes with details from the individual's life and his or her self-presentation. Even when an individual's failures and flaws are laid bare—Steve Jobs' tantrums, bullying, and bad treatment of friends and girlfriends are discussed with some relish in much of the discourse—the organizing frame throughout nonetheless ties business success to the individual's life story. We are invited to interpret bits of detail from the individual's youth and his or her stylistic tastes, not as symptoms of the times, but as a tale of individual uniqueness and thus of a piece with the individual's business successes. So the fact that Jobs abandoned a pregnant girlfriend and for a time denied paternity is presented as a telling aspect of what Isaacson called his difficult, "searingly intense personality" (2011, p. xx) and not, say, a symptom of the problems with post-1960s sexual culture, or a symptom of the blind spots inherent in the gendered, Silicon Valley cult of radical individualism.

Within these narratives—sometimes explicitly, but more often by way of simple apposition—the products of a global industrial enterprise are thus made to seem the product of a unique, highly distinct individual. Maybe Jobs' flaws were of a piece with his successes, maybe they were tangential, but in either case the story of his life is assumed to be the story of Apple products and vice versa. Edison invented the light bulb, Marconi the radio, Ford the assembly line, Jack Welch the corporate turnaround, Steve Jobs the iPod; put so bluntly, all such claims are gross oversimplifications at best—invention, historians have amply demonstrated, is generally a gradual, collective process—but when multiple narratives repeatedly interweave a focus on the life story of a business leader with the appearance of products and services that have come to permeate the industrialized world, an alternative understanding of corporate accomplishments as deeply historical and collective are excluded from view.

The narratives about Steve Jobs—even the critical ones—mostly follow this pattern. From the start of the Jobs hagiographic moment, it has been common to overattribute credit to Jobs for high-tech innovations. One television news report about Jobs' resignation from Apple, for example, claimed that Steve Jobs:

> invented the personal computer as a user-friendly device, invented the notion that the mouse could be our real interface with that computer, never mind the fact that he invented the category of iPod, iPad, and of course selling music digitally. ("Steve Jobs Resigns," 2011)

TED conference curator Chris Anderson said on camera, "this single individual [Jobs] gave us the original Apple, the Macintosh, and Pixar, and the iPod, the iPhone, and the iPad" (in O'Connor, 2011). These claims are so distorting of the facts that under normal circumstances they would be unacceptable in an undergraduate essay. (The Apple II, for example, was neither invented by Jobs, nor was it distinctively friendly in its day. Credit for the mouse goes to Douglas Engelbart, and the Xerox Star sold with a mouse as the primary interface two years before the Mac was released. There were digital music players, smart phones, and tablets long before the iPod, iPhone, and iPad.[6] And Jobs was never a programmer or an engineer; whatever his genuine contributions, they were largely on the level of timing, marketing, and design.)

Because of the crudeness of some of the oversimplifications in the journalistic coverage, and because Jobs actually had considerably less involvement with engineering or technical invention than many predecessor business celebrities, such as Edison, Marconi, or Edwin Land, some journalism has set out to correct this oversimplification. Malcolm Gladwell (2011) made the case that Jobs' "true genius" was that he was a "tweaker," someone who cleverly modified and combined existing technologies, not an inventor. Others have argued that Jobs' major contribution was to "transform industries" or that his distinct skill was motivating others to come up with breakthrough inventions. And in the wake of revelations of overworked employees and multiple suicides at a Foxconn plant in China that manufactured iPhones, a kind of counternarrative emerged in which Jobs was sometimes redefined as uniquely exploitive and uncaring.

But most of these proliferating discussions have remained largely focused on the question of how best to characterize Steve Jobs: inventor, marketer, designer, tweaker, motivator, role model, or tyrant. Simply because the figure of Steve Jobs remains at the center of these discussions, Guthey et al.'s (2009) "cluster of promotional activities" persists. Whether adulatory, probing, or condemning, the multiplying discussions collectively kept the spotlight on the figure of Jobs, and thereby facilitated, even if not always explicitly asserted, the assumption that the person of Jobs was essential to the activities of Apple and its products.

Of course, dissenting and critical voices have been raised, but for the most part they have not done much to reorient the mainstream discussion beyond the obsession with the person of Steve Jobs. Efforts to expand the list of inventors who contributed to all our digital innovations were largely ignored by mainstream journalism. Unix pioneer Dennis Ritchie, for example, who died a few days after Jobs, received almost no note in the mainstream press, though his contributions are described by many insiders as much more essential to modern computing than Jobs' (Langer, 2011). Some scholars and activists sought to bring attention to systematic labor problems in Asia in the wake of the Foxconn revelations, and a vivid but journalistically deeply flawed episode of the radio program and podcast *This American Life,* featuring monologist Mike Daisey, sought to call attention to the problematic character of the commodity fetishism evident in the way people think about Apple products and the global system within which they are manufactured (Glass, 2012). Yet, judging by the persistence of the depiction of Jobs as business

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[6] The digital sale of music was taking place at least by 1998 (e.g., Ritmoteca.com), years before iTunes followed suit.

celebrity in biopics, journalism, and political debates, larger questions about, say, the structural organization of high-tech manufacturing continued to receive little attention in the discussions of Jobs.

A recent documentary, *Steve Jobs: The Man in the Machine* (Gibney, 2015), illustrates the way that even deeply critical presentations have a hard time undoing the narrative wherein the story of Apple products seems to be the story of Steve Jobs. Opening with a clip of old footage of Jobs preparing for a television interview, followed by a sequence of shots of ordinary people lighting candles, posting YouTube videos, and otherwise expressing their awe and respect for Jobs on the occasion of his death, the film goes on to recount, through narration and interviews, many of the well-known stories of Jobs' bad behavior, mixed with interviewees' occasional reflections on the causes of his misdeeds. Much of the reflection comes across as psychological: The mother of his first child discusses his spiritual failings, a Buddhist monk speculates on the young Jobs' inability to transcend his selfishness, Gibney's voice-over narration conjectures about the effect on Jobs of the fact that he was adopted. Questions about Apple Inc.'s business practices are not raised until more than halfway through the film: employee suicides at Foxconn, a 2011 class action lawsuit involving collusion in hiring, a scandal over illegal backdating of employee stock options, a heavy-handed reaction to a lost prototype iPhone. The film does hint that some of these corporate misbehaviors involve many major Silicon Valley companies, such as Google, Adobe, and Intel. Yet the focus on Jobs' persona dominates the film, and so a possible broadening of focus toward industry structure and ethics is not pursued. A minority of already-informed viewers might come away from the documentary with questions about the politics and organization of global manufacturing, but it is hard to imagine how the majority of viewers would do so. Following a clip of Jobs saying, "People with passion can make the world a better place," Gibney responds, "Is making things enough to make the world a better place?" Good question, perhaps, but it leaves unchallenged the business celebrity assumption that Jobs somehow made Apple products.

Gibney concludes *Steve Jobs: The Man in the Machine* by asking the audience to reflect on why we love Steve Jobs, on what our obsessions tell us about ourselves. In essence, this essay began with the question with which Gibney's film ends.

The Rise of Romanticism in Business Culture

Guthey et al. (2009) argue,

> If we read between the lines of the many other functions and purposes it serves, we can see that the celebrity system provides a testing ground, and sometimes a soapbox, for ideas and arguments about how it is possible for an individual to take action, to stand out from the crowd, and to make a difference in the face of vast commercial, corporate, and social forces beyond their control. (p. 5)

Like Hollywood celebrity narratives, stories about business celebrities need not be seen merely as propaganda or in terms of their most obvious ideological functions. The stories can also serve as tools for reflection, sometimes thoughtful, on what it means to be an individual in one's society. Like most life stories, business celebrity narratives are morality tales. It is not surprising that they are a popular young

adult genre. They are often written and read with an attention to what this means for how the rest of us could or should live.

On this level, there is a telling historical variation in the tenor of business celebrity narratives. The first generation of celebrity executives presented themselves as models of rationality. Edison, who worked hand-in-hand with Henry Ford to generate perhaps the original archetype of the celebrity business leader, celebrated the "99% perspiration" required for invention, as opposed to the mere 1% of inspiration. Theodor Vail, architect of the AT&T telecommunications monopoly that spanned most of the 20th century, celebrated "human perfectibility and . . . technological planning, applied science, and social conditioning" (Wu, 2011, p. 8). Alfred Sloan (1941), who built General Motors into the largest industrial enterprise the world had ever seen to that point, emphasized that, "scientific management means a constant search for the facts, the true actualities, and their intelligent, unprejudiced analysis" (p. 140).

This first generation of business celebrities seem like fairly direct descendants of the figure of Benjamin Franklin as analyzed by Max Weber. Weber's "Protestant ethic" emphasized reason, hard work, science, and frugality ("a penny saved is a penny earned"). Weber's Protestant ethic, or something like it, provided a cultural operating environment for the first factories and urban-centered businesses that were starting to replace the quasi-feudal strictures of mercantile capitalism dependent on European monarchies. The stories about Edison, Ford, Vail, and Sloan, on the other hand, served to make sense of the rise of the giant, technology-based multiunit enterprises that were at first called trusts and are now called corporations—ever-growing, vast bureaucracies, seeking and often profiting from oligopoly or monopoly positions. But they retained from the earlier era the general image of the ideal capitalist individual as rational, calculating, and soberly scientific.

The United States emerged from World War II more confident than ever in the possibilities of science, planning, and rationality as embodied in its great corporations. It was in the 1960s, however, that this confidence was deeply shaken. There were failed promises, such as the claim that nuclear energy would "make electricity too cheap to meter," growing problems with pollution, and then the failure of the war on poverty, the energy crisis, and Watergate. And all these were set against the background of the murderous catastrophe that was the Vietnam War. Together, these events severely undermined the broad confidence in elite decision making, corporate structures, and the rhetorics of reason and science with which corporations had to that point habitually clothed themselves.

Against that backdrop, computing and the computing industry began to be refigured in both the popular and engineering imaginations. As discussed by both Turner (2008) and me (Streeter, 1999, 2011), parts of the 1960s counterculture began to intermix with trends in the computing industry: From being emblems of objective, scientific, centralized prediction and control, computers began to be imagined as devices for personal exploration, as creative tools more associated with art than science. Then, in the 1980s, counterculturally inflected "personal" computing became articulated with another trend of the time: the antigovernment pro-market enthusiasms that we now call neoliberalism.

In 1985, newly reelected President Ronald Reagan announced, "We have lived through the age of big industry and the age of the giant corporation. But I believe that this is the age of the entrepreneur"

(Brown, Hamilton, & Medoff, 1990, p. 1). After the grim failures of the 1970s, an official culture eager for stories of entrepreneurialism turned to the rapidly expanding microcomputer industry in search of exemplars, and many of the young executives of the time—for example, Osborne, Gates, Jobs—were happy to oblige them with interviews in which they performed the role. At the same time, various professional writers and pundits—notably Stewart Brand (1987) and Steven Levy (2001)—began fleshing out a peculiarly romantic narrative, heavily inflected with tropes from the 1960s countercultures, about these high-tech entrepreneurial heroes. By the early 1990s, books such as Cringely's (1992) *Accidental Empires*, the subsequent PBS series *Triumph of the Nerds* (Sen, 1996), and docudramas such as *The Pirates of Silicon Valley* (Burke, 2000) made the life stories and eccentricities of Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and similar figures familiar to millions.

This version of the business celebrity had a new tone. Neither Edison, Ford, Vail, nor Sloan would have been likely to recommend that we do as Steve Jobs did—namely, drop out of college and travel to India to explore Eastern religions. But Ralph Waldo Emerson very well might have. Back in 1841, Emerson advised Americans "Trust Thyself . . . conformity . . . loves not realities and creators, but names and customs. Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist" (Emerson, 1990, pp. 160–161). Emerson, "the theologian of the American religion of Self-Reliance" (Bloom, 2004, p. 190), exemplified the first generation of American romantics, who imported European romantic philosophies and gave them an American, highly individualist, cast. Romanticism in general cast doubt on enlightenment certainties, particularly concerning scientific reason and calculation. If the European romantics tended to find the alternatives to scientific calculation in personal encounters with nature (Wordsworth, Coleridge, and, in the United States, Thoreau) or language and culture (e.g., Dilthey), Emerson found it especially in the self. Emerson's self was distinctly set against Descartes' cogito or Bentham's calculating, self-interested shopkeeper. Rather, the self was "that science-baffling star, without parallax, without calculable elements, which shoots a ray of beauty even into trivial and impure actions" (Emerson, 1990, pp. 160–161). It was a self that defied or transcended the predictable, the measurable, the calculable. Emerson proclaimed the centrality of a dynamic, inner experience that calls on us to live creatively beyond the bounds of predictable rationality, to express ourselves according to our own unique personal perception of truth.

Romanticism, as understood here, works as what Swidler (1986) calls a cultural tool kit, a set of discursive practices available in the culture for use in different contexts (Streeter, 2011, pp. 44–46). Emerson is thus better understood as a symptom than a cause of romantic individualism; his writings crystallized forms in the culture at large. For the last two centuries or so, people who have never read Wordsworth, Byron, or Emerson have produced and consumed stories structured by romantic individualist tropes: passionate masculine heroes rebelling against tradition, tales of revelation based on inner experience, celebrations of art as what Wordsworth called "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth & Coleridge, 2013, p. 94), the use of the colloquial to generate an effect of authenticity, and a skepticism about instrumental reason. Taken together, these shared tropes constitute a technology of the self, where the self is understood as uniquely isolated in a masculine fashion and the source of a dynamic, inner experience that calls on us to live creatively beyond the bounds of predictable rationality (Streeter, 2011, pp. 9–10).

Keeping that in mind, one can read Jobs' oft-quoted 2005 address to Stanford's graduating class as a statement of a kind of straightforward expression of Emersonian individualist philosophy. With considerable panache, Jobs told the crowd of Stanford college graduates basically the same thing as Emerson told his audience in 1841:

> There is no reason not to follow your heart. . . . Don't be trapped by dogma—which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary. (Jobs, 2005, para. 18, 23)

Trust the self, your inner voice, not others; go with your intuition, not some calculation or common wisdom. Don't calculate; pursue your inner passion.

The romantic measure of truth is authenticity. The self may not be "scientifically" true, but in its romantic version, it is a source of *authentic* truth. One of the marks of authenticity in romantic writing is revealing personal details about oneself, even—or especially—unflattering ones. Robert Darnton (1984) has argued that Jean-Jacques Rousseau did much to "fabricate romantic sensitivity" by putting the persona of the writer in the forefront. "Instead of hiding behind the narrative and pulling strings to manipulate the characters in the manner of Voltaire," Darnton writes, "Rousseau threw himself into his works and expected the reader to do the same" (p. 228). Rousseau encouraged readers to approach his works as the authentic, unmediated expression of the inner feelings of a unique human. In *La Nouvelle Heloise*, for example, Rousseau not only made the then-unusual gesture of signing his own name to the novel but made much of that fact in the preface, insisting that a "man of integrity" should not hide himself from the public. He furthermore insisted that "I do not want to be considered any better than I am" (Darnton, 1984, p. 229). "A man of integrity," in other words, is a man who bares his flaws, which in turn become the marks of authenticity, the sign of an honest connection.

In 2005, Jobs delivered what could have been a highly clichéd speech (how often have graduates been admonished to be true to their selves?) by first telling a story about dropping out of college:

> I didn't have a dorm room, so I slept on the floor in friends' rooms, I returned Coke bottles for the 5¢ deposits to buy food with, and I would walk the 7 miles across town every Sunday night to get one good meal a week at the Hare Krishna temple. I loved it. And much of what I stumbled into by following my curiosity and intuition turned out to be priceless later on. (para. 6)

Then he told a story about the humiliation of being fired by Apple at age 30: "Sometimes life hits you in the head with a brick. Don't lose faith. I'm convinced that the only thing that kept me going was that I loved what I did. You've got to find what you love" (para. 15). And, finally, a story about his cancer:

> I had a biopsy, where they stuck an endoscope down my throat, through my stomach and into my intestines, put a needle into my pancreas and got a few cells from the

tumor. . . . This was the closest I've been to facing death, and I hope it's the closest I get for a few more decades. . . . And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because Death is very likely the single best invention of Life. It is Life's change agent. (para. 20–21)

And he closed by quoting Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog*: "Stay Hungry. Stay Foolish" (i.e., follow desire, not reason).

Given the fact that "Stay Hungry. Stay Foolish" appeared on many a hand-written testimonial laid in front of Apple stores and Jobs' home in the weeks after his death, it seems almost churlish to point out that Jobs' speech worked through the artful application of time-worn cultural conventions. But the use of novelistic details— Coke bottles, the endoscopy—and the revelation of failures and vulnerability—being fired, facing death—all conform to learned tropes from romantic discourse, within which they serve as signifiers of an essential or authentic truth of the speaker. And it is these marks of authenticity which then make the call to follow one's passion seem compelling rather than clichéd.

The romantic tropes of the 2005 speech are consistent with Jobs' lifelong self-presentation, and much of Apple's more memorable marketing. In an interview after his ouster from Apple, Jobs famously said, "The only problem with Microsoft is they just have no taste . . . they don't think of original ideas, and they don't bring much culture into their product" (Sen, 1996). The problem is not monopoly or some other measurable or structural matter; in other words, it is a question of expression, of style—Microsoft is inauthentic. "Insanely great" implies a greatness stemming from the irrational. "Think Different" does not just suggest that Apple products are distinct, but invites consumers to imagine *themselves* as "change agents." And the studied informality or ungrammatical character of both advertising slogans involves another romantic trope: the strategic use of "improper" or unofficial colloquial language. Robert Burns wrote poetry in a rural dialect, and was much admired for that. Rock stars use four-letter words with a practiced theatricality. Informal language signifies authenticity because it implies a kind of direct expression from speaker to audience, a solidarity unfiltered by the formal niceties of educated or official speech. The ungrammaticality of "think different" is intentional and effective; it sounds authentic, as if spoken from the heart.

Jobs and Apple were nodal points in the circulation of romantic framing of the rebel heroes of computing. Journalists, pundits, and other industry leaders and aspirants have also engaged in the discourse over the years, about Jobs and others. So, in part, the outpouring of discourse upon Jobs' death was because his passing created an opportunity to engage the romantic frame; whether U.S. society actually loved Steve Jobs, it loved the story. Facebook executive and Napster cofounder Sean Parker's post about Jobs' death is fairly typical:

> Today is an incredibly sad day for me [and] for anyone who believes in the value of
> creativity and the importance of innovation, and for the millions of people who were
> touched by the creative genius evidenced in the many products and companies created
> by Steve Jobs throughout his remarkable career. Steve Jobs was a man who
> demonstrated—more so than any other—that pure force of will, energy, and creative
> drive can change the world for the better . . . he represented exactly the sort of person I
> always wanted to someday become. . . . Steve Jobs gave me hope that taking the path
> less traveled could lead to greatness. Hope that someone with clarity of vision and
> strength of conviction, despite not fitting perfectly within the mold established by other
> business leaders, could not only be a groundbreaking innovator, but also experience
> success on an almost unimaginable scale. (Kroll, 2011, para. 1, 4)

The romantic framing here is straightforward. A promethean creativity and force of will—not, say, Edison's hard work or Sloan's rational, fact-based planning and certainly not social context or accidents of privilege, gender, race, geography, or timing—are the secrets to "changing the world." Jobs is presented as an Emersonian nonconformist who ignored the common wisdom and (we are invited to assume), for that very reason, succeeded. And the appeal of his story is in part the invitation to the rest of us to do the same: He is a rebel-hero role model.

A Brief History of the Figure of the Romantic Computer Entrepreneur

When romantic countercultural practices first began to be applied to computing in the late 1960s and 1970s, they appealed to dissidents within the small community of computer engineers. Depicting computing as expressive, perhaps even artistic, instead of as embodiments of instrumental rationality provided a way to justify alternatives to the centralized strictures inherent in batch-processed mainframes (Streeter, 2011, pp. 44–68). By the 1980s, the countercultural frame was fused with the Reagan-era enthusiasm for entrepreneurialism. Media narratives thus catapulted the capitalists of the microcomputer revolution ahead of other less economically successful innovators. For example, mouse inventor Engelbart, Unix developer Dennis Ritchie, and Ted Nelson, who coined the term *hypertext*, fell into the shadows, known mostly only to industry insiders, whereas Jobs, Gates, Steve Wozniak, and Michael Dell became darlings of the mainstream business press.

The contemporary representations of entrepreneurial computer heroes owe a great deal to Steven Levy's 1984 *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution* (Levy, 2001). The book does an enormous amount of myth making by being selective in the stories it tells; the focus is entirely on young, outsider individuals, while the essential contributions of professional industry insiders—for example, employees of Xerox's PARC—are not mentioned. Yet the book does not yet articulate hackers with the neoliberal vision of the heroic entrepreneurs. Levy, in fact, is explicit about the tensions between the free-wheeling experimentalism of his hacker heroes and the imperatives of profit, property, and the market. Similarly, the first book-length biography of Jobs, Jeffrey Young's 1988 *The Journey Is the Reward*, also helped lay the foundation for much that came after it, revealing a fascination with Jobs' rebellious youth, his intense personality, his charisma and bullying. But the book approaches what the author calls the "myth" about Jobs with a skepticism that is strikingly absent in the 21st-century versions.

Another key moment in the development of the romantic narrative of Jobs and other Silicon Valley executives was Robert Cringely's 1992 breakout book, *Accidental Empires: How the Boys of Silicon Valley Make Their Millions, Battle Foreign Competition, and Still Can't Get a Date*. This book, the first to tell many of the now-familiar stories about the microcomputer generation of then-young Silicon Valley executives, presents them through the lens of a rollicking, iconoclastic, countercultural sensibility, reminiscent of Tom Wolfe or Hunter Thompson. By focusing on personalities and relationships rather than abstracted economic processes or business strategies, the book was a key contributor to the formation of the celebrity narrative of Jobs, Gates, and others; the book provided the foundation for the PBS series *Triumph of the Nerds*, probably provided some of the inspiration for a made-for-TV movie based on the lives of Jobs and Gates (Burke, 2000), and otherwise made the lives of these characters an ongoing national drama.

Yet by describing the new Silicon Valley corporations as "accidental," Cringely announces in his title a skepticism about one of the keystones of business celebrity discourse: the belief that business success is somehow tied to the unique individuality of those at the top. In his 1992 book, Cringely explained at some length how he thinks the story of Silicon Valley's tycoons is one of a series of accidents, that their eccentric personalities and rivalries have little or nothing to do with their successes, or lack thereof. Cringely mostly finds this situation comic or ironic; he has no particular explicit political conclusion to draw from the arbitrariness of capitalist success. But as long as the narrative allows for the possibility that the power and riches of the Silicon Valley CEOs was gained by some amount of sheer luck, the harnessing of the narrative to one or another version of dominant capitalist apologetics remained awkward.

Even earlier, Young's (1988) book provided a less rollicking but similar sense of irony about the story. "Jobs' youth and good-looks," he wrote,

> an ability to say the quotable thing, wealth beyond measure after Apple's stock offering, and an American public looking for a hero to forget the disastrous seventies, all coalesced in one slender, intense young man. In him we created a myth. And like all myths, this one says more about our need for a person like the figure Steve Jobs has become, than it does about the reality of who Steve Jobs is, or ever could be. Given his youth, the explosion of the computer field, the adulation, adoration and deification of him that the press spawned and supported, the power that he came to possess, and the particularly intriguing mix of machine and mind that personal computers represented, is it surprising that he came to believe the idolatry? . . . He was never the architect of Apple's success. Jobs was neither the careful business and marketing planner, which was Mike Markkula's role, nor the brilliant creator of the company's machines. This latter role belonged at first to Steve Wozniak or "Woz" as he is widely known, and then others of similar caliber who the company could attract with its unique blend of business and vision. (p. 12)

Levy's, Young's, and Cringely's skepticism and sense of irony during the formation of the discourse in the 1980s and early 1990s made it available to those who might have doubts about neoliberal

political economy. In most of the contemporary discussions of Steve Jobs, that irony has almost entirely disappeared. From Isaacson's biography to President Obama's tributes to the Hollywood biopics, Jobs is treated as an actual, dramatic success story. Isaacson cites Levy, Young, and Cringely, yet nowhere acknowledges these earlier books' arguments that Jobs' contributions could be overvalued or accidental. The measure of truth for Isaacson is not weighing competing ways of telling the story of Jobs, but laying bare what Isaacson calls Jobs' "Nietzschean" tendencies to act as though ordinary rules do not apply to him—all the while implying, and sometimes explicitly stating, that these problematic aspects of Jobs' personality are of a piece with his successes. There is hardly a hint of irony in the contemporary discourse, and certainly no sense that the mythology is just that—a mythology: a story we like to tell and that Jobs adopted for himself. The story has solidified as if it were a straightforward, factual history.

In the early 1990s, just before the Internet took off, a publicist for the newly founded Netscape corporation decided the best way to sell the company was by foregrounding the disheveled programmers—Marc Andreessen especially—using the by-then-familiar programmer-as-artist frame (Streeter, 2011, pp. 130–131). By 2002, when a teenaged Mark Zuckerberg enrolled at Harvard as an undergraduate, the rebel-hero high-tech entrepreneur was all already a well-tested, decades-old formula. When Zuckerberg dresses casually, displays rock-star arrogance, or claims that he created Facebook simply because he liked building things (*From Business Insider*, 2010)—that is, not for money, but for a satisfaction inherent in the act of creation—he may or may not be sincere, but in any case he is following a well-established script. In the computing industry of the 21st century, the Byronic executive-rebel has become its own cliché.

Jobs Since 2011

In the spring of 2011, Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg were more common in the headlines. Why has Jobs since then stolen the limelight?

Political economic context is a factor. At the time Jobs died in October 2011, doubts about capitalism as a whole were at an all-time high in the United States. It was recent memory that the Tea Party was almost as loud in its criticisms of Wall Street bankers as it was of Obama. News of the mounting European banking crisis and scandals associated with the mortgage and finance industries filled the air. And these accompanied a continued despair over unemployment, while Wall Street profits and salaries continued to soar on the back of the taxpayer-supported bailout. Occupy Wall Street broke into mainstream media attention a few days before Jobs died.[7] In December 2011, a poll found that 61% of Americans thought that the U.S. economy unfairly favored the wealthy (Madl, 2012). Economic inequality as a political problem was suddenly gaining more mainstream recognition in the United States than at any time since the Great Depression.

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[7] Some claim that Occupy Wall Street's media "breakout" occurred with the arrests of 700 protestors on the Brooklyn Bridge on October 1, 2011, five days before Jobs' death.

All these issues weighed on public consciousness just as reporters, pundits, and ordinary citizens began to tell and retell the story of Steve Jobs as a rebellious creative hero. On Whitehouse.gov, the president released a statement reflecting the dominant media narrative (including its distortions):

> Michelle and I are saddened to learn of the passing of Steve Jobs. Steve was among the greatest of American innovators—brave enough to think differently, bold enough to believe he could change the world, and talented enough to do it. By building one of the planet's most successful companies from his garage, he exemplified the spirit of American ingenuity. . . . The world has lost a visionary. And there may be no greater tribute to Steve's success than the fact that much of the world learned of his passing on a device he invented. (Obama, 2011, para. 1–3)

In his 2012 State of the Union address, President Obama said,

> an economy built to last is one where we encourage the talent and ingenuity of every person in this country. That means women should earn equal pay for equal work. It means we should support everyone who's willing to work, and every risk-taker and entrepreneur who aspires to become the next Steve Jobs. (Obama, 2012, para. 47)

Mitt Romney predictably countered by trying to associate Steve Jobs with Republican pro-market policies:

> The centerpiece of the President's entire re-election campaign is attacking success. . . . Business and growing jobs is about taking risk, sometimes failing, sometimes succeeding, but always striving. It is about dreams. Usually, it doesn't work out exactly as you might have imagined. Steve Jobs was fired at Apple. He came back and changed the world. (Romney, 2012, para. 67, 69)

Then, as the 2012 elections approached, politicians of all sides began to claim that their preferred policies would enable "the next Steve Jobs"—which has since become a common buzzword (Bayers, 2013; e.g., Bushnell & Stone, 2013; "Girl Dubbed," 2013). As of this writing, the 15-minute YouTube video of Jobs' address to Stanford students has close to 22 million views.

Much of the appeal of the Steve Jobs narrative comes to this: The romanticized version of Jobs' life offers a story wherein one can imagine a capitalism with integrity, a capitalism where one's inner life, one's flaws, one's passions are appreciated and lead to good things. The Jobs narrative offers the appealing vision of an idealized, productive, humane capitalism contrasted with the speculative, predatory kind of capitalism, unconnected to useful objects or activities, that appeared in the headlines after 2008. The name of Steve Jobs has become the symbol for the opposite of a Wall Street financial manipulator. Jobs functions, not always but often, as a signifier of good capitalism, of industrial capitalism with moral integrity. And in a world straining awkwardly, perhaps desperately, for ways to reconcile capitalist production with political democracy, that signifier can seem immensely useful and attractive.

Conclusion

Steve Jobs was a significant figure. Someday, scholars will place him accurately within the history of the development of computing. Perhaps he will eventually be understood as analogous to Walter Gropius, the impresario of the Bauhaus movement that transformed industrial design early in the 20th century. Or perhaps, as journalist Martha Nichols has interestingly argued, his real analogue is Coco Chanel, master of the industrially produced fetish object and the first executive to turn her own life story into a part of the brand (Nichols, 2011).

But for now, we have to face Steve Jobs the symbol rather than Steve Jobs the person. On that level, one needs to grant the mythos of Steve Jobs its appeal. It is not wrong to desire a world that squares our personal feelings with our outward behaviors and institutional arrangements; there is a reason that romanticism's appeal to the authentic truth of the self remains captivating to so many. Wanting to live a life that has both integrity and rewards, a life where one's inner passions don't have to be suppressed, where one's personal principles don't have to be compromised is a good thing. And one cannot assume that all enthusiasts of the Steve Jobs narrative are interpreting it the same way.

What will continue for the foreseeable future is that Americans will remain in love with rebel-hero stories and will continue to yearn for authenticity in their lives and imaginations, and business celebrity discourses will continue to circulate and remain part of the cultural conversation over the character and legitimacy of capitalism. Debunking the most exaggerated claims will have its value; the product of a global system of manufacture is never the product of a single individual; no one, ever, is truly self-made; and achieving a life with integrity for all is in the end a collective, political project, not something achieved by charisma or genius or artful storytelling. But a politics that simply dismisses the common hopes that the Jobs mythos appeals to misses the point. What is needed is a way to address our yearnings for authenticity while also being open and explicit about the full range of labor and effort that goes into making our world. We need to offer a kind of freedom for individuals that does not eclipse the broader social context that makes individual exploration possible. Romantic structures of feeling do not necessarily pull toward the status quo; if we are going to build a more democratic world, we need to grant them their richness, but find a way beyond them.

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