The virtual you and the real you

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Elias Aboujaoude
VIRTUALLY YOU
The dangerous powers of the e-personality
978 0 393 34054 9

Giles Slade
THE BIG DISCONNECT
The story of technology and loneliness
978 1 61614 993 8

Howard Rheingold
NET SMART
How to thrive online
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In a radical break from mid-twentieth-century theories of perception, the American psychologist J. J. Gibson argued that to perceive something is not to view it from the outside, but rather to experience it directly from within. When we see an environment, he suggested in The Perception of the Visual World (1950), what we see are the possibilities for behaviour that this environment affords us. Thus, a water strider looks at a river pool and sees a place to walk. This implies that the flexibility of an organism is constrained by nature, but many species wiggle out of these constraints by engaging in niche construction, altering their own environment with the long-term result of transforming their own options. Beaver have become aquatic animals by virtue of their homegrown feats of engineering. By changing the world in certain ways and then adapting to these self-made changes, they effectively redefine themselves.

Humans are the world’s grand masters of niche construction. With culture and technology, we transform our environments, and effectively our own bodies, in amazing ways and at amazing speeds. Now we can hardly keep up with ourselves. Clever inventions from stone tools to the wheel, from literacy to firearms, have made us more productive, more adaptable, more creative, more powerful. But “affordances”, as Gibson called them, have a dark side too. A tree branch might afford climbing, but depending on the weight of your body it may also afford crushing to the ground. The costs of the axe, wheel, word and weapon are all too familiar, but we tolerate them in return for their benefits. We are willing, for example, to risk death by automobile as long as we can enjoy the superhuman speeds and distances of travel that cars afford us. We are even willing to pay for the costly infrastructure that cars demand, the roads, parking lots, fuel supply lines and toxic emissions. Technology enhances our potential, but it also introduces dark affordances, dangers we wouldn’t otherwise face.

In Virtually You, the psychiatrist Elias Aboujaoude focuses on problems of the e-personality in the context of our new online world. Ranging from unchecked online aggression to loss of control over privacy to obsessive-compulsive behaviour, these problems stem from new affordances of the internet. It provides for real-time, fully networked social interaction, but with the curious property that the medium is essentially independent from our bodies. In this self-engineered environment, the physical body is rendered almost obsolete, still needed by its owner for little more than the sustenance that keeps the soul in play. It makes possible a new kind of self, Aboujaoude explains, and this new self is not all nice: “larger-than-life, convinced of its specialness, alternately dark and infantile, both compulsive and impulsive”. The problem is that this new you, despite having become effectively separated from your body, is still you: “you still own it and own its consequences”. You lose certain restrictions that once constrained your communicative power, but you don’t lose your accountability. When your virtual branch breaks, it is the real you that comes crashing to the ground.

For Giles Slade, our inventions are indeed the end of us. A virtue of his book is its fascinating account of the development of some key twentieth-century technologies, including radio, television and mass-produced guns. The dehumanizing effect of technology is well illustrated, for example, in the observation that men in uniform can be effectively interchangeable, like factory-made machine parts. People can serve as tools; and “machines”, by which he mostly means people-isolating devices such as the Sony Walkman and its descendants, have become “prosthetic substitutes for human company”.

For Slade, twentieth-century musical culture went from “communicative” to “lonely and isolating”; people are now “predisposed to feel more comfortable with human contact when it is mediated by machinery”; and we have given up “the traditional activity of trusting and interacting with other humans”. But if this were really so, social life would have collapsed completely. Slade’s arguments would be easier to follow if it were clear what he really wanted to say.

A difficulty for both Slade and Aboujaoude is that while they are ostensibly addressing human problems, their sample of humankind is a distinctly thin slice. When Slade writes of “traditional society” and “pre-modern society”, it turns out he means the societies of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century North America. But of course these people had all sorts of technology. They were already immersed in the prosthetic human future. They possessed, for example, the technology known as the book. While Slade worries that post-twentieth-century electronic media compromise the natural framework for human communication because they strip away certain features of face-to-face interaction, such as our ability to see others’ facial expressions, this compromise was surely initiated centuries earlier. A book is no more natural to human communication than a chat room or a Twitter feed; maybe less so.

Aboujaoude similarly takes one cultural milieu and implicitly treats it as a model for the human psyche more generally. Possession of a self, he says, is defined by custodianship of information about one’s own life; but this is a decidedly culture-specific view. Arguably, the most natural type of relationship work for humans is the kind of small-scale social sphere in which most people, today and in the history of our species, live and have lived. In village settings, one’s daily life involves intense and constant interaction in a circle of kin and other in-group members. Contact with strangers seldom occurs. In such settings, information about people’s lives flows freely and openly. The very concepts of privacy and personal autonomy presuppose a kind of social separability that could only be achieved in a modern kind of world, with its ways of cordoning off people and experiences. To build an argument for what is good for the human psyche, Aboujaoude needs...
something other than a modernized and culture-specific baseline. If zero privacy is closer to the norm for human beings, then those with privacy problems online should do what any village does: be as careful as anyone says or does is as good as already public, and so only say or do things when one is prepared to face their public consequences.

If this seems easier said than done, consider the teachings of Ernestine Rheingold in Net Smart. Rheingold wants to solve the same problems as Slade and Aboujaoude, but what he offers is more practical, more personal, and more carefully thought through than either.

I believe that learning to live mindfully in cyberculture is as important to us as a civilization as it is vital to you and me as individuals. The multifield expansion of human minds by chips and nets in the first decade of the twenty-first century has granted power to billions, but in these still-early years of multimedia production studios in your pocket and global information networks in the air, it is clear to even technologically enlightened like me that our enhanced abilities to create and consume digital media will certainly mislead those who haven’t learned how to exert mental control over our use of always-on communication channels.

Most of us have an online life but few of us appreciate the affordances – both positive and negative – of our newest, most radical self-constructed niche. Perhaps the darkest affordance of online technology as we know it concerns Rheingold’s foremost issue: our attention. This problem was articulated by the economist and cognitive scientist Herbert Simon in his article “The Hypothesis in an Information Rich World” in 1971, from which Rheingold quotes:

In an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a scarcity of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information conceals. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it. The online world is as competitive as any other human social domain, and so when your attention is momentarily diverted by some flashing advertisement or social media feed in the corner of your computer screen, you’ve been played, almost literally. But Rheingold says we can win at this game.

What we stand to gain far outweighs what we stand to lose, and so the choice is not merely “adapt or perish”. Why just adapt when you can thrive?

Rheingold’s mission is to give simple and concrete instructions for how to go about it. Anyone can go online, but many of us have no idea of the true nature of this medium. He identifies “five literacies” for the online environment: attention, participation, collaboration, “detection”, and network smartness. With out acquiring these five literacies we will, at best, fail to thrive, and at worst we will be played like suckers. While his book provides many case studies, it is striking that the solutions are independent of the technological nature of the problems they are intended to solve, a point that gets lost on Slade and Aboujaoude. When it comes down to it, Rheingold’s proposal is simple: we need to be mindful, generous and co-operative. All else follows. These principles will turn us into winners even in the complete absence of technology. When everybody chooses to be mindful, generous and co-operative, even the riskiest social tools – including the mother of all information technologies, language – become positively good.

For Rheingold, all the control that’s needed will come from within. He advocates a kind of Zen anarchism, a personal commitment to awareness, trust and mutual aid. When he looks at life online he sees bright opportunities for us to keep adapting to our self-made world, and to redefine ourselves in just the right ways.

In Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, cute, interesting, Siânne Ngai has written an important book which harks back to the heyday of the leftist literary theory of the 1980s, and is none the worse for that. Dense and demanding, occasionally meandering, equally at home with I Love Lucy and conceptual art, Theodor Adorno and Im Carrey, the argument of this interdisciplinary book is fairly straightforward. Ngai thinks that the sublime and the beautiful, the categories traditionally used by aesthetics, are not up to scratch in the “hypercultural,信息化-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism.” Instead, she argues, we may better understand our times and our world through less dramatic and demanding but “central and pervasive” aesthetic categories which respond to consumption (the cute), circulation (the interesting) and production and labour (zanness). These may be “trivial” and, indeed, focus our attention on their affective weaknesses, but their powerlessness is their interest.

Ngai is interested in these categories because she is a follower – sometimes laudatory, sometimes critical, certainly stylistically – of the great American critic Fredric Jameson. She, like him, differentiates between three different critical activities: those to do with “taste”, or making aesthetic judgements; “analysis”, exploring “historical conditions of possibility of specific forms”; and “evaluation”, which examines social and political life itself through artworks. Jameson, a Marxist, takes his work to be centrally “evaluation” (although Ngai shows that the other modes also pervade his work). With caves, so does Ngai. So when she turns from her introduction, which explores abstractly and most interestingly the origins and significance of aesthetic categories, her attention is drawn to what these usually undescribed categories mean.

Cute appears to be an aesthetic of powerlessness. (The “Hello Kitty” character, popular with little girls, does not even have a mouth.) Cute things appeal to us for “protection and care” and because of this, Ngai argues, with a crafty reading of Marx, the cute is a very conspicuous, very affective, what “lacks the power to resist man”. Yet, in this way, the cute gets its revenge, because in

National Speed Limit

The day you win the prize, or get the job, always feels like that first school bop song, or this stepping hard on the gas with the radio turned up full blast, no-one else in sight on the road, evening and summer not yet over, the chorus kicking in like cannon-fire, the way ahead seemingly straight for ever.

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