Machine Psychology: A Disappearing Act

John Zerzan

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Already in the 1960s, Theodore Adorno found the computer to be *"the bankruptcy petition of consciousness."*[1] Now we are at the threshold of cyborg existence, wherein the self emerges as a shifting matrix of animate and inanimate parts. This is being accomplished insofar as we have reduced ourselves to the machine's level. *"The very possibility of subjectivity and the generation of meaning for the future"* is at stake, as Gray Kochhar-Lindgren put it.[2] As the techno-culture advances in its fast-forward course, what has become undeveloped is the result. *"We are as highly developed in psychopathology as in technology,"* concluded Jules Henry.[3] Lightning speed of connectivity—and increasing disconnection among people. Considerable regress in substantive communication.

Consciousness, like perception and cognition, is embodied. Except when it's not. Direct, primary experience is severely on the wane. Life has moved to the screen, where all is secondhand experience. Cyberspace is not the realm of the texture, depth and continuity of anyone's life-world. Without the immediacy of human experience we live in a Dead Zone. And we need a tremendous distraction industry or apparatus because the content of our own activity is thus diminished.

Our Age of Distraction[4] privileges external stimuli, especially data, over interior reflection. From understanding to knowledge to information to data, the lowest level in the mental food chain. Undigested information–data—is apt to become disinformation, confusion, deception. Discernment, attention span, etc. are so many casualties of the erosion of deeply felt experience.

Thought is not data-processing, however much the metaphor of an essentially machine-like process tends to creep into our consciousness. We *"scan"* this, *"process"* that, in common usage. Faster and faster speeds online *"input,"* and we are increasingly impatient with the slightest delay. But deep experiences require more than fractions of seconds. More and more reliance on cyberspace means we know less and less about the world available to us directly.

Technological systems are configured to be mind-deadening. The ultimate danger is that people will become addicted to technologies that in effect ban their capacities to think, that take away a basic sense of identity and reality. For some time now, we've been immersed in a universal culture of redirection, diversion and infotainment, a mass-based content level of cognitive distraction. Unsurprisingly, boredom and anxiety are hallmarks of this restless ethos. Attention is at a premium, sought and manipulated like

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[1] Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1997), p. 206.
[2] Gray Kochhar Lindgren, *TechnoLogics* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), p. 1.
[3] Quoted in David Levin, *Pathologies of the Modern Self* (New York: New York University Press, 1987), p. 480.
[4] Joseph R. Urgo, *In the Age of Distraction* (Jackson MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), e.g. p. 19.

data.[5] Interacting face-to-face becomes rarer. A barren, synthetic reality challenges us to be capable of thinking for ourselves, because without reflection, hope for a different world dims.

Prominent among those who embrace the technoverse is Donna Haraway, who claims that machines do not dominate or threaten us: the machine is us. Too late to check the invasiveness of technology anyway: *"Prothesis becomes a fundamental category for understanding our most intimate selves."*[6] Susan Griffin counters this beautifully: *"We know ourselves to be made from this earth. We know this earth is made from our bodies. For we see ourselves. And we are nature."*[7] The tragedy is that only machines thrive in the global technoculture. Some people grow to be like machines, à la Haraway.

All this is new and, in a sense, not new. Kochhar-Lindgren proposes that this is *"when philosophy becomes what it has always latently been: cybernetics."*[8] In other words, philosophy's control and alienation aspects have been lurking for a long time. Since its origin in early civilization, writing has been an independent object, abstracted from reality. It virtualizes and delocalizes memory. The text stands over us in a sense, like time. The decline from speech to writing to the increasing digitalization of human consciousness exacts a price.

Society becomes an unhealthy expression of the Internet. Michael Heim calls this *"a unifying network of human presence."*[9] Of course, we are not present to each other online, and there is no substitute for actual place. Marc Andreessen had it right in 2011: *"Software is eating the world."*[10] Phenomenologists speak of being-in-aworld, meaning that it is from the world that we come to understand not only it, but ourselves. The technosphere is immersive and invasive. It patterns or structures our lives. Our sense of place, presence, and self is being remade in the image of the Machine.

Champions of cyborg existence applaud the *"seamless integration and overall transformation"* of human and machine.[11] Smartphones are not zombifying agents of distraction, but *"mindware upgrades."*[12] Much is disappearing as the sentient and tangible are de-realized. The sense of community, for instance, shrinks in proportion to the extension of global online culture. An exception to disappearance is social media; what

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[5] See Adam Gazzaley and Larry D. Rosen, *The Distracted Mind* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2016) and Steve Talbott, *Devices of the Soul: Battling for Our Selves in an Age of Machines* (Sebastopol CA: O'Reilly Media, 2007).

[6] Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 249, n.7.

[7] Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 226.

[8] Kochhar-Lindgren, *op.cit.*, p. 5.

[9] Michael Heim, *"The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality,"* in Sandra K. Kelsel and Judith Paris Roth, editors, *Virtual Reality: Theory, Practice, and Promise* (Westport, CT: Meckler Publishing, 1991), p. 34.

[10] Marc Andreessen, *"Why Software Is Eating the World"* (Wall Street Journal, August 20, 2011).

[11] Andy Clark, *Natural-Born Cyborgs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 34.

[12] Ibid., p. 10.

is there is eternal. Kate Eichorn's The End of Forgetting[13] discusses how one is hard pressed to break away from the past after those endless and permanent self-surveillance posts to Facebook, Instagram, etc.

Technology has become the organizing principle of our lives. It is also clear that it is civilization's cardinal value, the chief reason that there is just one, global civilization now. Thus it is a huge challenge to be outside it, or to even imagine such a change. And yet individuals are far from happy within the force-field of the everpresent technoverse. Its promises and claims are threadbare and false. Everyone knows that, at least on a visceral level. We know that the totality is built on lies and is failing. Consciousness may yet become better armed, more able to take advantage of Walter Benjamin's dictum:

"The smallest cell of visualized reality outweighs the rest of the world."[14]

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[13] Kate Eichorn, *The End of Forgetting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

[14] Quoted in Adorno, *op.cit.*, p. 303.

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