Prosthetic Identity: An Essay on Interpersonal Relationships in Consumer Culture

While the first major Internet service provider became commercially available in the late 1960’s, and the earliest social networking programs (e.g. the email, discussion boards) were available to the public in the late 70’s, it wasn’t until the mid-90’s that the cyber world began to proliferate. Although many early critics dismissed the rise in popularity and increase in usage of the World Wide Web as merely a passing phase-- short-lived and transitory as all trends are-- online activity continued to grow and, by the turn of the century, the undeniable and enduring influence of the Internet was embraced and accepted. Online search engines, encyclopedias, dictionaries, magazines, newspapers, relationship and dating services, movies, music, photography, games, and other sources of leisure and enjoyment would soon attract millions of people from all over the world to join in the ‘Online Revolution’.

No longer would people need to worry about leaving their comfortable homes for such banal and time consuming activities like shopping, traveling, exploring, learning, exercising, or any other enterprise which would require an unnecessary expenditure of valuable energy; the world may be out there, but one can experience it right here-- and for only a fraction of the price!
The advent and widespread use of ‘smart phones’, or, essentially, what amount to wireless, pocket-sized, personal computers, has freed the members of society from that nasty habit of accumulating cumbersome objects which harm the planet in their production and distribution,

and which would restrict the ambitious free-spirited individual from entertaining whatever whim they may have to ‘pick up and go’. Paradoxically, this enthusiastic individualism and freedom from the materiality of the world and others has made society even more dependent on the objects they wish to eschew. “Man[kind] has become less rational than his own objects, which now run ahead of him, so to speak, organizing his surroundings and thus appropriating his actions”.  

With the ‘world at their fingertips’, people are beginning to find less and less value in personal knowledge and intellectual abilities like critical reasoning and memorization; why would anyone waste time cultivating their natural faculties when they have near-instantaneous access to a virtual universe of endless immensity?

It is my contention that the growing emphasis on the benefits of utilizing technology and the virtual world as the primary framework within which we, as a national and global community, should communicate with and disseminate information to each other has had a more or less negative effect on the interpersonal relationships of people in the actual world.  

By serving as a mediator for public and private discourse, “[m]achines are already becoming better at communicating with each other than human beings with human beings. The situation is ironical. More and more concern about communication, less and less to communicate”.

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3 Of course, this is to say nothing about the primarily Western obsession with the outward appearance of the physical body. However, for the sake of this essay, we will concede that these developments are, largely, superficial and solely for the sake of appearance; or, if you will, the reification and internalization of a culture’s concept of beauty.

4 If one is even able to discern such a distinction today.

Before we continue, it would prove fruitful to define in what sense ‘consumer culture’ is being used here. ‘Consumerism’ can take on a variety of meanings depending on who is defining it, and what the concept itself is being applied to. In this case, ‘consumerism’ is being used to indicate a tendency for individuals in an industrialized society, a society which utilizes technology for mass production and distribution, to identify with the objects of one’s possession, “which function as props for one’s sense of self”.6 In effect, what one has, materially, defines who one is, socially and psychologically.7 Now, if we are, as many commentators have maintained, moving away from an industrial society toward a post-modern, or informational society, one in which “the creating, distribution, use, integration and manipulation of information is a significant economic, political, and cultural activity”,8 then it follows that the ‘consumer culture’ in an ‘informational society’, is one which identifies, not with its accumulation of material objects, but with its dispersion into various virtual personalities whose unity is, ideally, meant to accurately and adequately signify the reality of the person behind them. The self can no longer be found in any network of objects, but, instead, is revealed in the collection of images, sounds, numbers, and letters, all of which refer to still more images, sounds, numbers, and letters. While the individual is, according to Marx, “an ensemble of social relations”;9 these


7 Here, the “looking-glass self” takes on a literal meaning-- for one can only apprehend oneself in a reflection if they have access to an object whose purpose is to reflect.


relations are today entirely conditioned by and sustained in a virtual world, for technology and its effects have become pervasive.

If we take a moment to reflect on the competitive nature inherent to capitalism, perhaps some reasons which could help explain the exponential growth of this cybernetic obsession will be revealed in the process. An impartial definition of capitalism may run like this: “A socio-economic system characterized by private initiative and the private ownership of factors of production. In such a system individuals have the right to own and use wealth to earn income and to sell and purchase labor for wages”\textsuperscript{10}. Essentially, what this allows for and, ultimately, the kind of behavior it encourages-- to support capitalism in theory and not in practice is not merely an inconsistency, but counter intuitive-- is the exploitation of some (the employees who, quite literally, work for a living, i.e., who must yield their bodies, their minds, their energy, and their time to the will of an authority in exchange for a wage) by others (the employers who utilize capital in an abstract form such as credit, as well as in material form, by way of the employees’ labor, to generate profit). On one hand, one must spend money to make money; on the other, one must have money to spend it. In a society whose socio-economic structure encourages subordinating the will of others to one’s personal benefit we can begin to see how an alienated sense of relationships can seep into one’s psyche.

It should be noted that some very interesting conspiracies for maintaining this structural status quo have been offered: “This society which eliminates geographical distance reproduces distance internally as spectacular separation … With the present means of long-distance mass communication, sprawling isolation has proved an even more effective method of keeping a

population under control”. What Guy Debord is suggesting is that in order to maintain a social, economic, and political hierarchy in an increasingly globalized world, those who benefit the most from the particular division and distribution of opportunities and rewards that capitalist stratification incurs seek to use the socially crippling capacity of technology to keep people empathetically isolated and, Aldous Huxley might agree, pacified, in order to keep people docile and obedient to ensure that those oppressed do not consolidate and revolt. We will not go so far as to make such a claim, but the plausibility should not be doubted.

When analyzed objectively, that is, when one analyzes the materially observable effects and consequences of the application of capitalism, we can see why people turn to and engage in more passive forms of leisure in their ‘free time’. For one, they are often much cheaper, although sometimes only in the long-run. Why pay for gas and spend even more time preparing to enjoy yourself when you can receive satisfaction immediately? It is largely for these reasons that the fast-food industry and televised and electronic media formats have gained popularity. No need to go out with somebody, spend time or money, or lose energy one may need to get through one’s job later, when one can stay home, watch television, eat frozen meals or order in, listen to music, and converse with friends and family on the internet. If one does go out, their phone is surely one of the last things they will forget, and it will, no doubt, be one of the most used devices for finding topics to generate conversation.

Interesting to note, is the fact that more and more companies are beginning to alienate those who do not participate in social media networks. Access to exclusive music, pictures, and

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opportunities are increasingly becoming available only to those who, for instance, virtually ‘Like’ this band or company’s personal page or website, or who provide their email or phone number to receive up-to-minute text updates. What’s more, is that individual people are beginning to do the same to each other; events and get-togethers are planned, discussed, and advertised on various social sites to the exclusion of those who are not online. The naturalization\(^{13}\) of technological access by these groups is abhorrent, but the disjunctive stratification of society through technological means continues.

The preceding analyses have focused mainly on the effects of technological dependency at a local and national level, but a brief discussion of how the mainstream media cultivates interest in certain topics to the omission of others may provide broader insight into the values and norms society has about the role of technology in the lives of its citizens. When it comes to global relationships, technology would seem to be a godsend, opening up seemingly endless avenues of communication and discussion between different nations.

However, global competition for resources leads some to favor the interests and lives of those who share their borders, and the best way to mobilize a group of people in one country to support the colonization of people in another is to show images, videos, and audio clips-- in short, to “show you a wolf”\(^{14}\)-- to convince people to support the military campaign against those ‘other’ and ‘evil’ people. Because many publications and news programs, online and off, are nationalized, the topics chosen and the information discussed is virtually ubiquitous, giving the

\(^{13}\) Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York, Hill and Wang, 1972)

\(^{14}\) “The shrewd imperialists knew that the only way that you will run to the fox is to show you a wolf,” Malcolm X, *By any means necessary* (New York, Pathfinder, 1992), p. 17.
passive\textsuperscript{15} viewer the impression that what is being considered and agreed upon or debated really is important and should be thought of in these terms and from within these particular, ‘professional’, perspectives.

Charles Hamilton, co-author of the book *Black Power*, writes in the afterword of said book:

> Part of the problem today is … what might be called instant politicization. We are in an era of tremendous influence through the pop-culture medium, where many become politicized not through long, hard study and organizing, but through the passionate portrayal of … struggle through television documentaries, emotional speeches, movies, and television and radio talk shows. For many younger people, this is understandable, but not particularly efficacious. It complicates the politicization process. It is quick, intense, theatrical, and sincere, but it is not very likely to be deep and sustaining.\textsuperscript{16}

As we noted before, technological dependency has allowed for the rampant proliferation of easily digestible and entertaining bits of information. Like a microwaveable meal or a bag of chips, information is consumed by the mass majority when it is fast and captivating; qualities that are not very likely to attributed to information that is “deep and sustaining”. Moreover, the information provided may, indeed, be important and relevant, the fact that it is prepared and presented by a corporation whose employees must obey the hierarchical power structure and its

\textsuperscript{15} For national media outlets rarely provide a forum for dialogue, reserving the right of discussion for ‘professionals’ and ‘specialists’ in the field.

interests in order to remain employed is enough, to me, to suggest the overwhelming probability of an abuse of power.

The general thesis of this essay has been that “when images chosen and constructed by someone else have everywhere become the individual’s principal connection to the world they formerly observed for themself”,\textsuperscript{17} the individual’s relationship to that world and the people that inhabit it is constituted and determined almost entirely by outside factors. This statement is not intended to dismiss the discussion of free-will or dualism, for an exhaustive account of these philosophical concepts would extend beyond the scope of this essay. Nor is its intention to overlook the liberatory capacity of technological advancement.\textsuperscript{18} What I have hoped to elucidate here, is the potentially crippling effects on society and interpersonal relationships that an increasing dependency on technology appears to produce.

While some have suggested reverting back to a primitive form of society in order to combat this issue, I do not feel-- I do not hope-- that such extreme behavior is necessary. However, only time will tell if people will come to enjoy life as it unfolds organically, or if their obsession with diversionary devices will eventually lead to a society of cyborgs, whose only connection with each other is the fact that they are all immersed in a technological dimension.

\textsuperscript{17} Guy Debord, \textit{Comments on the Society of the Spectacle} (New York, Verso, 1998), p. 27.

\textsuperscript{18} Murray Bookchin, \textit{Post-Scarcity Anarchism} (Edinburgh, AK Press, 2004), pp. 41 - 84.