The Century of the Self Reader

Part 4:

The Self as Commodity

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Simulacra and Simulations

By Jean Baudrillard

IX. Absolute Advertising, Ground-Zero Advertising

Today what we are experiencing is the absorption of all virtual modes of expression into that of advertising. All original cultural forms, all determined languages are absorbed in advertising because it has no depth, it is instantaneous and instantaneously forgotten. Triumph of superficial form, of the smallest common denominator of all signification, degree zero of meaning, triumph of entropy over all possible tropes. The lowest form of energy of the sign. This unarticulated, instantaneous form, without a past, without a future, without the possiblity of metamorphosis, has power over all the others. All current forms of activity tend toward advertising and most exhaust themselves therein. Not necessarily advertising itself, the kind that is produced as such - but the form of advertising, that of a simplified operational mode, vaguely seductive, vaguely consensual (all the modalities are confused therein, but in an attenuated, agitated mode). More generally, the form of advertising is one in which all particular contents are annulled at the very moment when they can be transcribed into each other, whereas what is inherent to "weighty" enunciations, to articulated forms of meaning (or of style) is that they cannot be translated into each other, any more than the rules of a game can be. This long movement toward translatability and thus toward a complete combinatorial, which is that of the superficial transparency of everything, of their absolute advertising (of which professional advertising is, once again, only an episodic form), can be read in the vicissitudes of propaganda.

The whole scope of advertising and propaganda comes from the October Revolution and the market crash of 1929. Both languages of the masses, issuing from the mass production of ideas, or commodities, their registers, separate at first, progressively converge. Propaganda becomes the marketing and merchandising of idea-forces, of political men and parties with their "trademark image." Propaganda approaches advertising as it would the vehicular model of the only great and veritable idea-force of this competing society, the commodity and the mark. This convergence defines a societyours- in which there is no longer any difference between the economic and the political, because the same language reigns in both, from one end to the other; a society therefore where the political economy, literally speaking, is finally fully realized. That is to say dissolved as a specific power (as an historical mode of social contradiction), resolute, absorbed in a language without contradictions, like a dream, because traversed by purely superficial intensities.

A subsequent stage is crossed once the very language of the social, after that of the political, becomes confused with this fascinating solicitation of an agitated language, once the social turns itself into advertising, turns itself over to the popular vote by trying to impose its trademark image. From the historical destiny that it was, the social itself fell to the level of a "collective enterprise" securing its publicity on every level. See what surplus value of the social each advertisement tries to produce: werben werben (advertise advertise) - the solicitation of the social everywhere, present on walls, in the hot and bloodless voices of female radio announcers, in the accents of the sound track

and in the multiple tonalities of the image track that is played everywhere before our eyes. A sociality everywhere present, an absolute sociality finally realized in absolute advertising - that is to say, also totally dissolved, a vestige of sociality hallucinated on all the walls in the simplified form of a demand of the social that is immediately met by the echo of advertising. The social as a script, whose bewildered audience we are.

Thus the form of advertising has imposed itself and developed at the expense of all the other languages as an increasingly neutral, equivalent rhetoric, without affects, as an "asyntactic nebula," Yves Stourdze would say, which envelops us from every side (and which at the same time eliminates the hotly controversial problem of "belief" and efficacy: it does not offer signifieds in which to invest, it offers a simplified equivalence of all the formerly distinctive signs, and deters them with this very equivalence). This defines the limits of advertising's current power and the conditions of its disappearance, since today advertising is no longer a stake, it has both "entered into our customs" and at the same time escaped the social and moral dramaturgy that it still represented twenty years ago.

It is not that people no longer believe in it or that they have accepted it as routine. It is that if its fascination once lay in its power to simplify all languages, today this power is stolen from it by another type of language that is even more simplified and thus more functional: the languages of computer science. The sequence model, the sound track, and the image track that advertising, along with the other big media, offers us - the model of the combinatory, equal distribution of all discourses that it proposes - this still rhetorical continuum of sounds, signs, signals, slogans that it erects as a total environment is largely overtaken, precisely in its function of simulation, by the magnetic tape, by the electronic continuum that is in the process of being silhouetted against the horizon of the end of this century. Microprocessing, digitality, cybernetic languages go much further in the direction of the absolute simplification of processes than advertising did on its humble - still imaginary and spectacular-level. And it is because these systems go further that today they polarize the fascination that formerly devolved on advertising. It is information, in the sense of data processing, that will put an end to, that is already putting an end to the reign of advertising. That is what inspires fear, and what is thrilling. The "thrill" of advertising has been displaced onto computers and onto the miniaturization of everyday life by computer science.

The anticipatory illustration of this transformation was Philip K. Dick's papula - that transistorized advertising implant, a sort of broadcasting leech, an electronic parasite that attaches itself to the body and that is very hard to get rid of. But the papula is still an intermediary form: it is already a kind of incorporated prosthesis, but it still incessantly repeats advertising messages. A hybrid, then, but a prefiguration of the psychotropic and dataprocessing networks of the automatic piloting of individuals, next to which the "conditioning" by advertising looks like a delightful change in fortune.

Currently, the most interesting aspect of advertising is its disappearance, its dilution as a specific form, or even as a medium. Advertising is no longer (was it ever?) a means of communication or of information. Or else it is overtaken by the madness specific to overdeveloped systems, that of voting for itself at each moment, and thus of parodying itself. If at a given moment, the commodity was its own publicity (there was no other) today publicity has become its own commodity. It is confused with itself (and the eroticism with which it ridiculously cloaks itself is nothing but the autoerotic index of a system that does nothing but designate itself - whence the absurdity of seeing in it an "alienation" of the female body).

As a medium become its own message (which makes it so that now there is a demand for advertising in and of itself, and that thus the question of "believing" in it or not is no longer even posed), advertising is completely in unison with the social, whose historical necessity has found itself absorbed by the pure and simple demand for the social: a demand that the social function like a business, a group of services, a mode of living or of survival (the social must be saved just as nature must be preserved: the social is our niche) - whereas formerly it was a sort of revolution in its very project. This is certainly lost: the social has lost precisely this power of illusion, it has fallen into the register of supply and demand, just as work has passed from being a force antagonistic to capital to the simple status of employment, that is to say of goods (eventually rare) and services just like the others. One can thus create advertising for work, the joy of finding work, just as one will be able to create advertising for the social. And, today, true advertising lies therein: in the design of the social, in the exaltation of the social in all its forms, in the fierce, obstinate reminder of a social, the need for which makes itself rudely felt. Folkloric dances in the metro, innumerable campaigns for security, the slogan "tomorrow I work" accompanied by a smile formerly reserved for leisure time, and the advertising sequence for the election to the Prud-hommes (an industrial tribunal): "I don't let anyone choose for me" - an Ubuesque slogan, one that rang so spectacularly falsely, with a mocking liberty, that of proving the social while denying it. It is not by chance that advertising, after having, for a long time, carried an implicit ultimatum of an economic kind, fundamentally saying and repeating incessantly, "I buy, I consume, I take pleasure," today repeats in other forms, "I vote, I participate, I am present, I am concerned" - mirror of a paradoxical mockery, mirror of the indifference of all public signification.

The opposite panic: one knows that the social can be dissolved in a panic reaction, an uncontrollable chain reaction. But it can also be dissolved in the opposite reaction, a chain reaction of inertia, each microuniverse saturated, autoregulated, computerized, isolated in automatic pilot. Advertising is the prefiguration of this: the first manifestation of an uninterrupted thread of signs, like ticker tape - each isolated in its inertia. Disaffected, but saturated. Desensitized, but ready to crack. It is in such a universe that what Virilio calls the aesthetic of disappearance gathers strength, that the following being to appear: fractal objects, fractal forms, fault zones that follow saturation, and thus a process of massive rejection, of the abreaction or stupor of a society purely transparent to itself. Like the signs in advertising, one is geared down, one becomes transparent or uncountable, one becomes diaphanous or rhizomic to escape the point of inertia - one is placed in orbit, one is plugged in, one is satellized, one is archived - paths cross: there is the sound track, the image track, just as in life there is the work track, the leisure track, the transport track, etc., all enveloped in the advertising track. Everywhere there are three or four paths, and you are at the crossroads. Superficial saturation and fascination. Because fascination remains. One need only look at Las Vegas, the absolute advertising city (of the 1950s, of the crazy years of advertising, which has retained the charm of that era, today retro in some sense, because advertising is secretly condemned by the programmatic logic that will give rise to very different cities). When one sees Las Vegas rise whole from the desert in the radiance of advertising at dusk, and return to the desert when dawn breaks, one sees that advertising is not what brightens or decorates the walls, it is what effaces the walls, effaces the streets, the facades, and all the architecture, effaces any support and any depth, and that it is this liquidation, this reabsorption of everything into the surface (whatever signs circulate there) that plunges us into this stupefied, hyperreal euphoria that we would not exchange for anything else, and that is the empty and inescapable form of seduction.

Language allows itself to be dragged along by its double, and joins the best to the worst for a phantom of rationality whose formula is "Everyone must believe in it." Such is the message of what unites us.

- J. L. Bouttes, Le destructeur d'intensites (The Destroyer of Intensities) Advertising, therefore, like information: destroyer of intensities, accelerator of inertia. See how all the artifices of meaning and of nonmeaning are repeated in it with lassitude, like all the procedures, all the mechanisms of the language of communication (the function of contact: you understand me? Are you looking at me? It will speak! - the referential function, the poetic function even, the allusion, the irony, the game of words, the unconscious), how all of that is staged exactly like sex in pornography, that is to say without any faith, with the same tired obscenity. That is why, now, it is useless to analyze advertising as language, because something else is happening there: a doubling of language (and also of images), to which neither linguistics nor semiology correspond, because they function on the veritable operation of meaning, without the slightest suspicion of this caricatural exorbitance of all the functions of language, this opening onto an immense field of the mockery of signs, "consumed" as one says in their mockery, for their mockery and the collective spectacle of their game without stakes - just as porno is a hypertrophied fiction of sex consumed in its mockery, for its mockery, a collective spectacle of the inanity of sex in its baroque assumption (it was the baroque that invented this triumphal mockery of stucco, fixing the disappearance of the religious in the orgasm of statues).

Where is the golden age of the advertising project? The exaltation of an object by an image, the exaltation of buying and of consumption through the sumptuary spending of advertising? Whatever the subjugation of publicity to the management of capital (but this aspect of the question - that of the social and economic impact of publicity - always remains unresolved and fundamentally insoluble), it always had more than a subjugated function, it was a mirror held out to the universe of political economy and of the commodity, it was for a moment their glorious imaginary, that of a torn-up world, but an expanding one. But the universe of the commodity is no longer this one: it is a world both saturated and in involution. In one blow, it lost both its triumphal imaginary, and, from the mirror stage, it passed in some sense to the stage of mourning.

There is no longer a staging of the commodity: there is only its obscene and empty form. And advertising is the illustration of this saturated and empty form.

That is why advertising no longer has a territory. Its recoverable forms no longer have any meaning. The Forum des Halles, for example, is a gigantic advertising unit - an operation of publicitude. It is not the advertising of a particular person, of any firm, the Forum also does not have the status of a veritable mall or architectural whole, any more than Beaubourg is, in the end, a cultural center: these strange objects, these supergadgets simply demonstrate that our social monumentality has become advertising. And it is something like the Forum that best illustrates what advertising has become, what the public domain has become.

The commodity is buried, like information is in archives, like archives are in bunkers, like missiles are in atomic silos.

Gone the happy and displayed commodity, now that it flees the sun, and suddenly it is like a man who has lost his shadow. Thus the Forum des Halles closely resembles a funeral home - the funereal luxury of a commodity buried, transparent, in a black sun. Sarcophagus of the commodity.

Everything there is sepulchral - white, black, salmon marble. A bunker-case-in deep, snobbish, dull black-mineral underground space. Total absence of fluids; there is no longer even a liquid gadget like the veil of water at Parly 2,*1 which at least fooled the eye - here not even an amusing subterfuge, only pretentious mourning is staged. (The only amusing idea in the whole thing is precisely the human and his shadow who walk in trompe l'oeil on the vertical dais of concrete: a gigantic, beautiful gray, open-air canvas, serving as a frame to the trompe l'oeil, this wall lives without having wished to, in contrast to the family vault of haute couture and pret-a-porter that constitutes the Forum. This shadow is beautiful because it is an allusion in contrast to the inferior world that has lost its shadow.)

All that one could hope for, once this sacred space was opened to the public, and for fear that pollution, as in the Lascaux caves, cause it to deteriorate irremediably (think of the waves of people from the RER) ,*2 was that it be immediately closed off to circulation and covered with a definitive shroud in order to keep this testimony to a civilization that has arrived, after having passed the stage of the apogee, at the stage of the hypogee, of the commodity, intact. There is a fresco here that traces the long route traversed, starting with the man of Tautavel passing through Marx and Einstein to arrive at Dorothee Bis . . .Why not save this fresco from decomposition? Later the speleologists will rediscover it, at the same time that they discover a culture that chose to bury itself in order to definitively escape its own shadow, to bury its seductions and its artifices as if it were already consecrating them to another world.

Notes

1. Parly 2 is a mall that was built in the 1970s on the outskirts of Paris.-TRANS.

2. The RER is a high-speed, underground commuter train.-TRANS.

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THE COMMODIFICATION OF SELF

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THE COMMODIFICATION OF SELF WOULD SEEM TO BE A misnomer. If a commodity is a product, something that can be bought and sold, then in what sense can the self be commodified? Without any claim to being exhaustive, I want to discuss two possible meanings. A first is that self-understanding is mediated by the consumption of goods and images. In this sense, self-definition depends on the appropriation of the traits of commodities. We know who we are and we judge the quality of our inner experience through identification with the things we buy. A second meaning of self-commodification involves the reorganization of our personal lives and relationships on the model of market relations. This adaptation is well illustrated by the recent practice of "personal branding," a strategy of cultivating a name and image of ourselves that we manipulate for economic gain. Both of these meanings of self-commodification concern the terms in which we define ourselves and our well-being, and each has been facilitated by the loosening of self-definitions from specific social roles and obligations.

I begin with the shift in self-definitions and then consider evidence for the commodification of self.

From Institution to "Impulse"

In the 1970s and 1980s a body of literature appeared discussing and documenting a modal shift in the way that Americans conceive of and express themselves. Compared with the 1950s and before, scholars argued, people now put less emphasis on institutional roles in their self-definitions and more weight on internal criteria or "impulse." The shift in self-conception, these writers argued, was fueled by ongoing social and cultural changes and was having important personal and public consequences.

In a characteristic article, published in 1976, the sociologist Ralph Turner found evidence that "recent decades have witnessed a shift in the locus of self…."[1] He characterized the movement in self-anchorage—in the feelings and actions that we identify as expressions of our "real self"—as movement along a continuum from "institution" to "impulse." At the institutional pole, one recognizes the real self in the pursuit of institutionalized goals. Self-control, volition, and exacting standards within institutional frameworks are paramount. At the impulse pole, by contrast, "institutional motivations are external, artificial constraints and superimpositions that bridle manifestations of the real self."[2] At this end of the continuum, the real self consists of "deep, unsocialized, inner impulses" waiting to be discovered and spontaneously expressed.[3] Though few people occupy the extremes, Turner emphasized, the personal relevance of institutions seemed to be declining and personal reality increasingly indexed to impulse.

Turner's observations were not unique. Earlier, Nathan Adler had suggested that an "antinomian personality," a character type who rejects conventional morality, was emerging for whom the expression of

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1 Ralph H. Turner, "The Real Self: From Institution to Impulse," *American Journal of Sociology* 81 (1976): 989.

2 Turner 992.

3 Turner 992.

impulse and desire is central.[4] Similarly, Christopher Lasch, in his best-seller *The Culture of Narcissism*, saw the spread of a "therapeutic outlook" in American society that seeks peace of mind in the "overthrow of inhibitions and the immediate gratification of every impulse."[5] In a more empirical vein, Joseph Veroff and his colleagues, comparing the results of national surveys they conducted in 1957 and 1976, found a significant shift in the way that people structure their self-definition and sense of well-being. They characterized this change as one from a "socially integrated" paradigm to a more "personal or individuated" paradigm and identified it in three aspects: "(1) the diminution of role standards as the basis for defining adjustment; (2) increased focus on self-expressiveness and self-direction in social life; [and] (3) a shift in concern from social organizational integration to interpersonal intimacy."[6]

Along with others, including Daniel Bell, Robert Bellah, and Daniel Yankelovich, these scholars saw the sixties and seventies as giving rise to a new emphasis on the exploration of personal desires and immediate experience, on distancing oneself from institutional (i.e., external) norms and goals, on finding one's unique inner voice, and on freely expressing one's intimate feelings.[7] None of these sentiments were new, of course; all reflect an old Romantic sensibility. Yet the evidence suggested that they resonated as an ideal and as terms of self-expression with a much wider swath of the public. On the way to the seventies, many Americans had, in effect, internalized the harsh fifties' critique of the "organization man."

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4 Nathan Adler, *The Underground Stream: New Life Styles and the Antinomian Personality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

5 Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Warner, 1979) 43.

6 Joseph Veroff, Elizabeth Douvan, and Richard A. Kulka, *The Inner American: A Self-Portrait from 1957 to 1976* (New York: Basic, 1981) 529.

7 Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic, 1976); Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985); and Daniel Yankelovich, *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down* (New York: Random House, 1981).

The Commodification of Real Selves

Consumerism and the commodification process were among the key forces that social critics such as Lasch and Bell identified as leading to the attenuation of social identities (e.g., mother, deliveryman, member of the Elks Club) in self-definitions and the destabilizing of the older institutions of identity formation (family, school, church, and so on). These developments created a vacuum of normative expectations and bonds. The very terms of the new self-definitions did so as well. The nonconformist appeal of "individuated paradigms" and "unsocialized, inner impulses" required that they lack social definition and normative structure. The "real self," in this view, has its own criteria. Each person works out his or her own self-definition in relative isolation from others. The need for socially-derived identity criteria and the social recognition of others is in principle denied.

The very market forces that helped create the vacuum now rushed in to fill it. New "scripts," to use Louis Zurcher's apt term, were written to channel those inner impulses into intentional consumer choices.[8] Branding, for instance, the powerful marketing strategy used by companies to sell mass-produced goods and services, was transformed in the mid-to-late 1980s. Companies, some with no manufacturing facilities of their own (e.g., Tommy Hilfiger), began to emphasize that what they produced was not primarily things but *images*.[9] A brand became a carefully crafted image, a succinct encapsulation of a product's pitch. But a successful brand is also more than that. According to branding expert Scott Bedbury, in an interview with the business magazine *Fast Company*, a "great brand" is "an emotional connection point that transcends the product." Myth-like, it is an evolving "metaphorical story," that creates "the emotional context people need to locate themselves in

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8 Louis A. Zurcher, "The Bureaucratizing of Impulse: Self-Conception in the 1980s," *Symbolic Interaction* 9 (1986): 172.

9 Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (New York: Picador USA, 2000).

a larger experience."[10] Inspiring passion and dreams of gratification, the theory goes, successful brands *impel* people to buy.

The new marketing scripts incorporate the language of self-determination and transformation, and build on the knowledge that being true to our unique inner selves is a powerful moral ideal. Indeed, authenticity has been so thoroughly appropriated and packaged in the metaphorical stories of the mass marketers that we barely notice anymore. Advertisements rail against the conventional demands of society and sell products as instruments of liberation. Brands of jeans signify rebellion and rule breaking, fruit drinks and sneakers have countercultural themes, and cars let us escape and find ourselves. In the person of the bourgeois bohemians or "Bobos," as journalist David Brooks portrays them, we have a social type that lives on precisely this model of "self-determination," merging an ethic of nonconformism and impulse with a vigorous consumerism.[11] Theirs, to use Thomas Frank's term, is a "hip consumerism."[12]

Even such ostensibly intimate concerns as sexual expression, self-development, and spiritual growth are now the subject of expert advice and prepackaged programs. Self-actualization, as Louis Zurcher once wrote, has become a "product marketed by awareness-training organizations that are subsidiaries of dog food and tobacco companies. Are you only a 'three' on our self-actualization scale? Too bad! We can make you a 'ten' during one of our weekend seminars in Anaheim, minutes away from Disneyland, for only a few thousand dollars."[13] By purchasing the right workbook, following the right steps, or getting the right makeover, we can change the quality of our inner experience, enhance our psychological well-being, and finally achieve true self-fulfillment.

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[10] Quoted in Alan M. Weber, "What Great Brands Do," *Fast Company* (August/September 1997): 96.

[11] David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

[12] Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[13] Zurcher 172.

The marketing scripts have power because they are points of personal identification. The marketers recognize that an inwardly generated self is a fiction. We are selves in dialogue, both internalized and in direct conversation, with others. People need to "locate themselves in a larger experience," and they need social recognition for their identity projects. To the degree that social identities are attenuated as the mooring of self-identification (and this, of course, is widely variable), companies can position their goods and images (and ever more precisely with niche marketing) not simply as fulfilling desires but as meeting a felt need for connection, recognition, and values to live by. At the same time, consumers can feel liberated, seeing their consumption choices as facilitating an expressive self and the articulation of personal style without the constraints of tradition or convention.

Social identities remain but as one is turned into a consumer, they are increasingly shaped and conditioned by patterns of consumption. We identify our real selves by the choices we make from the images, fashions, and lifestyles available in the market, and these in turn become the vehicles by which we perceive others and they us. In this way, as Robert Dunn has written, self-formation is in fact exteriorized, since the locus is not on an inner self but on "an outer world of objects and images valorized by commodity culture."[14] There is more than a little irony here, but the mediation of our relation to self and others by acts of consumption also has significant implications. These implications overlap with another form of self-commodification and to that I turn.

The Brand Called You

The shaping and conditioning of our self-understanding by consumption is one form of the commodification of self. So-called "corporate revolutionaries," who have been insisting for some time that private life be reshaped on the model of business culture, champion a second form. This form, nicely illustrated by the practice of "personal branding,"

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[14] Robert G. Dunn, "Identity, Commodification, and Consumer Culture," *Identity and Social Change*, ed. Joseph E. Davis (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2000) 115.

fuses self and market quite self-consciously and endows this fusion with deeper justification.

Although personal branding sounds like something done at a tattoo parlor or a rodeo, its meaning is much more mainstream. Personal branding, like product branding, is a form of image marketing. In 1997, *Fast Company* devoted a cover story to "The Brand Called You."[15] With typical sensationalism, Tom Peters, new economy guru and author of the story, explains: "We are CEOs of our own companies: Me, Inc. To be in business today, our most important job is head marketer for the brand called You." If branding is such a powerful tool for selling products, he reasons, then it makes perfect sense that individuals should "self-brand" in order to stand out from the competition, become the "go to" guy, and get to the top. The concept struck a nerve. Since 1997, assorted career coaches and image managers, including Peters, have created a virtual cottage industry of how-to books, websites, workshops, and more.

Personal branding follows the logic of product branding step for step. A successful brand, as the advertisers say, "knows itself." Marketers must know the characteristics of their product or service and what it promises to deliver and use this knowledge to focus and position the product. To self-brand, therefore, individuals must get in touch with their skills, the "selling parts" of their personality, and any and every accomplishment they can take credit for. Then they must consciously craft these traits into a relentlessly focused image and distinctive persona, like the Nike swoosh or Calvin Klein, even testing their "brand" on the model of the marketers by using focus groups of friends and colleagues. Substance isn't nearly enough; self-branders also need style. According to Peters, "packaging counts—a lot." Finally, like the famous brands that have become a part of our consciousness, self-branders have to go about enhancing their profile and increasing their visibility through marketing, marketing, marketing. Via self-promotion, they too can become objects of desire.

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[15] Tom Peters, "The Brand Called You," *Fast Company* (August/September 1997): 83.

At least one observer of the self-branding phenomenon has suggested that it is a new language for self-empowerment. It may be. Advocates, such as David Andrusia and Rick Haskins, the authors of the self-help book *Brand Yourself*, pitch personal branding as an exercise in self-discovery.[16] Yet self-branding is also much more. It is an exercise in self-commodification, because people are asked, in essence, to relate to themselves as a commodity, a product. Interestingly, advocates also recognize this but do not flinch. In fact, they insist that if people treat themselves as a product, then they can beat the corporate world at its own game, turning the power of branding around to personal advantage.

At least that's the theory. The people profiled in *Brand Yourself* and the other the self-help books certainly seem delighted with their branding and marketing efforts and the career success it has brought them. Still, it's hard to see how relating to oneself as a product defeats market forces. After all, as Haskins observed in an interview, companies already "treat us as products." If that is true, then treating ourselves in the same terms doesn't outmaneuver business culture; it only submits us further to its logic, its demands, and its mode of relations.

The implications of this submission are many, not least is how we conceive of ourselves and our personal relations. To commodify something is to relate to it as an object that can be bought and sold, or as Marx would say, as an object that has "exchange value" in a market. Thus, commodifying ourselves in the interest of maximizing our "exchange value" or "market worth" means that we envision ourselves as marketable objects. Doing so necessarily implies that the criteria of self-definition we use become more narrowly instrumental, impersonal, and contingent. To be successful at Me. Inc, my traits, values, beliefs, and so on—the qualities by which I locate myself and where I stand—must be self-consciously adopted or discarded, emphasized or de-emphasized, according to the abstract and competitive standards of the market. And since the market is never static, staying "relevant" like the

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[16] David Andrusia and Rick Haskins, *Brand Yourself: How to Create an Identity for a Brilliant Career* (New York: Ballantine, 2000).

great brands means that these qualities must be constantly monitored and adjusted to retain the desired image. Self-branders, says Peters, should "reinvent" themselves—their brand—on a "semiregular basis."

Commodifying and marketing ourselves also necessarily implies a change in our social relations. Relentless self-promotion, even if carried off without appearing to be self-absorbed and self-aggrandizing (as Peters recommends), requires a carefully controlled and utilitarian way of relating to others. They too must be objectified in the interest of the bottom line. On another level, self-commodification also means that at least certain relationships must be more attenuated and even displaced as sources of meaning. If I make what the market values the measure of what I value, then non-instrumental relations, obligations, and commitments lose priority and significance for what I am and what I do. Being a business-like CEO, it would seem, can leave little meaningful room for anybody who doesn't advance the cause of Me, Inc.

These implications for self and social relations are, of course, logical extremes, and few, presumably, would push self-branding to its self-devoted limits. Nonetheless, self-branding is part of a trend that we all experience, as many aspects of the consumer society contribute to a redefinition of the self in commodity terms. To the degree that the yardstick of the market shapes and justifies the way we live, so our self-understandings and relationships are unavoidably altered and diminished.

The Filter Bubble

by Eli Pariser

INTRODUCTION (Abridged)

A squirrel dying in front of your house may be more relevant to your interests right now than people dying in Africa.

Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook founder

We shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us.

Marshall McLuhan, media theorist

FEW PEOPLE NOTICED the post that appeared on Google's corporate blog on December 4, 2009. It didn't beg for attention, no sweeping pronouncements, no Silicon Valley hype, just a few paragraphs of text sandwiched between a weekly roundup of top search terms and an update about Google's finance software.

Not everyone missed it. Search engine blogger Danny Sullivan pores over the items on Google's blog looking for clues about where the monolith is headed next, and to him, the post was a big deal. In fact, he wrote later that day, it was the biggest change that has ever happened in search engines. For Danny, the headline said it all: “Personalized search for everyone.”

Starting that morning, Google would use fifty-seven “signals”, everything from where you were logging in from to what browser you were using to what you had searched for before to make guesses about who you were and what kinds of sites you'd like. Even if you were logged out, it would customize its results, showing you the pages it predicted you were most likely to click on.

Most of us assume that when we google a term, we all see the same results, the ones that the company's famous Page Rank algorithm suggests are the most authoritative based on other pages' links. But since December 2009, this is no longer true. Now you get the result that Google's algorithm suggests is best for you in particular, and someone else may see something entirely different. In other words, there is no standard Google anymore.

It's not hard to see this difference in action. In the spring of 2010, while the remains of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig were spewing crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico, I asked two friends to search for the term “BP.” They're pretty similar, educated white left-leaning women who live in the Northeast. But the results they saw were quite different. One of my friends saw investment information about BP. The other saw news. For one, the first page of results contained links about the oil spill; for the other, there was nothing about it except for a promotional ad from BP.

Even the number of results returned by Google differed, about 180 million results for one friend and 139 million for the other. If the results were that different for these two progressive East Coast women, imagine how different they would be for my friends and, say, an elderly Republican in Texas (or, for that matter, a businessman in Japan).

With Google personalized for everyone, the query “stem cells” might produce diametrically opposed results for scientists who support stem cell research and activists who oppose it. “Proof of climate change” might turn up different results for an environmental

activist and an oil company executive. In polls, a huge majority of us assume search engines are unbiased. But that may be just because they're increasingly biased to share our own views. More and more, your computer monitor is a kind of one-way mirror, reflecting your own interests while algorithmic observers watch what you click.

Google's announcement marked the turning point of an important but nearly invisible revolution in how we consume information. You could say that on December 4, 2009, the era of personalization began.

WITH LITTLE NOTICE or fanfare, the digital world is fundamentally changing. What was once an anonymous medium where anyone could be anyone, where, in the words of the famous New Yorker cartoon, nobody knows you're a dog, is now a tool for soliciting and analyzing our personal data. According to one Wall Street Journal study, the top fifty Internet sites, from CNN to Yahoo to MSN, install an average of 64 data-laden cookies and personal tracking beacons each. Search for a word like “depression” on Dictionary.com , and the site installs up to 223 tracking cookies and beacons on your computer so that other Web sites can target you with antidepressants. Share an article about cooking on ABC News, and you may be chased around the Web by ads for Teflon-coated pots. Open, even for an instant, a page listing signs that your spouse may be cheating and prepare to be haunted with DNA paternity-test ads. The new Internet doesn't just know you're a dog; it knows your breed and wants to sell you a bowl of premium kibble.

The race to know as much as possible about you has become the central battle of the era for Internet giants like Google, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft. As Chris Palmer of the Electronic Frontier Foundation explained to me, “You're getting a free service, and the cost is information about you. And Google and Facebook translate that pretty directly into money.” While Gmail and Facebook may be helpful, free tools, they are also extremely effective and voracious extraction engines into which we pour the most intimate details of our lives. Your smooth new iPhone knows exactly where you go, whom you call, what you read; with its built-in microphone, gyroscope, and GPS, it can tell whether you're walking or in a car or at a party.

While Google has (so far) promised to keep your personal data to itself, other popular Web sites and apps, from the airfare site Kayak.com to the sharing widget AddThis, make no such guarantees. Behind the pages you visit, a massive new market for information about what you do online is growing, driven by low-profile but highly profitable personal data companies like BlueKai and Acxiom. Acxiom alone has accumulated an average of 1,500 pieces of data on each person on its database, which includes 96 percent of Americans, along with data about everything from their credit scores to whether they've bought medication for incontinence. And using lightning-fast protocols, any Web site, not just the Googles and Facebooks of the world, can now participate in the fun. In the view of the “behavior market” vendors, every “click signal” you create is a commodity, and every move of your mouse can be auctioned off within microseconds to the highest commercial bidder.

As a business strategy, the Internet giants' formula is simple: The more personally relevant their information offerings are, the more ads they can sell, and the more likely you are to buy the products they're offering. And the formula works. Amazon sells billions of dollars in merchandise by predicting what each customer is interested in and putting it in the front of the virtual store. Up to 60 percent of Netflix's rentals come from the personalized

guesses it can make about each customer's movie preferences, and at this point, Netflix can predict how much you'll like a given movie within about half a star. Personalization is a core strategy for the top five sites on the Internet, Yahoo, Google, Facebook, YouTube, and Microsoft Live, as well as countless others.

In the next three to five years, Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg told one group, the idea of a Web site that isn't customized to a particular user will seem quaint. Yahoo Vice President Tapan Bhat agrees: “The future of the web is about personalization ... now the web is about 'me.' It's about weaving the web together in a way that is smart and personalized for the user.” Google CEO Eric Schmidt enthuses that the “product I've always wanted to build” is Google code that will “guess what I'm trying to type.” Google Instant, which guesses what you're searching for as you type and was rolled out in the fall of 2010, is just the start. Schmidt believes that what customers want is for Google to “tell them what they should be doing next.”

It would be one thing if all this customization was just about targeted advertising. But personalization isn't just shaping what we buy. For a quickly rising percentage of us, personalized news feeds like Facebook are becoming a primary news source, 36 percent of Americans under thirty get their news through social networking sites. And Facebook's popularity is skyrocketing worldwide, with nearly a million more people joining each day. As founder Mark Zuckerberg likes to brag, Facebook may be the biggest source of news in the world (at least for some definitions of “news”).

And personalization is shaping how information flows far beyond Facebook, as Web sites from Yahoo News to the New York Times-funded startup News.me cater their headlines to our particular interests and desires. It's influencing what videos we watch on YouTube and a dozen smaller competitors, and what blog posts we see. It's affecting whose e-mails we get, which potential mates we run into on OkCupid, and which restaurants are recommended to us on Yelp, which means that personalization could easily have a hand not only in who goes on a date with whom but in where they go and what they talk about. The algorithms that orchestrate our ads are starting to orchestrate our lives.

The basic code at the heart of the new Internet is pretty simple. The new generation of Internet filters looks at the things you seem to like, the actual things you've done, or the things people like you like, and tries to extrapolate. They are prediction engines, constantly creating and refining a theory of who you are and what you'll do and want next. Together, these engines create a unique universe of information for each of us, what I've come to call a filter bubble, which fundamentally alters the way we encounter ideas and information.

Of course, to some extent we've always consumed media that appealed to our interests and avocations and ignored much of the rest. But the filter bubble introduces three dynamics we've never dealt with before.

First, you're alone in it. A cable channel that caters to a narrow interest (say, golf) has other viewers with whom you share a frame of reference. But you're the only person in your bubble. In an age when shared information is the bedrock of shared experience, the filter bubble is a centrifugal force, pulling us apart.

Second, the filter bubble is invisible. Most viewers of conservative or liberal news sources know that they're going to a station curated to serve a particular political viewpoint. But Google's agenda is opaque. Google doesn't tell you who it thinks you are or why it's showing you the results you're seeing. You don't know if its assumptions about you are right or wrong, and you might not even know it's making assumptions about you in the first place.

My friend who got more investment-oriented information about BP still has no idea why that was the case, she's not a stockbroker. Because you haven't chosen the criteria by which sites filter information in and out, it's easy to imagine that the information that comes through a filter bubble is unbiased, objective, true. But it's not. In fact, from within the bubble, it's nearly impossible to see how biased it is.

Finally, you don't choose to enter the bubble. When you turn on Fox News or read The Nation, you're making a decision about what kind of filter to use to make sense of the world. It's an active process, and like putting on a pair of tinted glasses, you can guess how the editors' leaning shapes your perception. You don't make the same kind of choice with personalized filters. They come to you, and because they drive up profits for the Web sites that use them, they'll become harder and harder to avoid.

THE STRUCTURE OF our media affects the character of our society. The printed word is conducive to democratic argument in a way that laboriously copied scrolls aren't. Television had a profound effect on political life in the twentieth century, from the Kennedy assassination to 9/11, and it's probably not a coincidence that a nation whose denizens spend thirty-six hours a week watching TV has less time for civic life.

The era of personalization is here, and it's upending many of our predictions about what the Internet would do. The creators of the Internet envisioned something bigger and more important than a global system for sharing pictures of pets. The manifesto that helped launch the Electronic Frontier Foundation in the early nineties championed a “civilization of Mind in cyberspace”, a kind of worldwide metabrain. But personalized filters sever the synapses in that brain. Without knowing it, we may be giving ourselves a kind of global lobotomy instead.

From megacities to nanotech, we're creating a global society whose complexity has passed the limits of individual comprehension. The problems we'll face in the next twenty years, energy shortages, terrorism, climate change, and disease, are enormous in scope. They're problems that we can only solve together.

Early Internet enthusiasts like Web creator Tim Berners-Lee hoped it would be a new platform for tackling those problems. I believe it still can be, but first we need to pull back the curtain, to understand the forces that are taking the Internet in its current, personalized direction. We need to lay bare the bugs in the code, and the coders, that brought personalization to us.

If “code is law,” as Larry Lessig famously declared, it's important to understand what the new lawmakers are trying to do. We need to understand what the programmers at Google and Facebook believe in. We need to understand the economic and social forces that are driving personalization, some of which are inevitable and some of which are not. And we need to understand what all this means for our politics, our culture, and our future.

Without sitting down next to a friend, it's hard to tell how the version of Google or Yahoo News that you're seeing differs from anyone else's. But because the filter bubble distorts our perception of what's important, true, and real, it's critically important to render it visible.

Can You Hear Me Now?

Sherry Turkle 05.07.07

from Forbes.com

Thanks to technology, people have never been more connected--or more alienated

I have traveled 36 hours to a conference on robotic technology in central Japan. The grand ballroom is Wi-Fi enabled, and the speaker is using the Web for his presentation. Laptops are open, fingers are flying. But the audience is not listening. Most seem to be doing their e-mail, downloading files, surfing the Web or looking for a cartoon to illustrate an upcoming presentation. Every once in a while audience members give the speaker some attention, lowering their laptop screens in a kind of digital curtsy.

In the hallway outside the plenary session attendees are on their phones or using laptops and pdas to check their e-mail. Clusters of people chat with each other, making dinner plans, "networking" in that old sense of the term--the sense that implies sharing a meal. But at this conference it is clear that what people mostly want from public space is to be alone with their personal networks. It is good to come together physically, but it is more important to stay tethered to the people who define one's virtual identity, the identity that counts. I think of how Freud believed in the power of communities to control and subvert us, and a psychoanalytic pun comes to mind: "virtuality and its discontents."

The phrase comes back to me months later as I interview business consultants who seem to have lost touch with their best instincts for how to maintain the bonds that make them most competitive. They are complaining about the BlackBerry revolution. They accept it as inevitable, decry it as corrosive. Consultants used to talk to one another as they waited to give presentations; now they spend that time doing e-mail. Those who once bonded during limousine rides to airports now spend this time on their BlackBerrys. Some say they are making better use of their "downtime," but they argue their point without conviction. This waiting time and going-to-the-airport time was never downtime; it was work time. It was precious time when far-flung global teams solidified relationships and refined ideas.

We live in techno-enthusiastic times, and we are most likely to celebrate our gadgets. Certainly the advertising that sells us our devices has us working from beautiful, remote locations that signal our status. We are connected, tethered, so important that our physical presence is no longer required. There is much talk of new efficiencies; we can work from anywhere and all the time. But tethered life is complex; it is helpful to measure our thrilling new networks against what they may be doing to us as people.

Here I offer five troubles that try my tethered soul.

There is a new state of the self, itself

By the 1990s the Internet provided spaces for the projection of self. Through online games known as Multi-User Domains, one was able to create avatars that could be deployed into virtual lives. Although the games often took the forms of medieval quests, players admitted that virtual environments owed their holding power to the opportunities they offered for exploring identity. The plain represented themselves as glamorous; the introverted could try out being bold. People built the dream houses in the virtual that they could not afford in the real. They took online jobs of responsibility. They often had

relationships, partners and even "marriages" of significant emotional importance. They had lots of virtual sex.

These days it is easier for people without technical expertise to blend their real and virtual lives. In the world of Second Life, a virtual world produced by Linden Lab, you can make real money; you can run a real business. Indeed, for many who enjoy online life, it is easier to express intimacy in the virtual world than in rl, that being real life. For those who are lonely yet fearful of intimacy, online life provides environments where one can be a loner yet not alone, have the illusion of companionship without the demands of sustained, intimate friendship.

Since the late 1990s social computing has offered an opportunity to experiment with a virtual second self. Now this metaphor doesn't go far enough. Our new online intimacies create a world in which it makes sense to speak of a new state of the self, itself. "I am on my cell … online … instant messaging … on the Web"--these phrases suggest a new placement of the subject, wired into society through technology.

Are we losing the time to take our time?

The self that grows up with multitasking and rapid response measures success by calls made, e-mails answered and messages responded to. Self-esteem is calibrated by what the technology proposes, by what it makes easy. We live a contradiction: Insisting that our world is increasingly complex, we nevertheless have created a communications culture that has decreased the time available for us to sit and think, uninterrupted. We are primed to receive a quick message to which we are expected to give a rapid response. Children growing up with this may never know another way. Their experience raises a question for us all: Are we leaving enough time to take our time on the things that matter?

We spend hours keeping up with our e-mails. One person tells me, "I look at my watch to see the time. I look at my BlackBerry to get a sense of my life." Think of the BlackBerry user watching the BlackBerry movie of his life as someone watching a movie that takes on a life of its own. People become alienated from their own experience and anxious about watching a version of their lives scrolling along faster than they can handle. They are not able to keep up with the unedited version of their lives, but they are responsible for it. People speak of BlackBerry addiction. Yet in modern life we have been made into self-disciplined souls who mind the rules, the time, our tasks. Always-on/always-on-you technology takes the job of self-monitoring to a new level.

BlackBerry users describe that sense of encroachment of the device on their time. One says, "I don't have enough time alone with my mind"; another, "I artificially make time to think." Such formulations depend on an "I" separate from the technology, a self that can put the technology aside so as to function apart from its demands. But it's in conflict with a growing reality of lives lived in the presence of screens, whether on a laptop, palmtop, cell phone or BlackBerry. We are learning to see ourselves as cyborgs, at one with our devices. To put it most starkly: To make more time means turning off our devices, disengaging from the always-on culture. But this is not a simple proposition, since our devices have become more closely coupled to our sense of our bodies and increasingly feel like extensions of our minds.

Our tethering devices provide a social and psychological Global Positioning System, a form of navigation for tethered selves. One television producer, accustomed to being linked to the world via her cell and Palm handheld, revealed that for her, the Palm's inner spaces were where her self resides: "When my Palm crashed it was like a death. It was

more than I could handle. I felt as though I had lost my mind."

The tethered adolescent

Kids get cell phones from their parents. In return they are expected to answer their parents' calls. On the one hand this arrangement gives teenagers new freedoms. On the other they do not have the experience of being alone and having to count on themselves; there is always a parent on speed dial. This provides comfort in a dangerous world, yet there is a price to pay in the development of autonomy. There used to be a moment in the life of an urban child, usually between the ages of 12 and 14, when there was a first time to navigate the city alone. It was a rite of passage that communicated, "You are on your own and responsible. If you feel frightened, you have to experience these feelings." The cell phone tether buffers this moment; with the parents on tap, children think differently about themselves.

Adolescents naturally want to check out ideas and attitudes with peers. But when technology brings us to the point where we're used to sharing thoughts and feelings instantaneously, it can lead to a new dependence. Emotional life can move from "I have a feeling, I want to call a friend," to "I want to feel something, I need to make a call." In either case it comes at the expense of cultivating the ability to be alone and to manage and contain one's emotions.

And what of adolescence as a time of self-reflection? We communicate with instant messages, "check-in" cell calls and emoticons. All of these are meant to quickly communicate a state. They are not intended to open a dialogue about complexity of feeling. (Technological determinism has its place here: Cell calls get poor reception, are easily dropped and are optimized for texting.) The culture that grows up around the cell phone is a communications culture, but it is not necessarily a culture of self-reflection--which depends on having an emotion, experiencing it, sometimes electing to share it with another person, thinking about it differently over time. When interchanges are reduced to the shorthand of emoticon emotions, questions such as "Who am I?" and "Who are you?" are reformatted for the small screen and flattened out in the process.

Virtuality and its discontents

The virtual life of Facebook or MySpace is titillating, but our fragile planet needs our action in the real. We have to worry that we may be connecting globally but relating parochially.

We have become virtuosos of self-presentation, accustomed to living our lives in public. The idea that "we're all being observed all the time anyway, so who needs privacy?" has become a commonplace. Put another way, people say, "As long as I'm not doing anything wrong, who cares who's watching me?" This state of mind leaves us vulnerable to political abuse. Last June I attended the Webby Awards, an event to recognize the best and most influential Web sites. Thomas Friedman won for his argument that the Web had created a "flat" world of economic and political opportunity, a world in which a high school junior in Brooklyn competes with a peer in Bangalore. MySpace won a special commendation as the year's most pathbreaking site.

The awards took place just as the government wiretapping scandal was dominating the press. When the question of illegal eavesdropping came up, a common reaction among the gathered Weberati was to turn the issue into a nonissue. We heard, "All information is good information" and "Information wants to be free" and "If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear." At a pre-awards cocktail party one Web luminary spoke animatedly about Michel Foucault's idea of the panopticon, an architectural structure of

spokes of a wheel built out from a hub, used as a metaphor for how the modern state disciplines its citizens. When the panopticon serves as a model for a prison, a guard stands at its center. Since each prisoner (citizen) knows that the guard might be looking at him or her at any moment, the question of whether the guard is actually looking--or if there is a guard at all--ceases to matter. The structure itself has created its disciplined citizen. By analogy, said my conversation partner at the cocktail hour, on the Internet someone might always be watching; it doesn't matter if from time to time someone is. Foucault's discussion of the panopticon had been a critical take on disciplinary society. Here it had become a justification for the U.S. government to spy on its citizens. All around me there were nods of assent.

High school and college students give up their privacy on MySpace about everything from musical preferences to sexual hang-ups. They are not likely to be troubled by an anonymous government agency knowing whom they call or what Web sites they frequent. People become gratified by a certain public exposure; it is more validation than violation.

Split attention

Contemporary professional life is rich in examples of people ignoring those they are meeting with to give priority to online others whom they consider a more relevant audience. Students do e-mail during classes; faculty members do e-mail during meetings; parents do e-mail while talking with their children; people do e-mail as they walk down the street, drive cars or have dinner with their families. Indeed, people talk on the phone, hold a face-to-face meeting and do their e-mail at the same time. Once done surreptitiously, the habit of self-splitting in different worlds is becoming normalized. Your dinner partner looks down with a quick glance and you know he is checking his BlackBerry.

"Being put on pause" is how one of my students describes the feeling of walking down the street with a friend who has just taken a call on his cell. "I mean I can't go anywhere; I can't just pull out some work. I've just been stopped in midsentence and am expected to remember, to hold the thread of the conversation until he wants to pick it up again."

Traditional telephones tied us to friends, family, colleagues from school and work and, most recently, to commercial, political and philanthropic solicitations. Things are no longer so simple. These days our devices link us to humans and to objects that represent them: answering machines, Web sites and personal pages on social networking sites. Sometimes we engage with avatars who anonymously stand in for others, enabling us to express ourselves in intimate ways to strangers, in part because we and they are able to veil who we really are. Sometimes we engage with synthetic voice-recognition protocols that simulate real people as they try to assist us with technical and administrative issues. We order food, clothes and airline tickets this way. On the Internet we interact with bots, anthropomorphic programs that converse with us about a variety of matters, from routine to romantic. In online games we are partnered with "nonplayer characters," artificial intelligences that are not linked to human players. The games require that we put our trust in these characters that can save our fictional lives in the game. It is a small jump from trusting nonplayer characters--computer programs, that is--to putting one's trust in a robotic companion.

When my daughter, Rebecca, was 14, we went to the Darwin exhibition at the American Museum of Natural History, which documents his life and thought and somewhat defensively presents the theory of evolution as the central truth that underpins

contemporary biology. At the entrance are two Galápagos tortoises. One is hidden from view; the other rests in its cage, utterly still. "They could have used a robot," Rebecca remarks, thinking it a shame to bring the turtle all this way when it's just going to sit there. She is concerned for the imprisoned turtle and unmoved by its authenticity. It is Thanksgiving weekend. The line is long, the crowd frozen in place and my question, "Do you care that the turtle is alive?" is a welcome diversion. Most of the votes for the robots echo Rebecca's sentiment that, in this setting, aliveness doesn't seem worth the trouble. A 12-year-old girl is adamant: "For what the turtles do, you didn't have to have the live ones." Her father looks at her, uncomprehending: "But the point is that they are real."

When Animal Kingdom opened in Orlando, populated by breathing animals, its first visitors complained they were not as "realistic" as the animatronic creatures in other parts of Disney World. The robotic crocodiles slapped their tails and rolled their eyes; the biological ones, like the Galápagos tortoises, pretty much kept to themselves.

I ask another question of the museumgoers: "If you put in a robot instead of the live turtle, do you think people should be told that the turtle is not alive?" Not really, say several of the children. Data on "aliveness" can be shared on a "need to know" basis, for a purpose. But what are the purposes of living things?

Twenty-five years ago the Japanese realized that demography was working against them and there would never be enough young people to take care of their aging population. Instead of having foreigners take care of their elderly, they decided to build robots and put them in nursing homes. Doctors and nurses like them; so do family members of the elderly, because it is easier to leave your mom playing with a robot than to leave her staring at a wall or a TV. Very often the elderly like them, I think, mostly because they sense there are no other options. Said one woman about Aibo, Sony's household-entertainment robot, "It is better than a real dog. … It won't do dangerous things, and it won't betray you. … Also, it won't die suddenly and make you feel very sad."

Might such robotic arrangements even benefit the elderly and their children in the short run in a feel-good sense but be bad for us in our lives as moral beings? The answer does not depend on what computers can do today or what they are likely to be able to do in the future. It hangs on the question of what we will be like, what kind of people we are becoming as we develop very intimate relationships with our machines.

Sherry Turkle is professor of the social studies of science and technology at MIT and the author of the upcoming Evocative Objects: Things We Think With.

Sherry Turkle:
Surface, Surface Everywhere...

from transparencynow.com

A recent example of postmodernist philosophy can be found in the work of MIT professor Sherry Turkle, in her book *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. Turkle studied the way people interact on so-called MUDs or role-playing games on the Internet, in which they play fictional characters in equally fictitious "worlds," created with words. In a typical MUD, text on the screen is used to describe environments, situations, characters and actions. Players at various computers, who are all logged into the same MUD, "act" in this virtual world by typing a description of what they are doing or by typing their side of the dialogue, which is then viewed by other players on their own screens and responded to.

In studying all this, Sherry Turkle concluded that these experiences can help people discover a postmodern way of knowing. Just as they recognize that the computer screen is merely a play of surface simulations to be explored, so they come to see reality the same way.

"If there is no underlying meaning, or a meaning we shall never know, postmodern theorists argue that the privileged way of knowing can only be through an exploration of surfaces," Turkle writes. "This makes social knowledge into something that we might navigate much as we explore the Macintosh screen and its multiple layers of files and applications."

For the most part, she says, computer users who have achieved this new way of knowing, "suspend disbelief and become absorbed in what is happening on the screen." They are happy "to take the program at interface value."

Since everything is surfaces to be explored, and no surface has any more legitimacy than any other, the "embodied" life we live on a day-to-day basis has no more reality than the role-playing games on the Internet. Instead, for the MUD player, reality becomes what is referred to as "RL" -- "Real Life" -- which is just another role-playing game.

"...MUD players can develop a way of thinking in which life is made up of many windows and RL is only one of them," Turkle writes.

For Turkle, MUD players also discover that the idea that they are a unified self is also another fiction. By engaging in endless role-playing games, they come to see that they can be many selves and that none of those characters is any less real than what they think is there true self -- all are there to be played out and explored.

Turkle makes clear that this new experience of the self isn't merely an alternative model of identity -- it is also the basis for an alternative lifestyle. So long as we were attached to the old model of identity, she says, "the unitary self maintains its oneness by repressing all that does not fit. Thus censored, the illegitimate parts of the self are not accessible."

But with the new, postmodern, self: "We do not feel compelled to rank or judge the elements of our multiplicity. We do not feel compelled to exclude what does not fit."

Once that is accomplished, the self is prepared to play out all its fantasies, living life as a play of fictions. In effect, Turkle is describing how someone becomes an enthusiastic

participant in the symbolic arenas of contemporary culture. People can then devote themselves to indulging their fantasies without guilt or discomfort, since what they do via simulation has the same status as what they do in the rest of life. Nor is any of it a form of transgression, since the judging self that might label some fantasies off limits has been conveniently eliminated.

We can then live like "Stewart," who, Turkle tells us, is "logged on to one MUD or another for at least forty hours a week. It seems misleading to call what he does there playing. He spends his time constructing a life that is more expansive than the one he lives in physical reality."

"In sum, MUDs blur the boundaries between self and game, self and role, self and simulation," she writes. "One player says, 'You are what you pretend to be...you are what you play.' "

It isn't hard to see where Sherry Turkle's philosophy leads. It inevitably takes us to a state of political apathy in which we cease asking how we are being manipulated by simulations, and just enjoy them. In fact, Turkle's approving description of the way computer users, "suspend disbelief," and are content to take what happens on the screen "at interface value" is precisely the way the characters are described as living in totalitarian world of *The Futurological Congress*. They enjoy the manipulated facade, without questioning where it comes from, who created it, or for what purpose. This is the attitude the manipulators of deceptive simulations (advertisers, politicians, et al) want everyone to have: don't ask if all those wonderful images are painted on the gates of Hell; just enjoy the pretty pictures. Let everyone eat, drink and exchange sexually-charged messages on the Internet, because we will never understand what it all means, anyway.

What we are seeing with all of these ideas is an effort to "deconstruct" or "deactualize" reality. In the vision they offer, the popular culture that appropriates everything and turns it into a simulation and a story line becomes the model for the self, society and reality. Life becomes a symbolic arena for the acting out of fantasies.

With this in mind, we can now provide a more complete portrait of the culture of advanced technology and simulation. On the one hand, it is trying to create realistic simulations that are under our control, so they will give us whatever we can't get from the "nonfiction" world. On the other, it is using science and technology to give us the kind of control over the physical world that we have over simulations, and to describe reality as a kind of simulation. We can thus see one of the essential characteristics of this new culture, which acts as if it is trying to transcend the limits of existence by creating simulations that seem real and by making reality more like a simulation. It is similarly trying to accomplish this in its philosophy, with efforts to argue that simulation and reality aren't so far apart as we may have thought.

This tendency can also be found in another idea, that simulation and "reality" will, one day, merge or become indistinguishable as a result of the progress of science and technology. Here is an expression of this idea in a passage from the novel *The City and the Stars*, which was referred to in the previous chapter. The passage describes the inhabitant of a future city as living inside a room or chamber that can generate perfect physical illusions on his command.

"Another wish, and machines which he had never seen would fill the chamber with the projected images of any articles of furniture he might need. Whether they were 'real' or not was a problem that had bothered few men for the last billion years. Certainly they

were no less real than that other imposter, solid matter...."

What all of these philosophies reveal is the way the society of simulation, entertainment and fantasy is creating a vision of the universe fashioned after itself. These aren't the only philosophies produced by contemporary society, but they have growing importance and they have the potential to coalesce into an ideology and a source of cultural legitimation.

These philosophies give us a vision of life as a television program in which we frequently change channels to keep from getting bored. The universe becomes a metaphysical theme park -- cosmic Disney -- and we are all enjoying a participatory adventure, on the ride of our lives. Even the self ends up as nothing but a series of themed attractions. It is a world in which little is demanded of us; in which the stakes of life aren't so large, and the consequences of action aren't so final. It is also a world in which life ceases merely to imitate television. As Sherry Turkle makes clear in the title to her book, now that we are blessed with high-technology simulations, that's us we are watching on the screen.

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In You More Than Yourself

The revolutionary potential of the Internet is far from self-evident

By Slavoj Žižek

In December, *Time* magazine's annual "Person of the Year" honor went not to Ahmadinejad, Chavez, Kim Jong-Il or any of the other usual suspects, but to "you": each and every one of us using or creating content on the World Wide Web. *Time*'s cover showed a white keyboard with a mirror for a computer screen, allowing each of us to see his or her own reflection. To justify the choice, the editors cited the global shift from earthly institutions to the emerging digital democracy where individuals—you—are both citizen and king.

There was more to this choice than meets the eye—and in more than the usual sense of the term. If there ever was an ideological choice, this was it: The message—the new cyber-democracy allows millions to directly communicate and self-organize, bypassing centralized state control—masks a series of disturbing gaps and tensions.

First, the obvious irony, everyone who looks at the *Time* cover does not see the others with whom he or she is supposed to be in direct communication. They see the mirror-image of themselves. No wonder Gottfried Leibniz, the 18th century German philosopher who invented the binary system, is one of the predominant philosophical references of the cyberspace theorists: Consider his metaphysical concept of "monads," those entities of perception, which are to the mental realm what atoms are to the physical, though "without windows" that directly open up to external reality. Isn't that eerily similar to what we are reduced to when immersed in cyberspace? The typical Web surfer today, sitting alone in front of a PC screen, is becoming more and more of a monad with no direct window onto reality, encountering only virtual simulacra, and yet increasingly immersed into the global network, synchronously communicating with the entire planet.

One of the latest fads among sexual radicals is the "masturbate-a-thon," a collective event in which hundreds of men and women pleasure themselves for charity. Masturbate-a-thons build a collective out of individuals who are ready to share something with others. But what are they actually sharing? The solipsism of their own stupid enjoyment. One can surmise that the masturbate-a-thon is the form of sexuality that perfectly fits the coordinates of cyberspace.

This, however, is only part of the story. Additionally, the "you" who recognizes itself in its screen-image is deeply divided: I am never simply my screen persona. First, there is the (rather obvious) excess of me as a "real" bodily person over my screen persona: Marxists and other critically disposed thinkers like to point out that the supposed "equality" in cyberspace is deceiving. It ignores all the complex material dispositions (my wealth, my social position, my power or its lack, etc.). Real-life inertia magically disappears in the frictionless surfing in the cyberspace. What Virtual Reality provides is reality itself

deprived of its substance. In the same way decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like real coffee without being the real thing, my screen persona, the "you" that I see there, is always already a decaffeinated Self.

Second, there is the opposite and much more unsettling effect: the excess of my screen persona over my "real" self. Our social identity, the person we assume to be in our social intercourse, is already a "mask," as it involves the repression of our inadmissible impulses. However, it is precisely under the conditions of "just gaming," when the rules regulating our "real life" exchanges are temporarily suspended, that we can permit ourselves to display these repressed attitudes. Recall the proverbial impotent shy person who, while participating in a cyberspace interactive game, adopts the identity of a sadistic murderer or irresistible seducer. It is too simple to say that this identity is just an imaginary supplement, a temporary escape from his real life impotence. Rather, the point is that, since he knows that the cyberspace interactive game is "just a game," he can "show his true self" and do things he would never do in real-life interaction. In the guise of a fiction, the truth about one's self is articulated. The very fact that I perceive my virtual self-image as mere play thus allows me to suspend the usual hindrances that prevent me from realizing my "dark half" in real life—in cyberspace, my "id" is given wing.

And the same goes for my partners who I communicate with in cyberspace: I can never be sure who they are. Are they "really" the way they describe themselves? Is there a "real" person at all behind a screen-persona or is the screen-persona a mask for several different people? Does the same "real" person possess and manipulate more screen-personas? Or perhaps I am simply dealing with a digitalized entity that does not stand for any "real" person? In short, interface means precisely that my relationship to the Other is never face-to-face, that it is always mediated by the interposed digital machinery whose structure is that of a labyrinth. I "browse," I err around in this infinite space where messages circulate freely without fixed destination, while the Whole of it—this immense circuitry of "murmurs"—remains forever beyond the scope of my comprehension. The obverse of cyberspace's direct democracy is this chaotic and impenetrable magnitude of messages and their circuits that even the greatest effort of my imagination cannot comprehend. Immanuel Kant would have called it a cyberspace Sublime.

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A decade or so ago, there was an outstanding TV ad for beer in England. Its first part staged the well-known fairy-tale: A girl walked along a stream, saw a frog, took it gently into her lap, kissed it, and, of course, the ugly frog miraculously turned into a beautiful young man. However, the story wasn't over yet: The young man cast a covetous glance at the girl, drew her towards him, kissed her—and she turned into a bottle of beer that he held triumphantly in his hand. For the woman, her love and affection (signaled by the kiss) can turn a frog into a beautiful man, while for the man, it is to reduce the woman to what psychoanalysis calls a "partial object," that in you which makes me desire you. (Of course, the obvious feminist rejoinder would be that what women witness in their everyday love experience is the opposite: One kisses a beautiful young man and, after one gets too close to him, when it is already too late, realizes that he is basically a frog.)

The actual couple of man and woman are thus haunted by the bizarre figure of a frog embracing a bottle of beer. What modern art stages is precisely this underlying spectre: One can easily imagine a Magritte painting of a frog embracing a bottle of beer, with a title "A man and a woman" or "The ideal couple." (The association here with surrealist Luis Bunuel's famous "dead donkey on a piano" is fully justified.) Therein resides the

threat of cyberspace gaming at its most elementary: When a man and a woman interact in it, they do so under the spectre of *a frog embracing a bottle of beer*. Since neither of them is aware of it, these discrepancies between what "you" really are and what "you" appear to be in digital space can lead to murderous violence. After all, when you suddenly discover that the man you are embracing is really a frog, aren't you tempted to squash the slimy creature?