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Liminality and the emergence of an integrated being

ABSTRACT

Our culture is engaged in a process of dismantling the traditional processes of producing individuations and meaning. The borders between the engineered and organic, human and technological are dissolving as the individual reaches for the integrated experience. Liminality is the present state of dissolution of the self as a subject and a stage leading towards a new kind of individuation. There is a potential in developing a new language centred in the experience of the sensing body in order to move beyond the dialectical world-view initiated in an era marking the beginning of scientific progress. In this article, I will provide an overview of the processes that shaped the idea of a subject as an ontological entity. These processes will be viewed through the lens of scientific and aesthetic pursuits. I will follow with a short introduction of object-oriented ontology, which arose with the development and popularization of computers. I will then explore the border between the two ontologies and a possibility for crossing over through the use of the sensing body or bare life. In effect, I am arguing for aesthetics as a new form of language capable of bridging the different manifestations of being in the technological and biological life.

KEYWORDS

technology
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subject
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aesthetics

I. SUBJECT AND ITS POLITICAL ROOTS

The traditional way in which we think of the self as a unit has its roots in the civil rights ideas formed in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Conceiving of self, which is contained in a singular subject, as a citizen and sovereign entity was and still is the main mode of individuation in western

societies. In fact, the very word individuation stems from the individualistic attitudes initiated by that epoch and leading to the nascence of new sciences such as psychology. Subject is often related to its ability to be an active agent in the world. Being able to act on one's environment empowers the perception of self as a distinct entity and forges a link between internal experience and the external world. Lacan believed that 'The function of the mirror stage thus turns out, in my view, to be a particular case of the function of imagos, which is to establish a relationship between an organism and its reality – or, as they say, between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*' (Lacan 2007: 78). The inner–outer connection, in fact, establishes the range of experience by describing what is available and what is outside of one's influence. The action-feedback loop signals personal presence and the extent of one's agency.

Traditionally, individuation can be defined as a process of integration and differentiation through action, in which a discrete system manifests traits of consciousness. Life in a rapidly changing society demands a model of individuation that is less rigid and accommodates growth. Human interaction with technology as well as expanded scientific understanding of our world render the traditional ways of individuating as a subject obsolete. Today, the plurality of self-perceptions delivered through our technological exploits is incongruent with understanding self as a singular subject.

I am locating the origin of present attitudes towards and modes of engagement with our technology in the beginning of the last century. On a cultural level, Futurism is the first movement addressing the human and machine interaction. The avant garde of the twentieth century was bewildered and baffled by such an existential fluctuation produced vis-à-vis living in the city and the use of technology. Their reaction ranged from blind worship of the Futurists to wide-eyed bewilderment about the Dadaists and Surrealists to attempt at control and compartmentalization of the sensory input by post-World War II art. The result was creation of the notion of privacy and a hyper-individuation mostly through vision and suppression of all the other senses deemed abject such as smell and sound.

The Dada aesthetic of bricollage and confusion of space and time placed the traditional subject in duress. The oversaturation of senses that followed World War II culminated in primary emphasis on visual aesthetic in the art of the 1950s and 1960s. It was an attempt at curbing the over-stimulated senses and reconstitution of strong, singular subject as contextualized by Clement Greenberg. This almost century-long reaction to technological advances continues with Minimalism and the conceptual dawn of object-oriented ontology. I believe that works of minimalist artists introduce a switch from Modernist and Enlightenment-based cultural attitudes towards representations of the world from the vantage point of the technology.

II. OBJECT-ORIENTED ONTOLOGY

The traditional ontological views based in Enlightenment and Kantian philosophy are thus juxtaposed with what became known as object-oriented ontology, a term coined by Graham Harman. I am interested in the latter since it can account for the existence of digital entities on their own terms and as equal to human subjects. In this perspective, objects have their own existence and reality that is not understood in terms of human experience but rather based on sets of interactions among the parts.

However, I am not interested in treating the human entity as just another object in a set. This approach developed by Bruno Latour in the actor-network theory reduces the human to a set of actions that are performed in the context of the grouping. I believe that qualitatively humans are different from other objects in technological sets. I am interested in the experience of these qualities as we are engaging technology on an equal footing. In the meantime, the cultural perception of the split between human and technological persists.

III. PERPETUAL LIMINALITY

Instead of discussing our experience of the world as real or virtual, I propose to move away from such dichotomies and imagine a world that is continuous, united by human experience. We can begin to conceptualize this approach by integrating the technology with our sense of self instead of placing it outside as our shadow. The phenomenological understanding that our self comes to existence in a space between the body and what we currently perceive as the outside world expands our view to conceptually include the technological landscape as part of the self-image.

For the past century, we have been integrating the technological into the human life. In the process, we have created a history of progress, invention and wars. Since the Enlightenment we have been embracing the Cartesian view of the body in service of the mind, where a thought is possible only in the act of transcendence of the body. The cyborg model of the 1980s and the virtual worlds of the 1990s have been integrated into mainstream value systems and are no longer a threat. Technological augmentation has become a way of life.

Our present situation is such that we have to undo and reconstitute ourselves on a daily basis depending on our engagement in the cultural, hyper-mediated world. We switch from a driver to a user, from a citizen to a tourist, from an engineer to a client. Thus, we dis-organize ourselves in a Deleuzian sense only to individuate into different crystallizations of the self, depending on the used technology (just think how experientially different it is to drive a car and to use a computer). The contemporary user does not become psychotic in fragmenting himself or herself but rather shuttles between different modes of existence reaching the edge of undoing himself or herself in between the stages.

Being liminal is a skill that is necessary to operate our technology today. In that sense we become demonic since sorcery is concerned with transition from one reality to another. The crossing over is an act of becoming something else, moving from singularity to plurality. In describing the sorserous becoming Deleuze and Guattari write, 'We do not become animal without fascination for the pack, for multiplicity. A fascination for the outside? Or is the multiplicity that fascinates us already related to the multiplicity dwelling within us?' (Deleuze-Guattari 2007: 240) The human consciousness is that which infuses the multiple technologies and objects with agency.

I would like to argue that the space between the human and technology is occupied by new hybrid ontology. This territory has been traditionally theorized in the figure of the cyborg, an entity marrying in its body various orders of being such as human, plant, animal and technological. This conceptualization, however, still places the emphasis on the individual body. The liminality that interests me deemphasizes the individual ego and creates a connected world of objects as well as subjects. The new entity is not human in a traditional sense and not an object, but an entity suspended between these ontologies.

While most of the Futurists volunteered for service in World War I and perished, bringing to a close that particular art movement, today our engagement with technology takes into account the preservation of the body. We brush against the sublime without risking death. But is there such a thing as undoing the subject safely? Ultimately, there may be a price paid in heightened levels of anxiety that are omnipresent.

Our nervous system is being reshaped to handle the demands of relentless, heightened stimulation. We do not perish like the Futurists; we do not break down into psychotic Dadaist episodes; we do not deny the senses in a Greenbergian attempt to order the world according to visual fields. Instead, we open to the flows and dis-organize the body, confuse the organs and inputs to a point of reaching the sublime. We cross over between personas and technologies on a daily basis as we thrive on the border.

IV. WE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN LIMINAL

With or without our technologies we are already liminal beings. Our bodies do not help us to escape from technological mediation since they are themselves mediating apparatuses without which there can be no knowledge of the world. What unites the different experiential platforms is our ability to sense and have an experience. Through our sensing body grounded in biological processes we make meaning out of the flow of stimuli.

At present, we are developing a new way of experiencing that reaches beyond the senses available to us in everyday life. At the same time, the types of agency that we gain follow a different trajectory than our capabilities in the 'real world'. Our experience is not dictated only by what surrounds us physically. Electronic platforms provide plenty of space for our senses, imagination, thoughts and intentions to play out. By reaching out towards those experiences we start negotiating a space for our sense of self that goes beyond the physical world. In doing so we are creating clouds of presence infused with our sense of self. There is no difference whether we negotiate this understanding between ourselves and the objects in the physical world or abstract phenomena made possible by electronic devices and consoles.

The understanding of being as a process and crisis parallels my conception of the liminal event as a starting point of new ontology. One often takes it for granted that being and an individual constitute one and the same entity. Conversely, I theorize being in terms of networks and clusters of agency, which open up the dialectically constituted individual to being as a collective and connected phenomena. The crisis is a productive state initiating transformation and expansion. It is an opening and a liminal event, in which the meaning is unstable and the being is in between fixed states. Such moments often appear as horror and border on the sublime. The instability of meaning appears as grotesque and uncanny, familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. Understanding individuation as crisis and liminal event leads me to adopt a specific vantage point vis-à-vis the ontological paradigm, which we occupy in the beginning of the twenty-first century.

V. BARE LIFE AND TECHNOLOGY

I believe that human experience in the world creates the bridge between *zoe* and *techne* while the liminal space described above is achieved through the sensing body. *Zoe*, in this context, is understood as Giorgio Agamben's concept of 'bare life' set in opposition to a citizen or qualified life, defined as

bios (1995: 8). In my understanding such bare life is a biological phenomenon grounded in animal and plant bodies. What throughout the twentieth century used to be a political subject with its duties and privileges dictated by a societal structure becomes rid of this outside envelope to become life itself. As such it interacts with *techné*, a concept derived from the Greek word for 'craft' or 'art'. The latter provides a new context for life where the body produces the desire for the technological and at the same time becomes its limit.

In fact, the human ability to sense produces aesthetics and the drive to sense more. Thus, we step into technology with our bodies. The experience is based in human feeling that becomes amplified and extended and can be consciously reflected upon. The array of new technological capabilities creates sensations, which in their extreme manifestations reach towards the sublime. Therefore, individuation based in aesthetics instead of Cartesian language appears as a crisis of the world as we know it. The meaning becomes temporarily destabilized as the world appears familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. In this environment, the sensing body leads the way as language follows adapting to the former. Aesthetics instead of politics ushers human life into the new individuation.

Giorgio Agamben states that 'Western politics has not succeeded in constructing the link between *zoe* and *bios*, between voice and language, that would have healed the fracture' (1995: 11, original emphasis). In practising politics, we end up in a dialectical split because we are still looking towards old models of language based in Enlightenment and scientific ideology. With aesthetics understood as the function and the tool of bare life, I believe we can arrive at a possibility for a new language. Experientially, such a conceived world will feel very different from what we have known for the past century. The new language based in the sensing body has the potential to heal the split between *zoe* and *bios*, object and subject, as well as the ability to introduce politics that protects and cultivates bare life as a source of knowledge.

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