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A Specious Species

C. E. Hayes

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The experience of technological narcissism produces a smothering obsession with ways to reflect the superficial self. There is an inability of self-expression without recourse to a superficial identification within a technological process, product or field of influence. The process of self-expression becomes an obsession to declare individuality, uniqueness, specialness that is founded on superficiality. Each superficiality exhibits itself as a change in angle from, or newly cast reflection of, the technologically constructed subject. Self-expression has become a variation on a common theme — the celebration of the narcissistic superficial self through purely technological means.

Our culture tempts us with speciousness backed by a rubric of thought that enforces its repetition *ad infinitum*. There is unlimited access to the same experience wherein the experience of the individual is amplified via small manufactured superficial changes. The promise of technology has always been to make life easier and better. What it has done is provide standardization and unlimited access. Precisely what has happened is individuality, uniqueness, and the creative act, have nearly been erased from experience. We now follow standard proce-

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ture to meet stated goals. Technological narcissism pushes forward with making the experience of society, our culture, more and more general — a worldwide monoculture. While pursuing its self-fulfilling prophecies of personal freedom, liberty and unlimited variations for unique self expression (individuality) it has done nothing but construct a worldwide monoculture that is destroying the possibility of the existence for any real experience and replaces it with a “standing reserve” of experiential processes with superficially constructed deviations on the process to simulate individuality — the marketing term is personalization. What we have today, and what we have to look forward to is a technological culture, civilization, that is in love with itself and the multiple reflections it makes in its own image for us to celebrate, or obsess over.

Fast and furiously we are led into the frenzied self adulation of our technological society, its products and the reflection of them in ourselves. Our technology has never really been a reflection of ourselves directly. We were simply the vehicle for its deliverance, or its own being. For technology and its partner in disgrace, science, do not exist beyond the being we give them and as such, they exist outside of our direct human experience (the reality of our “being here”). They are virtual activities and we have elevated these virtual activities to their current level of control over our real lives and experiences. Technology and science are pressed into use to model and manipulate those beings in the world that do not perform the same manipulation. Upon this world, the “progress” of science/technology was not earned out by any other living creature besides humanity. Without us as the vehicle, technology stops. Science does not exist. The “knowledge” it begets is once again unknown and the products associated with such knowledge deteriorate and become useless. Technology and scientific thought should be properly understood as a type of possession of the mind. The mind is possessed with a will to dominate, manipulate and serve that which gives it structure — technological society it-

cial identification within a technological process, product or field of influence in order to confirm and clarify ones internal feelings. Without the technology to parse the experience of being in the world, then self-expression becomes impossible and the experiential data self-expression draws upon for inspiration becomes meaningless. As it stands, any technologically derived expression of reality is better than none, therefore self-expression has been reduced to spurious and superficial layers of technological narcissism.

The stimulus to all this activity is the same — the ubiquity of technology creates common cultural data and enables its expression in common terms. The reaction to the stimulus is narcissistic behavior. The overpowering desire to be “acknowledged” by others for one’s own individuality fuels the engine of the current technologically dependent culture. Since the experience of life is so schematized by the technology we manipulate, consume and depend upon, the will to express ourselves has now turned to our own bodies as the last refuge from the invasion of technology. With horrific irony, or absurd incongruity, the only means we have at our disposal to express what our body experiences “out there” in the real world is reliant on the prevailing technological framing of what we are supposed to be experiencing. The real world we encounter is largely the schema of technology imposed on our lives to make them “better”, i.e. more efficient, less strenuous, more comfortable, happier, and so forth. To strip the world of technology would return us to a brutal encounter with nature that we cannot bear to sustain, or so those who uphold the current technocratic civilization propose. It is here, in the experience of a non-technologically mediated existence, that one may find access to unfettered self-expression, though.

The specious species that we have become desires the perfections of experience that are promised by the technological representations of what it means to be human. An infallible “yes” or “no” to life as it has been constructed is what one desires in the schematized cultural experience. To experience an in-between state cannot be accurately expressed by such methods and as such, is intolerable. When the strict logic of scientific rigor is interrupted by the contradiction of emotions and reality itself, the experience is broken down into smaller technically manufactured states, quantified, analyzed and processed. The technical term for this may be conflict resolution. The technological narcissist desires clarity and confirmation of their self. Self-expression is derived by establishing a superfi-

self. Our use of technology is definitely not a benign creative diversion that is employed in the natural act of preserving and protecting our place in the natural world. It exists solely to separate us from our natural being and environment. What we have in the mirror of our existence is not ourselves, but rather the system generated by our technology.

No longer can we see ourselves in much of the society we encounter. What we see are reflections of the technological system with manufactured deviations on superficial levels. The desire to “be human” has been supplanted with a desire to be “different” within the system and most of all, to be acknowledged for being different. The consequence of these desires to be different, and the seeking of acknowledgement for being different, is that life becomes subservient to the system that communicates the expressions. The system now provides the means to create deviations on expression, and what follows is technology becoming not just the messenger of human expression, but what humanity expresses. Human desires are now sublimated, if not eliminated, based on the technological methods available for expression.

The raw experience of being human is repressed and redirected to serve the refinement of technological control over our direct experience of the world. That which can be modeled, manipulated and quantified in a virtual manner becomes the basis of what we do to our physical reality. The refinement of technology (specialization) reveals smaller and smaller deviations on physical reality until the reality is lost. What is left is the superficiality of the technologically derived model. This now becomes the desire, our desire: The technical perfection of a technologically derived model of ourselves. We are bred by the system to desire a life free of pain, suffering, distress, death, loss, and uncertainty among other things that are harmful to the functioning of the system. What remains is an impossible human life essentially, but the models have supplanted our concept of reality to the point where the virtual world, the techno-

logically perfect world, is the actual foundation of reality. Self-expression is sublimated to the virtual world. Self-expression becomes not an expression of the self, but an expression of a particular superficiality within the model constructed by the prevailing technology of the moment. We pretend to be what we are not in order to justify the existence of what we create and express.

We fall in love with the perfection of the model. The closest we can get to a raw human experience is this love, but it is a mutated and deformed version of love that is not naturally derived from our experience with direct reality. It is a technologically derived form of narcissism. It is not ourselves, nor anyone, we are in love with, but rather a reflection of ourselves cast by a mirror of science and technology. We desire to become what we are not, nor will ever be, but push ourselves to become the reflection. We want the perfection promised by the technological reflection. Self-expression is therefore not from the self, but rather an expression dictated by the reflection.

This “techno-expression” has manifested itself in many ways. Blogging, as a means of publishing a single person’s multimedia diary (a personalized electronic press kit of sorts) accessible to all, is perhaps a fitting example. Being accessible to all necessarily means that all can understand, that all can identify with, and this type of experience can only be produced if all have similar cultural data. Because the technology exists and because the technology is widespread, the experience of it (being technological) becomes a common fixture (utility) of daily existence to the beings that use it. It is to this end that the use of technology becomes the basis of the human experience. In order to express what it is to be human we must resort to expressing what it means to experience the technology we use. Blogging, while at superficial level, may appear to cover a wide spectrum of subjects, discourses and styles, actually restricts any sort of unique personal perspective from coming into existence. In order to be understood, one must speak the language

of technology. In doing so, the speaker channels the language of the system and its desires through themselves. One needs gadgets to blog the knowledge of the gadgets that enable the processing of reality, and lastly the time to create the blog in isolation from reality in order to distill real-life into something that is able to be represented as something intelligible through a personal computer by others. In order for blogging to be effective at conveying information, human experience must be regulated and standardized — made easily digestible and transmittable by technology. What instructs the content of the blog is that which the blogger can distill through the current technology.

No longer are we limited to literate technology (writing) capturing data, but we now have ubiquitous technology to record images and sound — hence the rise of MySpace and YouTube (nothing narcissistic about the names of those sites at all!). Not only this, but there are even virtual worlds for us to inhabit such as SecondLife, which completely do away with the real world entirely. Perhaps the virtual world/virtual life is the greatest achievement of technological processing of life to date. It does away with the translation of reality and replaces it outright. In order to be “heard” within these virtual communities, you must be able to relate to common cultural data (monoculture) and have the ability to express it in familiar terms.

The focus becomes how can “I” stand out from all the sameness that technology fosters, but the ability to stand out only manifests on purely superficial, or stylistic, terms. How many genre names can we give to the explosion of sameness that has occurred in the Digital Age? Only the smallest of superficial deviations produce the desire to be recognized as different or claim individuality. Sometimes the “difference” is only in the application of certain technology to the same exact data — from black and white to color, from analog to digital, from orchestra to synthesizer, etc.