WITH DESIGN IN MIND? 'MORAL ECONOMY' AND CONTEMPORARY DIGITAL CULTURE

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Technological innovation is often characterised as producing a moral economy of "tempted" bodies, corrupted desires or utopian potential distorted by unlimited possibility, and juxtaposed to a now-foregone simpler era and existence. This paper seeks to explore the relation between subjective experience (consciousness) and the contemporary environment, in particular, the dissemination of digital technology within mobile devices.

This paper addresses the anxieties around 'freedom' in relation to emerging technologies and their use in contemporary capitalist culture. It does so by investigating the figure of 'the consumer' and its mediation of the relationship between the human, the artefactual, and the proliferation of digital devices and services. The failure of the discourse of consumerism to explain today's culture reveals an *aporia* regarding the description of the mutually constitutive relationship between people and things. The historic attempt to ground theories of the human in rationality, desire and now the brain/genes reveals a fear of freedom, of the loss of demarcated boundaries, of definitive distinctions between moral and immoral categorisations of activities and pursuits. The technological capacity of contemporary capitalist culture, its devices, distractions, pleasures and potential represent a problem for the social sciences and their conceptualisation and explanation of the behaviour of human beings, as citizens, as consumers, as gendered identities, as workers etc, precisely because the non-human world is changing so dramatically.

Broadly speaking, social sciences assigned people identities, roles or types, which might vary or overlap with context but which were largely stable and enduring – even if less stable or enduring than those putatively assigned to earlier social formations or other cultures. This implied shared moral framework translated into ethical action, understood as personal conduct shaped to a greater or lesser extent by law and custom, as the citizen-consumer exercised choice as an indicator of personal (psychological) preference based upon calculations of utility framed within a set of circumstances including individual idiosyncrasy, socio-economic position and educational background. This position evolved over two centuries against a backdrop of the production of capitalist commodities, desirable objects and mechanical machinery – alienable and demarcated in time and space. The historically recent plethora of digital devices and immaterial services has complicated the relationship between people and things, consumers and commodities, to such an extent that previously held shibboleths describing consumption require revision. Arguably, the digital domain has altered the spatial and temporal rhythm of contemporary life to the point where neither 'consumption' nor 'production' remain unchanged and the modality of the inter-relation between the human and the non-human must be reconsidered.

The relation between human and non-human coalesces around technology. The anxiety over this liminal threshold has prompted an inquiry into whether some property of human physiology, perhaps the brain or the genes, can offer a foundation for this discussion; or whether a useful contemporary understanding of 'human' requires the radical re-thinking of our relationship to the non-human. Against the nostalgic evocation of an 'authenticity' accorded to certain desires or actions in which the human can be rooted this paper asserts the latter. Rather than devise a moral economy of action, exemplified in consumer activity, to define the limits of the human through notions of taboo, sin or the profane – without

denying the legal framework that codifies such concepts – this paper considers the concept of human as part of an evolving discourse emerging from contemporary culture and its formulation of a relationship of 'co-shaping' between people and things.

The historical evolution of the figure of the consumer and its centrality to contemporary accounts of life in capitalist culture is predicated upon the role of choice; where selection signals preference based around a calculation of value amongst equivalents or alternatives. This unification of bourgeois psychology with utilitarian economics sees a socialised homo œconomicus as a self-directed individual acting in concert with personal desires and social norms. Consequently, the discriminating choices and purchases evidenced by goods and services assert an apparent unity of psychology and social life. This is the normal and normative individual engaged in the 'biographical fiction of the self' [1] through an interaction with the material culture of contemporary capitalism.

This fiction of the consumer is at odds with the historical evidence – most obviously when the pathological acquisition of objects, services or experiences are considered. The ubiquity of eccentrics, collectors, hobbyists, the predominance of habits, acquired, inherited or imitated behaviours, the over-indulgent or self-denying obsessive all serve to dispel such a myth. Indeed, the only possible existence for such an ideal-type consumer or citizen would as an absence, as a putative precondition that was ceaselessly interrupted and deviated from.

The nineteenth century's expression of the utilitarian psychology through rational action as the precondition of identity production appears superannuated:

The classical bourgeois world view can be understood as a process of individuation, as the pursuit of pleasure. The pursuit of pleasure is the pursuit of the self; and the self, like the cosmos, is a system of relations tending towards a unique equilibrium. This has long since ceased to be a plausible view of either psyche or cosmos. [2]

 As a result, homo œconomicus, the homunculus of the 'consumer,' was rendered redundant just as the figure of the consumer was adopted by discourses as varied as law, political theory, marketing and sociology as the basis of an explanation of the particularly modern incarnation of 'consumption. Here freedom to consume is the freedom to construct an idealised version of the self, to express through external actions the inner being. Consequently, the types of choices made, the preferences expressed are freighted with meaning and significance implying, as they do, the inner world of psychology, morality and personality. In this way the problem of choice, of particular choices or even the renunciation of consumerism are deemed to be moral considerations, ethical activities and problematically gendered experiences. Against, 'economic man' and his will expressed through the manipulation of the material world in accordance with a rationally organised desire for utility stands a hysterical figure that is prey to the irrational emotions and temptations of desirable commodities.

While social science added psychological and socio-spatial meat to the bones of *homo œconomicus*, the 'consumer' remained the moral intersection of bourgeois psychology and utilitarian thought. The subject was considered an active agent who organised the world of inert matter or manipulated pixels on a screen, in the service of a desiring self. Critical sociology sees in this the realisation of an authentic selfhood stymied by the denigration of experience inherent in the 'culture industry' and an 'ersatz individuality' [3] as the result of a corrupted libidinal economy. The manipulation of commodities to manufac-

ture personal identity can involve a degree of 'risk' for the subject, as unstable identity formations, contingent upon consumption habits and practices, solidify into lifestyles, which are viewed as being to whatever degree deviant, immoral, or illegitimate.

This desiring consumer can be seen as the lodestone of a nascent 'consumerism' and 'consumer society,' a harbinger of modernity and the 'mass' consumer society of today. In doing so, alternative forms of exchange – non-modern, non-market forms, such as gift-giving – became the focus of a nostalgic privileging of the archaic that functioned as a fantasy of the 'real' or 'authentic' in human consumption that is apparently warped by the over-provision of commodity capitalism. Here the promised satisfactions of the commodity outweigh utility, and possession comes to be predicated upon meaning, or social worth, rather than functionality.

As a brief example it is instructive to consider the recent riots in the United Kingdom's larger cities. In an economic era commonly termed 'post-scarcity' – in which mass consumption prevails for the majority of the populace – even allowing for these recessionary times, much of the mass media coverage of rioting focused specifically upon *looting*, and the illegal removal of goods from retail environments (or other looters). People who were otherwise, and previously, considered to be consumers were denounced as *feral*, *criminal*, or *manic* and their actions immoral, sinful or unreasonable. Such unruly consumption does not bear upon the *use* to which any goods appropriated would be put, but simply describes the manner of their acquisition. It is interesting to consider that the goods liberated from stores – at least as reported in the popular media – were consumer items (widescreen TVs, mobile phones, designer clothing: portable, high-value items), which simply replicated the types of goods already possessed by many of those rioting or looting. Indeed, the difference between looting and shopping appeared to be the unregulated manner in which it occurred - the absence of law, social convention, surveillance and the disciplinary apparatuses normally associated with these. So, the rationale governing the actions of individuals was not simply a desire for utility, economic necessity or, in most cases, pre-planed criminality. It is precisely in the *irrational* aspect of these events, in their *group* character that we see the failure of conventional models of the consumer.

 By characterising the riots and looting as *immoral* and unreasonable acts the political and media apparatuses seek to re-assert the fiction of the morally responsible, rational and law-abiding citizen-consumer at the heart of contemporary capitalist society. Even when criminality intrudes and individuals are suborned in some manner this must be construed as a *deviation* from the norm that creates transgression. Beyond assertions of "mob rule" there was no attempt to understand the behaviour of the participants in these events as members of a group in which the group is the unitary entity, and that its behaviour and rules of operation and engagement would not conform to those normatively expected of individual consumers. The concept of mob rule was deployed to explain why an aggregation of individuals behaved in such unexpected fashion.

However, a contradiction emerges between the rational and irrational, moral and immoral since the apparent co-ordination of mob or looter activity, was deemed to be rational, planned and criminal. And the tools that allowed this to occur? Digital devices. RiM's Blackberry 'phones and its messaging service were pinpointed, one politician to urging a 'BBM curfew' in London. However, the hysteria highlighted here by those unaware and fearful of the technological possibilities of digital devices (and the many alternatives to BBM) exposes a fear of emerging technology that echoes the alarm over commodity fetishism by critical sociology – that otherwise rational, discerning, morally upright individuals will be seduced into inappropriate activities by *objects*, either alluring commodities or technologies that confer a seditious set of freedoms upon their users.

Into the 'black box' of the technological device disappears the rule of law and the citizen-consumer; by simply assenting to the potential of such technologies, so this logic goes, we are losing, undermining or deforming our humanity – a physiological as well as moral corruption occurs because our bodies and our minds are embroiled. The possibility of the corruption the flesh and the mind of the users of such technology through the stimulation of illicit or novel desires re-animates religious conceptions of sin and taboo in the contemporary world, even underpinning notionally secular discussions. The degree of freedom putatively offered by digital technology, whether in the web itself, the communications and interactions it makes possible or the purchase of goods and services it facilitates, seems to escape regulatory purview – where are the digital police, and what might they term a crime? In the absence of the citizen-consumer and a pseudo-rational pursuit of utility, how are we to determine the nature and conception of the human agent and identify appropriate limits upon action? How is it possible to determine the *authentic* human desire or action from its inauthentic counterpart, which arises merely from tempted flesh and seduced mind, born of an excess of possibility?

One position can be phrased as: if we distinguish truth from falsity, the authentic from inauthentic, based upon a combination of physiology and psychology then we can legislate accordingly. The enduring appeal of medical discourses in the arena of consumption is evidence of this: including 'hysterical' women being pathologised as kleptomaniacs or phrenology revealing thieves. Descartes' mind/body dualism here hints at resolution, if only we know where to look. This putative re-unification of the biological and the symbolic, of matter with meaning, whether removing the false freedoms of technology or the fetishistic deception of the commodity-form, would allow for authentic experience of the world, discrimination between the true and the false, the consecrated and taboo in a contemporary and technologically permeated world. A 'moral economy' of action might emerge that would reconcile the human with the non-human by asserting what it was permissible to ask of the world and those within it. No longer would desire (cause) result in an immoral or inauthentic longing or wish (effect).

This is precisely the promise of explanations premised upon the relationship between the social and the natural or medical sciences. For instance, the emerging area of neuro-anthropology seems to promise just such a reconciliation via its address to the 'encultured brain' and investigation of the relation between physiology and culture. Equally, developmental psychology or behavioural economics seek to patrol and map such terrain in their own distinct fashions. A more intriguing starting point for considering the relationship between technological culture and human behaviour might be Marshal McLuhan's famous dictum that media, artefactual as well as communicational, are 'extensions' of humanity. Such formulations foreground the relationship between humans and non-humans, highlight experience and invite a discussion of consciousness under specific conditions, rather than as a human attribute absent in non-humans. In proposing a relational understanding of consciousness, rather than its 'medicalisation,' we avoid a reduction to the brain as site and origin of consciousness (intention).

Explaining human action in this manner requires unpicking the enigma of the mind/brain (consciousness) by resorting to technologies capable of imaging or 'imagining' the brain's operation. In imaging the brain in search of consciousness and the source of human action, science must attribute to it changes of state that are visible and recognisable, to which are assigned functions, states and operations: to these, in turn, is attributed a relationship to consciousness and action. In relation to Persistent Vegetative State (PVS), we expect or require patients to respond to stimuli – questions, medical probes etc – in the manner of the healthy. Failure to respond as expected and they are deemed to be functioning imperfectly or not at all. However, they may simply be functioning – interacting with their environment and us – in a markedly different or altered fashion, which we are failing to recognise, comprehend and respond to in our turn.

The various medical technologies for inspecting and interrogating the brain as it operates include Positron Emission Tomography (PET) and functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI), both offer indications of levels of cortical activity in patients, but establishing how these quantitative measures relate to qualitative experiences or states of mind, or even capacity for such things, is problematic. The multicoloured images produced are intended to correspond to levels of varying neural activity. However, the description of such fluctuating processes in no way supplies an explanation of their role in or relation to conscious experience or intentional action. Emerging digital technologies appear to complicate the question of what it is to be human, and identify a specific anxiety on this point with regard to contemporary culture. The reconciliation of biology with the symbolic, physiology and culture, in a comprehensible relation of cause-and-effect is both promised by technologies, such as PET or fMRI, and undermined through the generation of innovations in how humans and non-humans interact, the expansion of possibilities for experience and affective transformation.

It may be instructive to pursue the relationship between humans and non-humans, the association or networking of actants (Latour) or the relation between organisms and their environments discussed by ecological psychology, which 'affords' experiential possibilities for individuals and populations. This allows a 'postphenomenological' (Verbeek) [4] analysis of the relationship between people and things in which the Cartesian privileging of the human subject is circumvented through an analysis of the 'ontological relationship' of affordance forged between 'organism and environment.' [5] Specifically, this asserts the mutually constitutive relationship between people and things:

… the concept of mediation helps to show that technologies actively shape the character of human-world relations. Human contact with reality is always mediated, and technologies offer one possible form of mediation. [However…] any particular mediation can arise only within specific contexts of use and interpretation. Technologies do not control processes of mediation all by themselves, for the forms of mediation are always context-dependent […]. [6]

The immersive engagement with technology obliges the human body to become the repository for the forms of experience that arise: the aesthetic and sensorial experience generated in the relation of affordance acts to transform cognitive capacity, as anyone who has ever looked through a microscope or a telescope can testify. Latour's re-discovery of Tarde's rejection of a 'primordial identity' in favour of a constant process of differentiation of 'being' through 'avidity,' or having, implies that every actant is an 'unstable aggregate' defined by the qualities it possesses.

Subjectivity, corporeality is no more a property of humans, of individuals, of intentional subjects, than being an outside reality is a property of nature […]. Subjectivity seems also to be a circulating capacity, something that is partially gained or lost by hooking up to certain bodies of practice. [7]

Consequently, the continuous transformation of subjectivity through the experience of difference is exacerbated by participation in the technological arena. The relationship between people and things functions as a medium within which being is articulated to having as an 'affordance' that re-defines subjective experience: this transmission of experience allows the 'differentiation' of the individual from itself in space and time. So, possession is not purchase, acquisition or ownership but the re-formulation of the relationship between 'being' and 'having' in which concepts of morality are dispersed by technology. In place of desiring consumers, 'unstable aggregates' constituted by their historical experiences and technological relations of affordance coalesce. The plenitude offered by digital devices and the service-based interactions they support 'affords' a range of experiences appear 'immoral' and corrupted only when

viewed through the lens of the nineteenth century and its economy of desire subordinated to rationality.

References and Notes:

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3. Herbert Marcuse, Negations: Essays in Critical Theory (London: Free Association Books, 1988).
4. Peter-Paul Verbeek, What Things Do: Philosophical Reflections on Technology, Agency and Design, (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania, 2005).
5. Alan Costall, "From Darwin to Watson (and Cognitivism) and back again: the principle of animal-environment mutuality," in Behaviour & Philosophy 12 (2004): 179-195
6. Peter-Paul Verbeek, What Things Do: Philosophical Reflections on Technology, Agency and Design (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania, 2005), 11.
7. Bruno Latour, "On Recalling ANT," 1997, http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/sociology/papers/latour-recalling-ant.pdf (accessed 5th February, 2007).