The virtual you and the real you

N. J. ENFIELD

Elias Aboujaoude

VIRTUALLY YOU

The dangerous powers of the e-personality

352pp. Norton. Paperback, £11.99.

978 0 393 34054 9

Giles Slade

THE BIG DISCONNECT

The story of technology and loneliness

300pp. Prometheus. Paperback, $19; distributed in the UK by Roundhouse. £16.99.

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Howard Rheingold

NET SMART

How to thrive online

272pp. MIT Press. $24.95; distributed in the UK by Wiley. £17.95.

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In a radical break from mid twentieth-century theories of perception, the American psychologist J. J. Gibson argued that to perceive something is not to view it from the outside, but rather to experience it directly from within. When we see an environment, he suggested in *The Perception of the Visual World* (1950), what we see are the possibilities for behaviour that this environment affords us. Thus, a water strider looks at a river pool and sees a place to walk. This implies that the flexibility of an organism is constrained by nature, but many species wiggle out of these constraints by engaging in niche construction, altering their own environments with the long-term result of transforming their own options. Beavers have become aquatic animals by virtue of their home-grown feats of engineering. By changing the world in certain ways and then adapting to these self-made changes, they effectively redefine themselves.

Humans are the world's grand masters of niche construction. With culture and technology we transform our environments, and effectively our own bodies, in amazing ways and at amazing speeds. Now we can hardly keep up with ourselves. Clever inventions from stone tools to the wheel, from literacy to firearms, have made us more productive, more adaptable, more creative, more powerful. But "affordances", as Gibson called them, have a dark side too. A tree branch might afford climbing, but depending on the weight of your body it may also afford crashing to the ground. The costs of the axe, wheel, word and weapon are all too familiar, but we tolerate them in return for their benefits. We are willing, for example, to risk death by automobile as long as we can enjoy the superhuman speeds and distances of travel that cars afford us. We are even willing to pay for the costly infrastructure that cars demand, the roads, parking lots, fuel supply lines and toxic emissions. Technology enhances our potential, but it also introduces dark affordances, dangers we wouldn't otherwise face.

In *Virtually You*, the psychiatrist Elias Aboujaoude focuses on problems of the e-personality in the context of our new online world. Ranging from unchecked online aggression to loss of control over privacy to obsessive-compulsive behaviour, these problems stem from new affordances of the internet. It provides for real-time, fully networked social interaction, but with the curious property that the medium is essentially independent from our bodies. In this self-engineered environment, the physical body is rendered almost obsolete, still needed by its owner for little more than the sustenance that keeps the soul in play. It makes possible a new kind of self, Aboujaoude explains, and this new self is not all nice: "larger-than-life, convinced of its specialness, alternately dark and infantile, both compulsive and impulsive". The problem is that this new you, despite having become effectively separated from your body, is still you: "you still own it and own its consequences". You lose certain restrictions that once constrained your communicative power, but you don't lose your accountability. When your virtual branch breaks, it is the real you that comes crashing to the ground.

For Giles Slade, our inventions are indeed the end of us. A virtue of his book is its fascinating account of the development of some key twentieth-century technologies, including radio, television and mass-produced guns. The dehumanizing effect of technology is well illustrated, for example, in the observation that men in uniform can be effectively interchangeable, like factory-made machine parts. People can serve as tools; and "machines", by which he mostly means people-isolating devices such as the Sony Walkman and its descendants, have become "prosthetic substitutes for human company". For Slade, twentieth-century musical culture went from "communicative" to "lonely and isolating"; people are now "predisposed to feel more comfortable with human contact when it is mediated by machinery"; and we have given up "the traditional activity of trusting and interacting with other humans". But if this were really so, social life would have collapsed completely. Slade's arguments would be easier to follow if it were clear what he really wanted to say.

A difficulty for both Slade and Aboujaoude is that while they are ostensibly addressing human problems, their sample of humankind is a distinctly thin slice. When Slade writes of "traditional society" and "pre-modern society", it turns out he means the societies of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century North America. But of course these people had all sorts of technology. They were already immersed in the prosthetic human future. They possessed, for example, the technology known as the book. While Slade worries that post-twentieth-century electronic media compromise the natural framework for human communication because they strip away certain features of face-to-face interaction, such as our ability to see others' facial expressions, this compromise was surely initiated centuries earlier. A book is no more natural to human communication than a chat room or a Twitter feed; maybe less so.

Aboujaoude similarly takes one cultural milieu and implicitly treats it as a model for the human psyche more generally. Possession of a self, he says, is defined by custodianship of information about one's own life; but this is a decidedly culture-specific view. Arguably, the most natural type of relationship network for humans is the kind of small-scale social sphere in which most people, today and in the history of our species, live and have lived. In village settings, one's daily life involves intense and constant interaction in a circle of kin and other in-group members. Contact with strangers seldom occurs. In such settings, information about people's lives flows freely and openly. The very concepts of privacy and personal autonomy presuppose a kind of social separability that could only be achieved in a modern kind of world, with its ways of cordoning off people and experiences. To build an argument for what is good for the human psyche, Aboujaoude needs

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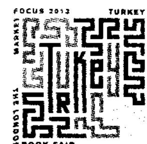

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something other than a modernized and culture-specific baseline. If zero privacy is closer to the norm for human beings, then those with privacy problems online should do what any villager does: be aware that anything one says or does is as good as already public, and so only say or do things when one is prepared to face their public consequences.

If this seems easier said than done, consider the teachings of Howard Rheingold in *Net Smart*. Rheingold wants to solve the same problems as Slade and Aboujaoude, but what he offers is more practical, more personal, and more carefully thought through than either.

> I believe that learning to live mindfully in cyberculture is as important to us as a civilization as it is vital to you and me as individuals. The multifold extension of human minds by chips and nets in the first decade of the twenty-first century has granted power to billions, but in these still-early years of multimedia production studios in your pocket and global information networks in the air, it is clear to even technology enthusiasts like me that our enhanced abilities to create and consume digital media will certainly mislead those who haven't learned how to exert mental control over our use of always-on communication channels.

Most of us have an online life but few of us appreciate the affordances – both positive and negative – of our newest, most radical self-constructed niche. Perhaps the darkest affordance of online technology as we know it concerns Rheingold's foremost issue: our attention. This problem was articulated by the economist and cognitive scientist Herbert Simon in his article "Designing Organizations for an Information Rich World" in 1971, from which Rheingold quotes:

> In an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it.

The online world is as competitive as any other human social domain, and so when your attention is momentarily diverted by some flashing advertisement or social media feed in the corner of your computer screen, you've been played, almost literally. But Rheingold says we can win at this game. What we stand to gain far outweighs what we stand to lose, and so the choice is not merely "adapt or perish". Why just adapt when you can thrive?

Rheingold's mission is to give simple and concrete instructions for how to go about it. Anyone can go online, but many of us have no idea of the true nature of this medium. He identifies "five literacies" for the online environment: attention, participation, collaboration, "detection", and network smarts. Without acquiring these five literacies we will, at best, fail to thrive, and at worst we will be played like suckers. While his book provides many case studies, it is striking that the solutions are independent of the technological nature of the problems they are intended to solve, a point also not lost on Slade and Aboujaoude. When it comes down to it, Rheingold's proposal is simple: we need to be mindful, generous and co-operative. All else follows. These principles will turn us into winners even in the complete absence of technology. When everybody chooses to be mindful, generous and co-operative, even the riskiest social tools – including the mother of all information technologies, language – become positively good.

For Rheingold, all the control that's needed will come from within. He advocates a kind of Zen anarchism, a personal commitment to awareness, trust and mutual aid. When he looks at life online he sees bright opportunities for us to keep adapting to our self-made world, and to redefine ourselves in just the right ways.

Cute or zany?

ROBERT EAGLESTONE

Sianne Ngai

OUR AESTHETIC CATEGORIES
Zany, cute, interesting
333pp. Harvard University Press.
£29.95 (US $39.95).
978 0 674 04658 0

In *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, cute, interesting*, Sianne Ngai has written an important book which harks back to the heyday of the leftist literary theory of the 1980s, and is none the worse for that. Dense and demanding, occasionally meandering, equally at home with *I Love Lucy* and conceptual art, Theodor Adorno and Jim Carrey, the argument of this interdisciplinary book is fairly straightforward. Ngai thinks that the sublime and the beautiful, the categories traditionally used by aesthetics, are not up to scratch in the "hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism". Instead, she argues, we may better understand our times and our world through less dramatic and demanding but "central and pervasive" aesthetic categories which respond to consumption (the cute), circulation (the interesting) and production and labour (zaniness). These may be "trivial" and, indeed, focus our attention on their affective weakness, but their powerlessness is the source of their interest.

Ngai is interested in these categories because she is a follower – sometimes laudatory, sometimes critical, certainly stylistically – of the great American critic Fredric Jameson. She, like him, differentiates between three different critical activities: those to do with "taste", or making aesthetic judgements; "analysis", exploring "historical conditions of possibility of specific forms"; and "evaluation", which examines social and political life itself through artworks. Jameson, a Marxist, takes his work to be centrally "evaluation" (although Ngai shows that the other modes also pervade his work). With caveats, so does Ngai. So when she turns from her introduction, which explores abstractly and most interestingly the origins and significance of aesthetic categories, her attention is drawn to what these usually undescribed categories mean.

The cute appears to be an aesthetic of powerlessness. (The "Hello Kitty" character, popular with little girls, does not even have a mouth.) Cute things appeal to us for "protection and care" and because of this, Ngai argues, with a crafty reading of Marx, the cute is the very essence of the commodity, which "lacks the power to resist man". Yet, in this way, the cute gets its revenge, because in seeming "to want us and only us for its mommy", the cute commodity is able to make large demands of us. This also explains the ambivalence that such items – bears, bath sponges, Hello Kitty itself – arouse. We want to possess them and, recognizing the power of this appeal, destroy them at the same time, as we realize, inchoately, perhaps, that the cute is at the heart of the all-powerful commodification of the world. This is why the cute turns out to be more complex when artists investigate it. Ngai examines a project by Takashi Murakai, who has invented a cute character, Mr DOB, a sort of sweet mouse-creature, big head, big eyes. Indeed, sometimes Mr DOB has a very, very big head: he is often reproduced in 99-foot-square pictures, or in huge helium balloons, his size both emphasizing and contradicting his "cuteness". Sometimes he even has sharp teeth and jagged fangs. Mr DOB is the apotheosis of cute. And he serves as an image for Ngai to attempt to unbalance that scourge of the cute and kitsch, Theodor ("Teddy") Adorno. Ngai argues that, as Adorno admits, the line between the cute or kitsch and "proper" art is very, very fine and while it's true that "kitsch parodies catharsis", as Adorno writes, ambitious art "produces the same fiction of feelings". Even in his own work, Ngai claims, the cute is central, as she points out that a cute kids' poem, "Mousetrap rhyme", lies at the heart of his *Aesthetic Theory*, and it is this that Adorno employs to argue that art reflects and uses helplessness. The point here is that the cute, in seeming powerless, is more powerful than we think.

The least convincing chapter concerns the "interesting", which is, Ngai notes, the one evaluative term left that everyone uses and no one seems to mind. Behind this, she finds more at work. The question of "what makes something interesting" turns out to be a question of what critics find interesting, which leads to a long and rather roundabout discussion of many thinkers and writers, from late eighteenth-century Germany to modern America, held together because they all work in a capitalist culture in which "change is paradoxically constant and novelty paradoxically familiar". (The ahistoricity of this is justified in a sharp footnote: the category of the "interesting" in these thinkers is, she argues, very similar.) The "interesting" turns out to be a way of binding the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic, or the everyday, together. Ngai's argument is clarified by her central example, the photographs by Ed Ruscha of repeated vernacular objects: "Twentysix Gasoline Stations" (1962), "Thirtyfour Parking Lots in Los Angeles" (1967). These pictures of everyday things are not beautiful but are "interesting": our interest is aroused in and by them. In this way, Ngai takes the long way round to suggest that Ruscha's pictures of parking lots simply work to draw our attention to them by defamiliarizing them in art. While I am not convinced this (standard) idea really needs a new aesthetic category, it does help us to understand the turn from beauty to affect in contemporary art.

The Zanni, a stock character of the *commedia dell'arte* and the origin of the word "zany", was a servant, but often not a good one. "Modelled after peasants forced . . . to emigrate . . . to Venice in search of temporary work", the Zanni was ridiculously awful at whatever task he put his hand to (a role for physical comedy) and was often amusingly untrustworthy. Ngai argues that this role has extended into the contemporary world. The worker with no skills becomes a model for all workers under late capitalism and we laugh, uneasily, at their (and our) constant attempts to succeed. Ngai's central example is Lucille Ball from *I Love Lucy*, but Frank Spencer from the 1970s English sitcom *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em* would suit her argument as well, or even better, as she goes on to argue that modern zaniness is gendered female (as the ineffective and shy Frank clearly was). Using the film *The Full Monty* as an example, she outlines how capitalism feminizes workers. But if the examples she uses, and perhaps even her categories, are open to question, the overall aim of her book – made clear in the long, theoretical introduction – is laudable and ambitious. Sianne Ngai recognizes that the art of our age has outstripped the more traditional concepts through which we try to understand it. Even the analyses of the "post-modern" are no longer able adequately to address the speedy and complex transformations of art or the questions it asks us. In order for art to fulfil its role and for criticism to survive, "aesthetic theory" needs to develop new and powerful concepts which reflect both art's changing nature and its ubiquity. This challenging and important book takes the first steps in this task.

National Speed Limit

The day you win the prize, or get the job,
always feels like that first school bop snog,
or this stepping hard on the gas
with the radio turned up full blast,
no-one else in sight on the road,
evening and summer not yet over,
the chorus kicking in like cannon-fire,
the way ahead seemingly straight for ever.

SARAH WARDLE