

Living in a Virtual World

Cyberseduction: Reality In The Age of Psychotechnology, Jeri Fink. Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1999. pp. 308.

“Psychotechnology” is the term coined by Jeri Fink to capture “a new approach to psychology” required by the fact that human identity is increasingly shaped by our experiences in “virtual environments” (p. 19). Communication between human beings occurs less in face-to-face interactions and more in the World Wide Web, usergroups, chat rooms and the like. These computer-mediated social spaces encourage the development of electronic personae, and over the past decade, the question of how the formation of human identity in a virtual environment can complement, enhance or undermine the traditional task of self-creation, has been addressed by an eclectic group of interdisciplinary writers such as Sherry Turkle (Turkle, 1995) and Allucquere Rosanne Stone (Stone, 1992). Fink’s “merging of psychology and technology” (p. 293) would benefit from a direct engagement with the insightful, conceptually more sophisticated work of these pioneers. Still, *Cyberseduction*’s image of humanity as a blend of Darwinian animal and cyborg promises an interesting exploration of this important cultural question.

According to Fink, the “cyborg metaphor” prevalent in science fiction, television and film “has become social reality” (p. 121). In particular, the development of virtual reality technology (VRT) has sharpened the edge on Freud’s comment about humanity becoming a “prosthetic God.” For this technology blocks the usual input to our sensory receptors, substituting a very different flow of information that replaces the *presence* of a person’s actual environment with *telepresence*, namely, the sensation of being immersed in a virtual environment. The technological goal, Fink says, “is to increase immersion, to involve as many human sensory and psychological receptors as possible to captivate and transform physical presence into telepresence” (p. 136). Of course, when increasingly high quality telepresence connects with an engrained tendency to repress unpleasant experiences, there is a huge incentive to believe in the reality of what we know to be an illusion. Hence the trajectory of VRT is not morally neutral.

Insofar as participants are transported into a space infused with communal values – for example, a virtual Oprah show or NBA game – then telepresence does “give us a sense of ... ‘social richness,’ or the feeling that we are in an immediate

and intimate part of the action” (p. 134). Nevertheless, fed information by programs that tend to reproduce dominant cultural narratives and freed from inhibiting reality checks, a person’s consciousness will be mapped out on a pixelled medium shaped by fantasies and desires. To a large extent, therefore, the computer-mediated relationships are forged between *oneself* and one’s *own* fantasies. For the “socially rich” relations are between virtual or electronic personae under the creative control of participants protected by anonymity. Despite its vaunted interactivity, moreover, VRT also encourages passivity no differently than television. As Fink says, virtual worlds provide deeply pleasurable experiences precisely because “we don’t need to invest in our own imaginative muscle” (p. 29).

Fink suggests the reason why VRT might entail a dehumanizing solipsism: “telepresence lies at the emotional heart of cyberseduction because it simply *feels good*” (p. 133). Still, she remains optimistic that humanity can control computer-mediated environments for our betterment. This optimism depends on a two-fold broadening of the key notion of virtuality. First of all, VRT is conceived as an evolutionary step on a continuum of relevant technologies as opposed to a revolutionary technology. *Cyberseduction* draws on film, television and recent literature to exemplify the broad sense of virtuality. It contains, for instance, an excellent description of “telepresence tricks” (p. 139) devised by Hollywood special effects engineers to induce telepresence in audiences without being able to exploit the complete immersion in an illusion made possible with VRT. Yet the principle involved is much more general. For example, techniques of contemporary artists are continuous with those of Renaissance painters who mastered perspective and were able to create the illusion of a three-dimensional object on a two-dimensional canvas (Devlin 1998). In that sense, humanity has used artistic techniques and technical tricks to create “virtual realities” for the purposes of self-exploration ever since the petroglyph stories on cave walls.

Secondly, Fink emphasizes that in a culture where “we can create cyborg bodies” (p. 119) human beings still behave like Darwinian animals. Hence *Cyberseduction* uses the evolutionary psychology elaborated by theorists such as Pinker and Orstein to frame its analysis of life in the age of computer mediated environments. This further expands the meaning of virtuality by conceiving it as an integral part of human cognition. For instance, “the brain can be conceived of as an information-processing system of interconnected mental modules that work independently or in conjunction with one another to produce environmentally appropriate and adaptive behavior” (p. 69). What we refer to as “reality,”

therefore, is a highly successful adaptation on the part of our species. Yet reality or actuality is scarcely a simulacrum of what exists external to our consciousness because it is partly constituted by what the central nervous system interpolates, adds, subtracts, highlights and enhances in processing environmental stimuli. Though obviously not a *computer* mediated environment, reality is thoroughly saturated with the virtuality contributed by the human *brain*.

This idea that all reality is “virtual” has been around ever since Hegel’s devastating criticism of “sense certainty.” Contemporary philosophers, moreover, are more likely to accept the position that “actual reality and virtuality are essentially relative, not opposing terms” (p. 23) than to interpret virtuality in terms of the traditional dichotomy of appearance and reality. So there is little excuse for *Cyberseduction*’s complete lack of interest in epistemological precision expressed in Fink’s breezy popularization that all reality is a social construction or the more radical slogan that “reality is a shared hallucination” (p. 40). Still, the decision to use psychology as a stand-in philosophy does result in a striking big picture. “Evolutionary psychology brings together the past and present, offering us a philosophy that can serve as an entrance to the future” (p. 58), but Fink also blends elements of other psychological theories to suggest humanity’s unique character. Prominently featured is Otto Rank’s picture of a creature torn between the desire to achieve autonomy and the desire for a fulfilling connection with other people. And even more influential is the central claim of Ernst Becker’s *The Denial of Death* that our species is destined to struggle to adapt to the traumatic consciousness of inevitable death.

Fink responds to this predicament by exploiting *Cyberseduction*’s broadened notion of virtuality. Humanity, that is, not only lives in a reality cut through with virtuality, but moves in and out of a thoroughly virtual world of imagination. Mental images perform a critical evolutionary function. We can engage in utilitarian problem-solving more effectively than other species precisely because “in a virtual reality people can process information independently from environmental input” (p. 80). Our ancestors, for example, creatively adapted the environment to our needs by cultivating wheat and irrigating arid land. In addition to this, humanity has created the symbols, stories and metaphors of art and religion as the means of adapting to the contingency and mortality of bodily life. They are the beautiful illusions within which we have defined ourselves virtually. The crucial move in Fink’s overall argument, however, is taken with the shift back to virtual worlds more narrowly defined – computer mediated

environments – and the suggestion that technology can help resolve our existential predicament in the new millennium.

The plausibility of this suggestion assumes two senses of “adaptation.” As Fink puts it, human beings both “create to adapt and then adapt once again to our creations” (p. 117). The secondary adaptation, the adaptation “to our creations,” concerns the ways the human psyche deals with the complexities of the social environment that emerges from our techno-economic adaptation of the physical environment. Today, however, it is difficult to do the former because we are mentally programmed to continually improve the latter. In other words, we have created a high-tech urban society that moves faster and faster, flooding us with tremendous flow of information and forcing us to assume the onerous responsibilities of increasingly diverse social roles. The ingenuity of our “stone age brain” seems incapable of coping. Drawing heavily on *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* by social psychologist, Kenneth Gergen, Fink argues, that this dysfunctional relationship between self and environment can be overcome. The strategy for success is to shed the traditional concept of a stable, unified sense of self and embrace a “multiple self” that can adapt quickly and flexibly to a context where change is the only constant by self-splitting: “saturated with virtual input” and “a chaotic postmodern relativity” a person “survives by normal adaptive dissociation” (p. 207).

Computer mediated environments, moreover, maximize the technical possibilities for cycling the various dissociating selves, granting participants a liberating anonymity and the sense that “we can be whoever we want to be.” Hence cyberspace provides the perfect habitat for such a self to flourish. This point brings the weaknesses of *Cyberseduction* into focus. “Normal adaptive dissociation,” for instance, is consistent with a “go with the flow” (p. 197) attitude that reinforces the dream-like quality of cyberspace (Suler, p. 209). This quality is magnified in the sophisticated spaces generated by VRT because a completely wired body suit will, in the future, enhance telepresence to the point where the computer mediated environment is sensorily *indistinguishable* from the real thing. The logic of this adaptive process, therefore, leads right back to the pessimistic vision of the future noted above. For a complete accommodation of humanity into a collective consciousness reminiscent of *Star Trek*'s sinister Borg (p. 212) and a dehumanizing solipsism are simply two sides of the same moral coin. To be sure, *Cyberseduction* is dominated by optimistic exhortations about “exercising your consciousness and taking control of cyberspace” (p. 188) for human betterment. Yet this rhetoric lacks a coherent theoretical context.

First of all, to make grand optimistic or pessimistic claims, *Cyberseduction* requires an *ethically normative* concept of adaptation, whereas evolutionary psychology works with a *scientifically descriptive* concept. Fink persistently equivocates between the two. From the perspective of evolutionary psychology, if humanity transformed itself into a Borg-like entity then it would succeed in an adaptation that ensures its survival. Using identical language but appealing to a normative conception of human flourishing, however, Fink urges us to resist the forces of assimilation: “humans need to adapt and find a way to survive” (p. 197) because “cyberseduction is a powerful force” (p. 297). Fink evades the task of justifying this ethical norm independently of evolutionary psychology by interpreting resistance from within Teilhard de Chardin’s teleological view of evolution. According to de Chardin, humanity is progressing toward an intrinsically good spiritual state or collective consciousness named the “noosphere” (p. 211). Cyberspace is a technical realization of the noosphere, that is, a space in which we can overcome the physical bodies that express the physical appearances dividing us as well as the consciousness of mortality that traumatically unites us. This radical switch to de Chardin might help resolve the existential dilemma discerned by Rank and Becker. Still, it is inconsistent with the evolutionary psychology that frames Fink’s argument.

Secondly, evolutionary psychology and de Chardin’s teleological mysticism are *both* thoroughly bound up with an old-fashioned dualism. Cyberspace is “a space where people are *disembodied*” (23) and Howard Rheingold is quoted to the effect that the “magic of virtual communities” is partly due to the fact that “we leave our bodies behind” (p. 216). This is ironic because even engineers striving to achieve VRT’s goal of perfect telepresence are coming to realize that programs are vastly improved when there is a close structural relationship between a person’s actual body and virtual body (Ihde, 1998 and Murray, 2000). Virtual worlds and Descartes do not necessarily go together. Fink, therefore, is in a double-bind. At its best, *Cyberseduction* describes the details of the new technologies. Yet the descriptive accounts (especially of text-based environments and personal web-sites) scarcely justify claims regarding human destiny. So the excitement animating *Cyberseduction* must be sustained by the possibility of overcoming deep-seated psychic and social conflicts. And that depends on dualism: “cyberspace offers the ultimate illusion – it quickly resolves all those conflicts when we wander in its disembodied parameters” (p. 186). “The most ominous threat to humankind lies in the gap between our technology and our philosophy” and Fink aims to inject “a sense of perspective in the power of

technology” (p. 296). Philosophical perspective, however, is precisely what *Cyberseduction* lacks.

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