Sensual Technology and Liminal Aesthetics, Beyond Dialectical Consciousness

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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 is reaching for the integrated experience. While liminality initiates the dissolution of the traditional subject, it introduces a new kind of individuation. The body with its capability to sense meets technology, which extends and stimulates the organic sensorium. There is a potential in developing a new ontology centered in the experience of the sensing body in order to move beyond the dialectical worldview initiated in an era marking the beginning of scientific progress.

In this article, I will provide an overview of the processes, which 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 came to rise with the development and popularization of computers. Further, I will 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, consciousness, liminality, subject, individuation, aesthetics

1.   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 during the XVIII 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 form the individualistic attitudes initiated by that epoch and leading to 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 believes 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*.' [1]. 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 renders 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.

2.   Artistic Manifestations of the Ontological Shifts

I am locating the origin of present attitudes towards and modes of engagement with our technology in the beginning of last century. On a cultural level, Futurism is the first movement addressing the human-machine interaction. The Avant Garde of XXth century was baffled by the existential fluctuation produced vis a vis life in the city and the use of technology. Their reaction ranged from blind enthusiasm of the Futurists to wide-eyed bewilderment of the Dadaists and Surrealists. These extreme attitudes finally lead to attempts at control and compartmentalization of the sensory input by post-WW 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.

Dada aesthetic of bricollage and confusion of space and time placed the traditional subject under duress. The oversaturation of senses that followed WWII culminated in primary emphasis on visual aesthetic in the art of the fifties and sixties. 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 Enlightment-based cultural attitudes towards representations of the world from the vantage point of technology.

3.   The Problematic Hegemony of Objects

The traditional ontological views based in Enlightenment and Kantian philosophy is 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 set of interactions among the parts.

I am not, however, interested in treating human entity as just another object in a set. This approach developed by Bruno Latour in the Actor-network theory reduces human to a set of actions that are performed in the context of the grouping. I believe that qualitatively humans are different form other objects in technological sets. The ability to produce a sense of self, based on the interactions in the set, is unique to humans. We know that human actions in this theoretical environment are influenced by self-reflexivity. Meanwhile, it may not be possible to collect data showing conclusively if objects have the same experience as human subjects.

I am interested in the experiential qualities as we are engaging technology on an equal footing. Equal in this case does not imply sameness. The reality may be more complex than the object-oriented ontology schematic would postulate. What I find exciting is the possibility to view elements in a set without any particular hierarchy, linked through interaction based on utility. Thus a human being could escape her/his traditional role as a subject while not becoming an object in the traditional sense. I am interested in the possibility of a hybrid ontology based on the liminal status of being. In the mean time, the present cultural perception of the split between human and technological persists.

4.   Liminality As a Skill

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 self comes to existence in a space between the body and what we currently perceive as the outside world. This phenomenological understanding expands our ability to conceptually include the technological landscape as part of the self-image.

For the past century, we have been integrating electronic technology into 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 1980s and the virtual worlds of the 1990s have been integrated into mainstream value system and is no longer a threat. The technological augmentation became a way of life.

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

Being liminal is a skill that is necessary to operate our technology today. In that sense we become demonic in a Deleuzian sense, since sorcery in his view is concerned with transition form 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?' [2]. Human consciousness infuses the multiple technologies and objects with agency. Thus the multiplicity within engages the multiplicity without.

I believe that the space between human beings and technology is occupied by new hybrid ontology. This territory has been traditionally theorized in the figure of 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.

Our nervous system is being reshaped to handle the demands of relentless, heightened stimulation. We don't perish like the Futurists; we don't break down into psychotic Dadaist episodes; we don't 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 daily basis as we thrive on the border.

5.   We Have Always Been Liminal

Humans are already liminal beings. In every act of cognition, we constantly negotiate the space between the inside and the outside using our senses as the media. We never have a direct experience of any event. Our bodies do not help us escape from the technological mediation since they are themselves mediating apparatuses without which knowledge of the world would be impossible. What unites the technological and biological 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.

Presently, we are developing a new way of experiencing that reaches beyond the senses available to us in every day 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 agency and identity. There is no difference if we negotiate this understanding between ourselves and the objects in the physical world, or abstract phenomena, which are made possible by electronic devices. In this environment, the dialectical subject insisting on singularity of the self comes undone.

The in-between state understood as liminality is a crisis of the self and the subject playing out in our everyday lives. We can no longer take it for granted that being and an individual constitute one and the same entity. Conversely, theorizing being in terms of networks and clusters of agency opens 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 a vis the ontological paradigm, which we occupy in the beginning of the XXI century.

5.   Sensual Technologies

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 [3]. In my understanding such bare life is a biological phenomenon grounded in animal and plant bodies. Today, the XX century political subject with its duties and privileges dictated by societal structures is increasingly rid of this outside envelope to become life itself. As such it interacts with techne, a concept derived from the Greek word for 'craft' or 'art.' Techne provides a new context for life where the body produces the desire for the technological and at the same time becomes its limit.

The human ability to sense produces aesthetics and the desire 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 its 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.

Thus created liminal field can be described as sensual technologies. It consists of coming together of zoe, the sensing life, and techne understood as art. Presently, the prevailing model consists of zoe ruled by logos resulting in the human subject. Life itself remains forever subjugated to language in a hierarchical opposition. Conversely, the engagement of senses or aesthetics instead of language bypasses any hierarchy. Zoe and techne interact through senses in a manner approaching object-oriented ontology, where all the parts are equal. The actual nature of such engagement is already being explored through art and becomes part of everyday life. The advances in nanotechnology for example bring techne closer to the body to produce a seamless experiential field.

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.' (Original italics) [4]. In practicing 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 of a new language of the senses. Experientially, such conceived world will feel very different from what we had 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 source of knowledge.

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