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EXAMINING THE UNPREDICTABLE AND DISRUPTIVE POSSIBILITIES CONTAINED WITHIN NEW TECHNOLOGIES

05/02/2016 Michael Eden Features, Society

The arresting image below is a piece of technology developed by the Toshiba Research Europe team at Cambridge University.

Its purpose is to provide an under-skeleton, which is used to animate a realistic-looking face. This is a highly advanced system moving towards a human/computer interface which the team hope will improve education, assist autistic children and generally serve as a useful and novel bit of tech for mass use.

The interface avatar, named Zoe, is according to its designers "the most expressive controllable avatar ever created", and replicate human emotions with "unprecedented realism".

It's worth considering the image both as a symbol for our time, and for the drive in society and the sciences for the kind of technology which, in part, points to an interface with Artificial Intelligence (the team also work on empowering machines to recognise movement, language and gesture).

Firstly, of course, there is a general curiosity with scientists and the thrust of scientific research. It is possible for this appetite to outrun the capability of a culture/society to provide an applicable ethical framework for the discovery, or technology, to exist and function within.

Much has been said about advances in biogenetics and artificial intelligence, to wit that our enthusiasm and ability to create new and socially unpredictable tools may outweigh our power to bring that 'thing' into the territory of meaning/morality/notions of progress. An example being the development of viable human tissues. Artificial Intelligence may well create a sentient type before society is able to provide laws and codes on how to deal with it, let alone create a meaningful spiritual or moral code to act as an environment for such novelties to exist in, without undermining traumatically the existing social order.

I asked the technology theorist and writer **Tom Chatfield** about the themes of this piece:

> "...it points to an underlying theme of great interest: that of how we make meanings – and how our meanings may be defined as "meaningful" in the sense of sustaining, connecting, being robust in the face of the world and each other – more than merely projection or reflex or evasion.
>
> This is something that, in its way, ties into a central concern of artificial intelligence and automation, that of whether meanings and perceptions distinct from our own may ever be brought into being – and indeed of what new meanings we may make through reflecting ourselves in and through new technologies."

Chatfield here reminds us how such technology opens new space and allows us pause for thought. This may seem too Science Fiction-influenced, so perhaps a better example would be the way in which technology developed to stop illness in unborn children or aid fertility in parents could be used to eugenic ends. Implications range from the demand to make designer babies for consumer capitalist couples to worse scenaria in different social conditions (doctors guaranteeing the conception of male babies in certain cultures, for example).

We may also think of the odd effects of the internet, which is inadvertently changing the nature of sexuality via the easy and addictive access to pornography. Of course this was not intended, we can surmise that Tim Berners-Lee had no interest in such repercussions. Nevertheless, the effect can be recorded, even if separating this aspect from the positive uses of the technology would be very difficult if not impossible:

> "To invent the sailing ship or the steamer is to invent the shipwreck. To invent the train is to invent the rail accident of derailment. To invent the family automobile is to produce the pile-up on the highway." (*The Original Accident*, Cambridge: Polity, 2007, p. 10).

This quote from the French cultural theorist **Paul Virilio** is prescient, and attempts to show the possible unknowns carried within a technology. Of course these are not all necessarily bad, depending on one's political stance: Berners-Lee would possibly not have predicted Edward Snowdon or the various democratic/activist applications of his technology.

Virilio's idea of an 'integral accident' hints at the unpredictable and disruptive possibilities contained within new technologies. While he is almost certainly negative about this, it is a radical area for further exploration.

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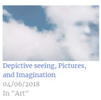

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About Michael Eden › 77 Articles

Michael Eden is the Arts Editor for Trebuchet Magazine, an artist and researcher working in London and the south east, his artistic practice is concentrated on painting and he divides his time between this and lecturing in art history and contextual studies.

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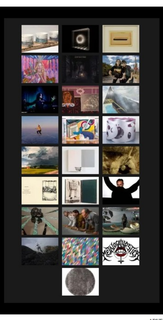

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