**Speculative Design. The body of the digital mind**

A central tenet of techno-utopianism, the desire of living outside and eventually beyond the body’s own finitude, lures us with its promise of immortality – a techno-alchemical version of the elixir of eternal life.

Cinematic imagination shows this desire as a dark and doomed one, the counter-natural, ennui-rising, vampiresque harbinger of an abject deterioration of society - cue a caste of immortals presiding over the world (from *Transcendence* to the current Netflix series *Altered Carbon*).

Can this well-rehearsed scenario be imagined otherwise?

What if future humans could successfully transcend their earthbound limitations by accessing full neuro-cognitive uploading? Leaving aside the implications of who would be entitled to the procedure and at which cost – not just for those who can afford it but, critically, for the rest of humanity - it is easy to see how persuasive the idea may be: digital optimization is *the* future.

A consciousness that becomes entirely digital gives us two conceptual paths to consider.

Either the body is obsolete – and total digitalization signals the absorption of body matter into a flow of codes, bits and algorithmic sequencing - the computational equivalent of the Cartesian body-mind split, with bodies turned into downgraded, disposable, replaceable ‘sleeves’ whose materiality becomes terminally second-rate.

Or else, what appears to be a cognitive externalization must be understood instead as the co-evolution of human minds with techno-digital machines. Here the human body-mind assemblage *becomes* machine *becomes* intelligence – whether this intelligence is deemed ‘artificial’ or ‘natural’, it no longer matters.

Maybe it never mattered.

The real challenge is to be able to speculate on this scenario of possible (present?) human-machine co-evolution without necessarily swerving to embrace the theocratic narrative of the singularity – the idea that a super-intelligence will emerge (or for some is emerging already) from the exponentially growing recursive process of automatic machine learning.

Co-evolution means something else. As French philosopher and mechanologist Gilbert Simondon said exactly 60 years ago, we humans are *always already among* machines. Likewise, there are no machines without humans. Both evolve. Indeed, they co-evolve, to the point that the boundary between technology and humanity is vague, uncertain, slippery. That is why Simondon also wrote, enigmatically, and rather splendidly: “The robot does not exist”.[[1]](#footnote-1)

One day, humanity will wonder why decades were spent feeding irrational fears of AI when there is no artificial intelligence as such, but only *one* intelligence constantly evolving, mutating, incubating its own difference.

Brain uploading, then, is the tangible expression of this metamorphosis of intelligence which is already happening in a *milieu* that is at once machinic and corporeal, human and non-human, synthetic and organic. With each search, each click, each update, our cognitive capacities are already uploaded, encoded, some may say ‘evolved’ – in the whirring of a silicon-carbon merger.

Whether humans are conscious of this process or not, perhaps no longer matters either. Evolution is just another word for the manifold hybridizations moulding us and pushing us to the edge of tomorrow. Some may call it intelligence. Just don’t call it robot.

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**512 words**

1. Gilbert Simondon. 2017. *On the mode of existence of technical objects*. Minneapolis: Univocal p. 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)