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Digital Immortality

by Julian Henriques

The idea of digital immortality is not new. The word *digital* has remained the moniker for “the latest technology” for three decades.¹ We are technophiliacs because, as Freud might tell us – besides our own shit – technology is the one thing we make ourselves. Human kind – men in particular – have always tended to fall in love with their creations. This has been the case from the Greek myth of Pygmalion’s most beautiful ivory statue, to the marvel – again scatological – of Jacques de Vaucanson’s defecating mechanical duck of 1739.² This perhaps was the inspiration for Julien Offray de La Mettrie’s bold proposition of *Man a Machine* published in 1748.³ The philosophical claim that we are ourselves actually only machines was of course made by Rene Descartes almost exactly a century earlier, in 1637.

The idea of digital immortality holds the promise of every new technology. It will solve all our problems, even the major problem of life – death. The Russian scientist Nikolai Fedorov, who inspired the Soviet space programme, submitted that the true ambition of science, should be to raise the dead.⁴ Even the humble gramophone was first advertised as a communication channel beyond the grave.⁵ According to Yuval Noah Harari’s latest best-seller *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, technology will make (some of) us gods.⁶ Prometheus eat your heart out, which of course was precisely his fate for stealing one of their gifts.

This short essay examines the key assumption on which the idea of digital immortality can be said to rest, or maybe be laid to rest. This is the Cartesian rationalist orthodoxy, which defines us only as minds - as cranial operating systems that can subsequently be separated from bodies. This idea is both supremely rationalistic and in a contradictory fashion, vauntingly hubristic; simultaneously both highly gendered and disembodied. It presents itself as the pinnacle of rationalistic scientific progress, while at the same time appealing to ancient superstitions and our basic instincts. As Freud wrote: “in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his immortality.”⁷ The idea of digital immortality fits well with current trends in so-called transhumanist and posthumanist thinking.⁸ It fits even better with the techno-fetishist – if not techno-fascist – business plans of digital corporations.

The digital undead are already among us. What can be called first stage digital immortality is currently on offer. The grandiose projection of the start-up Eternime being a case in point: “Become virtually immortal... We want to preserve for eternity the memories, ideas, creations and stories of billions of people.”⁹ A person’s pattern of life on the net, every click,

text, message, exchange and purchase preserved in a corporate database, not to mention innumerable uploaded Instagram images and memorial Facebook pages.

Such a digital archive, though more comprehensive, is not essentially any different from the conventional analogue immortality, as in a collection of books, images, diaries, etc. But the claims of Eternime go further; the company “creates an intelligent avatar that looks like you. This avatar will live forever and allow other people in the future to access your memories.”¹⁰ We can imagine these avatars populating the soulless necropolis of stage one digital immortality, perhaps long after human extinction.

Second stage digital immortality is more ambitiously conceived as some sort of upload of our “minds” into a computer software. Currently the Digital Immortality Institute offers “social networking between the living and the dead”¹¹ and the world’s best known scientist Steven Hawkins is quoted as saying “it’s theoretically possible to copy the brain onto a computer and so provide a form of life after death.”¹² Google’s Raymond Kurzweil predicts the so-called singularity, when machines will have become smarter than humans.¹³ All-the-better then, to use these machines to escape the biological limitations of our mortal coil in favor of a silicon base, even though this is a house that is literally, built on sand.

The immortal soul and the idea of the uploadable mind are different in that the mind needs a material – or digital – repository, whereas the soul does not. Historically the indestructible soul was born at the instant we could anticipate our inevitable demise. This momentous realization is said to have occurred in Orphic cults, from whose mystical ideas Pythagorean philosophy emerged. In the Eastern traditions this soul travels the circle of reincarnation. In the West it had an entire afterlife to inhabit as in Ancient Egyptian religion and the Christian Kingdom of Heaven.

What the soul and the mind share is a common fear of the flesh. The soul has to be saved from the seductive pleasures of incarnation, vividly depicted, for example, in Hieronymus Bosch’s famous painting from 1510, “The Garden of Earthly Delights.” This saving of souls was the job of the Church.¹⁴ Today the idea of digital immortality assuages our fear of having to live with the consequences of bio and climate catastrophe. Abandoning the biological natural world in favor of a silicon one is touted as the next stage in “human” evolution. This is the job of the digital technology corporations.

The memory that our minds require has traditionally been provided by cultural artifacts.¹⁵ The fragilities of the digital domain are little noticed given our obsessions with digital cloning and the ubiquitous access to instant information. But without a completely reliable storage system, any idea of immortality is likely to be as short-lived as that of cryogenics, not least

because both require a continuous electrical supply. In fact, the *older* the technology the greater its reliability.¹⁶ The cave paintings of Lascaux, for example, have lasted twenty thousand years; papyrus scrolls in clay pots have done well too, even 2 inch analogue recording tape is more reliable than any hard drive. Indeed oral histories are found to have sustained themselves for seven thousand years, according to researchers of Australian aboriginal traditions.¹⁷

By losing our bodies to the idea of digital immortality we lose what makes us human, that is, the experience of our multi-sensory engagement of being-in-the-world. This is the lived-event itself, the intensities of the dirt, noise and sweat of life, not the rationalized pure signal of its digital record. As the philosopher Richard Rorty put it: “If the body had been easier to understand, nobody would have thought we had a mind.”¹⁸ Describing the pleasures of phonography, Evan Eisenberg cites how Odysseus “leaves his immortal lover, knowing that time and ageing will make Penelope loveable in a way impossible for [the god] Calypso.”¹⁹ A digital trace is truly undead, promising immortality not because it never dies but because it never lives. Eisenberg continues, “the meaning that needs mortality, [feeds] off fading things.”²⁰ Through ideas of digital immortality the corporations invite us to suffer the fate of all those who aspire to be gods. Like Icarus, they crash and burn. We only have to be human to refuse this invitation.

¹ This is if we date its impact from adoption of the MIDI interface in the early 80s. The World Wide Web did not become publically available until 1991.

² Jacques de Vaucanson (1709 –1782), a French inventor and builder of automata exhibited the duck at the Académie des Sciences, Paris.

³ Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *Man a Machine: and, Man a Plant*, trans. Richard A Watson and May Rybalka (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1747 and 1748, 1994). Fritz Kahn (1888 –1968) continued this tradition with his popular science diagrams, see Uta von Debschitz, and Thilo von Debschitz *Fritz Kahn: Man machine = Maschine Mensch* (Wien: Springer 2009).

⁴ See John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (London: Granta Books, 2002) pp 137- 38, also <http://turingchurch.com/2015/09/28/technological-resurrection-concepts-from-fedorov-to-quantum-archaeology/> accessed 20th July 2016

⁵ See Julian Henriques, *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques and Ways of Knowing* (London: Continuum, 2011) 190.

⁶ Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (London: Harvill Secker, 2016).

⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Reflections on War and Death*, trans. A.A. Brill and Alfred B. Kutter (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company 1918) 62.

⁸ See Francesca Farrando, Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations, *Existenz*, vol. 8, no. 2, Fall 2013, 26 – 32, also http://www.existenz.us/volumes/Vol.8-2_Ferrando.pdf, accessed 20th August 2016

⁹ <http://eterni.me/> accessed 20th August 2016

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ <http://www.digital-immortality.org/> accessed 20th October 2016

¹² Stephen Hawkins, Stephen Hawking Predicts 'Digital Immortality' For The Human Race, *Medical Daily*, Sept. 21st 2013, see also <http://www.thespacereview.com/article/873/1>, accessed 1st September 2016.

¹³ Raymond Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co Ltd, 2006), see also Singularity University, <http://singularityu.org/>, accessed 1st September 2016, as well as Nick Bostrom, *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies* (Oxford: OUP, 2014)

¹⁴ See Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self: Volume 3 of History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

¹⁵ Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Connerton draws on Maurice Halbwachs' concept of collective memory.

¹⁶ Julian Henriques, Thinking without Trace, *Visual Culture*, Vol. 1 (3) 2002, 355 – 358.

¹⁷ Patrick D. Nunn and Nicholas J. Reid (2016) Aboriginal Memories of Inundation of the Australian Coast Dating from More than 7000 Years Ago, *Australian Geographer*, 47:1, 11-47, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/00049182.2015.1077539?needAccess=true>

¹⁸ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), 239.

¹⁹ Evan Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel: The Experience of Music from Aristotle to Zappa* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 254.

²⁰ Ibid.