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Manifesto challenges 'cybernetic totalism'

by Vincent Miller

YOU ARE NOT A GADGET: A MANIFESTO

By Jaron Lanier

Published by Vintage, \$15

What can the fact that all computer music sounds the same tell us about what Facebook and Wikipedia are doing to us? In this engaging and accessible 'manifesto' Jaron Lanier pursues such questions (and the communication abilities of octopuses as well!) to call attention to the choices and consequences of technological design.

Although he has an axe to grind, this dreadlocked former goat herder and midwife is no hippie Luddite. Lanier is a senior computer scientist who pioneered virtual reality (and coined the term), designed neuron-level digital interfaces, and helped create Microsoft's Kinect gestural interface.

Lanier targets the post-humanist philosophy he terms 'cybernetic totalism.' This believes that human consciousness can be adequately transferred into the digital realm. Devotees hope for the arrival of the 'Singularity' when the Internet awakens to consciousness and at long last, we shake off this mortal coil by uploading ourselves into the digital ether. This is easily derided Gnosticism warmed over for those who spend more time with machines than people. This vision is, however, widely embraced by the designers, movers and shakers who are constructing our digital lives today.

No, our laptops aren't about to digitize us into a virtual universe as in the movie 'Tron,' but they do form us in this philosophy that is hidden in plain sight within Web 2.0. This 'cloud mentality' presumes that human creativity can be sliced and diced into pieces of information and synthesized into digital wholes greater than any human part. We assent to this 'digital Maoism' (probably better understood as what capitalism does to culture and knowledge) every time we accept the results of Google's search algorithms

or Wikipedia's anonymous magisterium rather than consulting human experts and authors.

Lanier paints the peculiar, invisible force of technology in terms of "lock in." As a given technology becomes more widely used, unconsidered -- sometimes "haphazard" -- decisions can have widespread, even societal impact. Thus, the MIDI standard for computer music -- designed originally to enable computers to interface with music keyboards -- became the standard for all computer music. Computer music all sounds the same because MIDI was not designed to deal with the note shapes of violins or the human voice. Every sound is chopped into a note struck on a piano key. Lanier rightly fears that contemporary web interfaces are locking creativity and sociality into a MIDI-like fate.

Consequently, we court this fate every time we conduct our relationships through the attenuated template of Facebook "friends" lists, "likes" and "status updates." He traces kindred effects in popular music, finance and science.

Lanier seeks an alternate ideal of "digital humanism." This humbly accepts that human complexity exceeds our modeling. His "digital humanism" seeks to better understand the details of embodied human meaning and culture-making -- in order to imagine what technology could do if it *respected* human complexity rather than *editing* it to fit its cramped presuppositions.

Theologians and believers will find much to engage and debate in this book of humanistic reflections by an avowedly areligious technologist.

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