

Sex, Crash and Rock'n'Roll – Or Strategies For Acquiring a Virtual Extension

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Abstract

With the rise of the online culture of blogs, profiles, live webcasting and web video a new social development came to existence: a culture of exposure that spans all the aspects of human life ultimately using as its trump card human sexuality. This intense presentation of the self via electronic circuitry may be a cry for connectivity. It also may be viewed as a challenge thrown at the machine by the biological beings. The vastness and the disembodied agency of the Web are sublime. One may wonder how could we ever incorporate it as our extension. The director, David Cronenberg, addressed the question of humans fusing with their technology in an attempt to map out the psychology of this coming together. His model may be useful in conceptualizing our relationship to the Web. In the impulse to claim the new virtual territory, humans crash into the Web with their amplified representations.

1. From Comfort to Amplification

Technology seems to serve not only as means to human comfort but, in effect, as a way to amplify human existence. This byproduct of human efforts to make their life easier and their work more efficient may be the most important effect of technology on our emotions. Be it modes of transportation, entertainment or kitchen appliances, machines help us be more than we are. They enhance and amplify our existence and provide us with sensations unattainable before. Take for example the exhilarating feeling that overcomes a person in a beautiful sports car reaching dizzying speeds on a highway, or the excitement of a plane take off or touchdown. For those that don't like to expose their body to a possibility of a machine malfunction or an accident all those thrills and more is available in their home via the television, video games or the Internet. We can experience intense emotions with a minimal effort on our part thanks to the technical advances.

It is only natural that with the arrival of a new technology such as the Internet people found a way to use it as their own amplifier. This is, I believe, the case with the different modes of presentation of the self on the Web. The organization of the display is an interesting phenomenon that corresponds with the degree to which humans are still a little shy and not fully initiated into the possibilities of the medium. Blog and profile sites usually follow the format of a listing. One enumerates one's interests, friends, photos, videos, experiences and personal histories as though filling out a job application. In fact, in some cases while retaining its semi-social characteristic, that's exactly what these profiles are. Even more randomly organized blog and video sites have a very clearly delineated format into which one plots the data. The fill-in the blank nature of this presentation speaks to our need for instruction and solicitation. Once invited though many feel the freedom to express themselves beyond the boundaries that exist in the physical pedestrian life.

The result is a display of that, which the individuals deem most interesting, attractive and intense about them. From sports and pet tricks captured on video through displays of erudition on blogs and chats, to presentation of sexual talents and the eroticized body – it all has its place on the Web. When everything

else fails, one can always turn the camera on to continuously film oneself and channel the intensity through sheer duration. When it comes to the Internet show and tell, we are outperforming each other. But who is it that we are trying to impress? The official understanding is that we are reaching out to each other. But can we talk about actual connection when the interface that we are building to supposedly facilitate this connectivity is exaggerated, a bit doctored, missing details that one chooses to hide or otherwise completely made up. We can still communicate perfectly well when it comes to technical information or perhaps schedules, which is enormously useful nevertheless the truthful portrayal of the self on the Internet is highly problematic. The human representations that populate the Internet are not a transposition of the true self open for frank exchange with another human being. Rather, they serve as shields and partial unveilings communicating first and foremost an intensity. In using the Internet we amplify ourselves.

2. Intensity As a Solution

The whole world around us has grown faster and louder. Extreme experiences not only became increasingly accessible but they invade our privacy and impose the outside on us. The electronic technology is all-pervasive and serves as the permeable cell wall between the private and public. The mechanically advanced machines such as cars, trains and airplanes amplify our experience of space and provide avatars for our grandiose self-perception. Confronted with that intensity we throw everything that we've got back at the circuit. Demonstrations of extreme physical and psychological behavior seem to be the only way humans are able to respond. In thus created atmosphere of permissiveness, in an effort to keep up, we are willing to show off on the screen more than in real life. It almost seems appropriate that way. Additionally, this barrage of intense self-exposure lends a human element to otherwise technological landscape. Perhaps it is our main mode of operation when it comes to dealing with a foreign territory: fetishize it and populate it with self. The culture of desire already lends itself perfectly to the way we understand and use cars. The Internet is no different.

Human aggressiveness in inserting themselves into the technologically created world echoes in the films of David Cronenberg. In *Crash*, the protagonists' sexual drive is amplified by the machine and its merging with the human body. Existing next to a car is not enough anymore. The relationship requires actual fusion of the two bodies as in the sexual act. The gender and sexual orientation of the people don't matter anymore. In the highly sexualized atmosphere of a car crash everyone feels charged with libidinal energy and none discriminates in his or her choices of partners. In *Crash* the new desire-organizing axis runs between humans and machines. In this relationship, humans provide the desire and machines deliver the intensity unattainable to unaided human body. While damaging to the human flesh this relation is pursued and executed by humans. One of the characters, Vaughan, describes their exploits as "positive psychopathology" and deems it necessary for the emergence of a new kind of flesh. In essence, the act is

creative. In a view of this logic, the machine is a passive tool enabling the human to undergo a transformation. Thus, despite our first gut reaction, it is the human that takes on the role of the aggressor.

The human transformation, I believe, takes place on the emotional level. In a car crash the human is inspired to feel more vividly. My conviction runs contrary to Jean Baudrillard's interpretation of the human-machine relationship in *Crash*. According to him, the car crash sterilizes the humans of any emotion reducing the sexual act to pure mechanics.

"No affect behind all that, no psychology, no flux or desire, no libido or death drive. Naturally, death is implicated in an unlimited exploration of the possible violence done to the body, but this is never, as in sadism or masochism, with an express and perverse aim of violence, a distortion of meaning and of sex (in relation to what?). No repressed unconscious (affects or representations), except in a second reading that would still reinject a forced meaning, based on the psychoanalytic model".¹

Contrary to this statement I believe that human affect is precisely the force responsible for the crash. While the machine may appear to possess agency, it is the human driven by desire that enacts his/her will. The crash is an appropriate coming together since it is infused with human emotional charge. It is exciting. The meaning, based on the psychoanalytic model is not forced because it emerges spontaneously in the human psyche.

This bold fetishistic attitude and desire for excitement is present on the Web. They found their particular location on the social networking sites as expressed in the culture of exposure. The representation of oneself becomes an object of desire with an unclear audience. The profiles and Internet personas are the striking versions of ourselves. Humans show off "the best of" themselves in accordance with one's understanding of what's attractive in one's milieu. This shout for attention finds its culmination in virtual emergence of profiles and videos blatantly implying sexuality. Who exactly is the audience of all these efforts?

The display of mating colors is not an actual solicitation for a real person on the other side of the circuit. As I believe, the exchange of true information is not the goal of this behavior. The phenomenon is two fold. On one hand, we throw forth that which is most potent in our psyche, our libido, in order to match the surrounding intensity. A sort of equalization of electric charges takes place: the slick virtual sublime is confronted with sticky human chemistry. On the other hand, eroticism and intimacy may be the most immediate strategies through which we arrive at forming a union between the human and the technological Other. Perhaps, we can think and realize this merging together only through intensity equal to human sexuality. We are crashing our intimacy into the circuitry much like the protagonist of *Crash* throw their bodies against the car's metallic surface.

3. Wear It, Love It, Make It Yours

It's not a secret that humans tend to fall in love with their technology and the Web is no different. After all, it plays the role of the Other so well. The visual slickness, conceptual logic and the otherworldly dimension it inhabits are seductive. They promise a possibility of transformation, a different way of existence in a parallel world. In a sense, we put on our Web representations like a costume, which like an elaborate outfit is meant to inspire desire. Sandy Stone in her essay *Split Subjects, Not Atoms; or, How I Fell in Love with My Prosthesis* gives an interesting insight into human relationship with technology: *"With the development of industrial design in consort with strategies of commodification, as meaning moved to the surface of things, machines themselves became spectacle much as the Elizabethan body had been, taking on the qualities of desire that formerly sought their meaning and purpose in body surface – but meaning decoupled in complex and troubling ways from the shape that function had dictated. This worked to create a dual desire, at once for the hypertactility of the smooth surface and also for the mysterious hidden organs that nestled beneath".*²

We accessorize with our technology and "wear" it like fashion. The screen of the computer adds the extra shine to our photos and videos and offers an opportunity to edit our representations. The web makes us feel sexy by lending us its surface. Through the Web we gain an interface to our physical selves, which not only matches up with what we expect of ourselves but also carries on beyond into the world of fantasy. Just like our technology we too can hide our inner workings, our organs beneath the surface of the screen. If you were a car, what car would you be? On the Web, this becomes a serious question, which opens the door to embodiments of different attitudes no matter how extreme.

The result of our crash with the Web is a spectacle. Our new interface augments our appearance and psychology. In an effort to match the sublime intensity of the virtual world, we invent ever more slick and extreme versions of ourselves and throw them on the Web. In this love affair, the axis of sensual tension runs between the humans and the virtual world. We have the sense of being seduced and we respond with seduction. The cavalcade of kaleidoscopic representations mounts a barricade on which we confront the Other – our technology. A question arises. Is the non-conscious, sublimely non-locational entity that is the Web capable of responding to our oppressive sentiment? Are we, after all, alone in our obsession? In the mean time, our strategy seems to be clear: only extreme measures can result in successful appropriation of the virtual territory as a functional extension.

References

1. Baudrillard, Jean, 1994, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, p112
2. Stone, Sandy, 1995, *The Cyborg Handbook*, New York, Routledge, p. 398