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Hyperreality: The Prison of Our Own Device

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Mulder, Frank, *Hyperreality: How Our Tools Came to Control Us* (Resource Publications, 2021).

The tendency of any tool—from the spear to the smartphone—to change human beings and the way they interact with the world is commonly seen as both grounds for criticisms of technology, and justifications for it. Frank Mulder’s *Hyperreality: How Our Tools Came to Control Us* is clearly in the former camp, but without falling into a nostalgia for an imaginary paradise free of devices. Mulder begins in fact by arguing that man is “a technological being: technology is an extension of man.” “Techniques,” he says, “are just ways to create more means in order to act.” In many ways, Mulder observes, we are better off now than in the past, for instance, with the availability of medical technology, a sensibility to human rights, and governments based on equality before the law. And yet, says Mulder, because modern technology gives the impression of the limitless malleability of nature, it tends to obscure the fact that human nature is, in fundamental ways, the same as it always has been: what drives us, our fears, our virtues or vices, are not any different in the era of modern technology than they have always been.

It is the exploration of these drives and desires that makes up the bulk of Part I, entitled “The Promises of Hyperreality.” Following Abraham Maslow’s famous hierarchy of needs, Mulder identifies human desire as directed towards three main “goods”: wealth, security, and belonging. Technology has always sought to facilitate the attainment of these goods. But modern technology’s attempt to fulfill them, is doomed to failure, for a number of reasons.

First, while the foundational desires of human nature are a constant, their specific objects are dynamic, not fixed. We *learn* what we want, says Mulder, from others. Our desires are “mimetic,” in the words of René Girard. We think our desires are our own, but in fact, we “always want to copy and compete with one another.” Moreover, we have been doing so since infancy. Thus desire is not only deeply ingrained, but is ineradicable, even for those who want to rebel against what is popular by being “unique.” Says Mulder: “even by not copying others I

am copying. I want to prove that I am one of those people who go their own way, regardless of commercialized trends . . . And so we all feel unique, together.” The upshot is that the desire technology aims to satisfy is a constantly moving target. If the need is constantly shifting, then there is an endless demand for which technology provides the “supply.”

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Second, in copying the other, we are not just imitative, but competitive. Think of the child who doesn't even notice a particular toy until he sees another child playing with it. Competition bleeds easily into resentment, especially with social media which encourages constant comparisons with others. Technology allows corporations, interest groups and governments to have a front-row seat on our desires, fears, habits, and beliefs, when we hand them the key to our inner lives in exchange for the products and services they offer “for free.” Our eager participation in such systems makes us a captive audience with desires ready to be manipulated—even created—so that the powers that be can “satisfy” them for their own purposes.

Third, something fundamental has changed about our use of technology. The issue is not, as is often believed, technology's pervasiveness; that would mean the problem with technology today is merely quantitatively different from the past, rather than qualitative. What has changed is the role technology plays in relation to the fulfillment of human desires. Formerly, technology was regarded as a means to attain some other good that actually fulfilled us. Now, however, technology has become an all-encompassing end, by transforming the goods we seek by “technologizing” them and thus making them better, and by manipulating and exaggerating our desires so that they serve the interests of others rather than ourselves. This saturation of reality by technology Mulder calls “hyperreality,” a term coined by the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard. “Hyperreality” is “a constructed world, a simulated world, which would improve on natural reality. It is not a fake reality. On the contrary, it is *hyper*—more real than reality, in the sense that our senses experience much more.” It is not a fantasy world, as in *The Matrix*, but is part of the real world, “a perfectly designed layer on top of the stubborn reality, liberating us from the boundaries of time and space,” as, for example, when we ride an exercise bike in an air-conditioned New York apartment, with a screen in front of us portraying movement through a beautiful countryside in Germany. “Hyperreality” is not one of a number of new “technologies,” but rather “a whole new way of thinking,” in the words of Jacques Ellul. It is “a whole social system that is rationally pressing onward towards more efficiency, more means, in every sphere . . . The result of this is only judged by one criterion: does it give us more (speed, money, precision, stuff)? Then it is declared to be good.”

Hyperreality gives technology an almost total control over our lives. It attempts to increase our desires, while providing us with a stimulation that is shallow enough that we constantly want more, yet satisfying enough that we never question our enslavement. It does all this with a kind of life of its own: various technologies “interact with each other and form a system” such that no one person determines the overall trajectory, and thus does not proceed as “the result of our conscious choice.” Paradoxically, none of this could happen if we all refused to participate. We *could* get off the ride any time we wanted; but we no longer want to. In the end, hyperreality has taken control, and with our permission.

Mulder is ultimately optimistic, however. There are the intrinsic limitations of hyperreality. “Real” reality is, in Mulder’s words, “stubborn”: there is something in it that evades the power of technology to control and manipulate. “It will never be able to abolish the boundaries of reality. Moreover, it parasitizes on this reality, something which cannot go on forever.” Moreover, because hyperreality is utopian, it is not satisfying to actual human beings, because it promises a satisfaction it cannot provide. For these reasons, its quest for ultimate takeover is bound to fail.

It must be said, though, that it is not clear on Mulder’s own terms why this is the case. His analysis of desire, carried out in the framework of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, is a particular area of difficulty in this respect. At least in the stereotypical presentation, Maslow thinks that non-material things can be pursued *after* the material needs have been “met.” Since technology does increase the efficiency of production and distribution of material goods,[1] thereby meeting material needs more than ever before, it seems difficult on Maslowian grounds to explain the continuing failure of hyperreality to satisfy. If material goods are merely material, then meeting them ought to be possible. Remaining dissatisfied after these needs have been met by hyperreality may be a kind of gluttony, like wanting to continue eating after I’m already full. From a Catholic perspective, in contrast, the dissatisfaction of hyperreality becomes quite intelligible. Whenever I pursue even lower, “material” goods, I seek something spiritual: each thing is “sacramental,” a “sign” that points to some other and deeper reality; and I want even material things insofar as they “sacramentally” make present those spiritual realities that do in fact satisfy. Mulder seems to sense this by criticizing hyperreality for presenting reality in a way that is “flat.” Furthermore, he is convinced that the problems with hyperreality are not in fact technological, but spiritual. This insight would be greatly helped by the “sacramental” view, in light of which it is plain that the reason hyperreality cannot deliver on its promises is that, when “flattened,” nothing is capable of getting me to what I’m actually pursuing “within” or “beyond”—not *in addition to!*—that sign.

The sacramental view would deepen not only Mulder’s treatment of desire, but also the power he believes Christ has to overcome the allure of hyperreality. Since hyperreality is a “spiritual” problem, the solutions to the problems created by hyperreality cannot be sought in technology itself, but only in faith. In Mulder’s estimation, Christianity offers this salvation as adherence to the “Way” shown by Jesus. In response to the powers of his day, Jesus does not choose the path of power, but rather “steps aside of it. He embraces not fear, but trust that enables him not to be myopically preoccupied with how “effective” he can be, but only with the rectitude of the means. This is transformative for the world, Mulder believes, because Jesus “came from God, that he was God himself.” If the sacramental view is correct, then Christ’s Incarnation, God taking on our flesh, is the perfect confirmation “from above” that this world is meant to communicate “more”: God Himself.

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[1] “In 1990, about 36 percent of the global population . . . lived [below] the World Bank’s definition of extreme poverty. . . . By 2015, the share of the world’s population living in extreme poverty fell to 12 percent . . . During a single generation, more than a billion people around the world claimed out of extreme poverty” (Lucy Tompkins, “Extreme Poverty Has Been Sharply Cut. What Has Changed?” *New York Times* [December 2, 2021]).

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