Caught in the Net and Dreaming Lucidly

Connected – Or What It Means to Live in the Network Society
By Steven Shaviro
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Review by Andrew J. Felder

To dream, perchance, uninfected by virus or meme.

     With eyes wide open while metaphorically shut, Steven Shaviro fashions a tapestry of keen-minded reveries riffing on the ubiquitous contours of simulated existence. How? Not by appealing to the sleep of reason, nor by turning to tranquilizing representations of reality. Rather, Shaviro imaginatively demystifies the modern networked society by exploring the marriage between the economic "flows" of late capitalism and the 'fictions' of science. Shaviro does so by ironically taking recourse to, among other things, science fiction and its implicit cultural commentary. Replete with allusions to sci-fi film and literature, Shaviro pays homage to the likes of Phillip K. Dick, William Gibson, William Burroughs, and K. W. Jeters. Threaded within Shaviro's assemblage of futuristic sci-fi worlds, he lifts out captivating intimations of social critique. The critiques range over such things as Web surfing, electronic surveillance, multimedia, hip hop, artificial intelligence, and vegetable minds. Shaviro enfleshes his oneiric musings by referencing a mosaic of incisive thoughts from a roll call of thinkers including Deleuze, Guattari, Bataille, McLuhan, Kant, Marx, Jameson, Foucault, and Baudrillard.

     Why would a reader entertain such re-visioned takes on our human world? Shaviro sketches out how the human topography has progressively morphed into a networked or mechanical landscape engendering a corollary decline in organic feel and sensibility. Moreover, according to Shaviro, the tendrils of this network reach everywhere in effect ensconcing humanity in a simulated world. Taking a cue from Jeter's *Noir*, Shaviro strikes a dystopian chord by highlighting the notion that embedded within the rush to electronically mediated interactions, "Every connection . . . seems to lead back to . . . corporation[s]" (p. 3). And, if indeed, these corporations subject society to "soft fascism" or would have individuals purchase "Microsoft's

'Home of the Future' . . . clearly modeled upon [Bill] Gates's actual mansion" (p. 35), humanity would benefit from raising its consciousness about the flows of capital and power constructing its posthuman world. Especially since, after all,

> In an increasingly networked world, escape is nearly impossible. No matter what position you seek to occupy, that position will be located somewhere on the network's grid . . . . You cannot opt out of the network entirely, but at the very least, you can try to be connected a little less.(pp. 4-5)

Here, Shaviro echoes sci-fi genre sentiments reflecting the profound inevitability of human immersion in the electronic network. By extension, Shaviro's referencing of dark sci-fi films like *Blade Runner*, which mourn "the supposed loss of the real," (p. 149) opens onto concerns that immersion in the technocultural products of profit driven commerce give rise to dehumanizing social costs.

Whilst Shaviro could be challenged for couching well-worn critical theory polemics about the lost "real" within a frame where power is concentrated in the hands of multinational corporations, I would, instead, credit him with imaginatively re-describing how power relations inscribe posthuman subjects operating in the electronic social field. For instance, Shaviro, following from Richard Dawkins's "meme theory," explains how posthuman subjects wittingly or unwittingly become "hosts" for memes and viruses seeking to multiply iterations of marketing messages. In a world "organized by money . . . and saturated with advertising messages" (p. 98), human subjects are thrust into the Darwinian struggle of meme- or virus-coded mantras to "survive and reproduce" amid competing meme rivals.

Shaviro goes on to suggest that in order for humans to avoid becoming docile reproductions of the meme processes permeating the network, posthuman hosts will do well to remember that memes, much like genes, need their hosts in order to replicate themselves. Consequently, when a host embraces its relative autonomy from memes by maintaining a sense of his or her own creativity and values, resistance to viral subjectification can be enacted. In a sense, Shaviro is advocating the preservation of freedom for discursively aware subjects. And, it is on this point that Shaviro can be applauded for remixing and refitting Foucault's exhortation to transgress discourses into the new "reality" of simulated life spaces.

Weaving More Connections

Whereas Shaviro offers up potent metaphors and persuasive critical analyses—which can awaken the slumbering consciousness of posthuman subjects—he might also have introduced the role of historical consciousness as a catalyst for producing new worlds and new subjects. This is not to suggest that Shaviro is unaware of history's relevance. Toward the end of *Connections*, Shaviro remarks, "The goal of commerce is to destroy history, to put its customers in the eternal Now, the big happy theme park of desires . . ." (p. 250). It is at this point that Shaviro might have supplemented his claim about the ahistoricism of commodified virtual spaces by referencing significant works like Martin Heidegger's (1977) *The Question Concerning Technology*. In so doing, Shaviro may then have shed additional light upon the constricted disclosure of existence occasioned by the philosophical underpinnings of Socratic Greece and the advent of the modern scientific worldview.

Shaviro might also have explored Robert Romanyshyn's (1989) aesthetically inspired historiography, *Technology as Symptom and Dream.* In this work, Romanyshyn examines the historical convergence between art and science which contribute to the psychological abandonment of body and world. In this way, Shaviro's exploration of the meaning of astronauts and space shuttles—the staples of technology and science fiction—might have deepened his reverie regarding the de-animation and de-sensualization of the human world as an objectified spectacle.

Finally, consideration of Kenneth Gergen's (1991) *Saturated Self* might have provided further insight into the construction of posthuman subjects through consideration of electronic media's impact upon modernist, romanticist, and postmodern subject formations (e.g., rational, deep, and plural subjects). In these ways, Shaviro's emphasis upon the rhythms of commerce might have been enriched by an affirmation of the tributary flows of discourse impinging upon human subjects traversing the network.

To be sure, however, Shaviro provocatively expands *Connections* into increasingly fruitful meditations upon human identity, the misleading banality of virtual reality, and pathways for re-imagining vitalized sensual networks for human habitation. Throughout such discussions, Shaviro's willingness to risk introducing interpretations and possibilities foreign to the network were far from conventional. And for this, Shaviro can be rightly noted for having avoided the unreflective recycling of anesthetizing memes,

and appreciated for, perchance, successfully having distilled the stuff of il-
luminating dreams.

References

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