

## To be (Cyborg) or not

Review by Sajay Samuel

Chris Bateman, **The Virtuous Cyborg**, (London: Squint Books, 2018)

Jonathan Crary, **Scorched Earth: beyond the digital age to the post-capitalist world**, (New York: Verso Books, 2022).

Chris Bateman says Illich's *Tools for Conviviality* decisively shaped his thinking about the moral implications of tools. He sent me *The Virtuous Cyborg* to invite interested readers of *Conspiratio* to discuss his arguments. Bateman has made video games for more than twenty years and has deep knowledge of the aesthetics of digital play experiences. That is even more reason to take his argument seriously—particularly by those who have never played a video game or used a smartphone.

*The Virtuous Cyborg* comprises eight chapters and a sheaf of useful materials at the end which include a Coda/Overture, a Glossary, Author Notes, and References. The Author Notes explains why Bateman refers to the authors he knows by their first name and why he does not use academic style citations. The Glossary is necessary to keep track of the many technical terms Bateman has coined for his argument, which is also helpfully summarized in the Coda/Overture.

*The Virtuous Cyborg* is intended to explore the moral implications of tools in general, whether cars, hammers, or steam engines. However, it focuses on such digital phenomena as video games, smartphones, and social media. For the digital ignoramus, some of the examples used to elucidate his argument are not easy to understand. It took me a cou-

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ple of conversations with a gamer to form a dim idea of why Bateman thought a 'Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG)' was a 'truly social game.'

Ordinarily, the words cyborg and robot conjure up humanoids in the cast of the *Terminator* or *R2D2* from the movies. Instead, these and more are technical terms in Bateman's argument. A cyborg is a 'human-robot pairing' of a living being and an inanimate 'robot.' A robot is any device that is 'capable of independent functioning' whether it be a jukebox or smartphone. Accordingly, the computer on which I am writing this book review is a digital robot and I am a cyborg insofar as I cannot be disentangled from the computer. Such computer-human interactions result from a mind-boggling set of interrelated materials (computer chips and shipping containers) and activities (coding software, ordering parts, designing packaging). A 'cyberg' (his word) refers to such 'vast and complex webs of connectivity' of which cyborgs are elements. In Bateman's opinion, the second largest 'megacyberg' is the Internet, which enfolds about half the world's population. The most pervasive cyberg is money, which captures all but two percent of the world's population within its networks.

Bateman thinks such technical terms are necessary lest the reader forget that 'we were always cyborgs,' no different from ants and beavers. This is the first premise of his argument. Accordingly, he denies any substantive distinction between the natural and the artificial or equivalently between the natural and the cultural. Our cyborg condition as an ineradicable fact implies that the suggestion 'we give up our smartphones...is not even worth making.' This allows Bateman to avoid peddling nostrums that sound good in principle but are impossible in practice. For instance, more than 85 percent of people all over the world use smartphones today. 'Part of the essential crisis we are facing' is that we cannot wish these robots away, however destructive they are of social relations

and personal integrity. *The Virtuous Cyborg* is the author's unflinching attempt to understand 'the moral implications of living with robots' that have become indispensable.

The second premise of *The Virtuous Cyborg* is that tools can 'affect how we think and act'; that they 'can encourage virtuous behavior or draw us into behaving badly.' To ignore their influence on human behavior is to avoid finding 'ways in which the design of our robot's hardware and software *could be made to encourage virtue and cybervirtue*' (emphasis in original). Just as humans can be virtuous or not, so also cyborgs can be cybervirtuous or not. The book is a plea to design robots that facilitate cybervirtue instead of increasing profits or promoting seeming conveniences that in fact debilitate.

Accordingly, Bateman elaborates nine cybervirtues and their contrary cyber-debilities (few of which rise to the level of cyber-vices). The trash bin which appears on every computer is an example of the programmed cybervirtue of kindness because it is designed to give the user time to reflect on whether she really wants to discard the file for good. The notification that alerts users to the quantity of screen time spent each week encourages the cybervirtue of restraint when using digital robots. The unguarded anonymity permitted by Facebook spurs the social cyber-debility of cyber-cruelty whereas a Multiuser Dungeon (MUD) supervised by a group of well-meaning wizards can nudge participants towards 'a virtuous community...bound together by their mutual engagement in the fictional world of a game.'

Among his nine cybervirtues appropriate for the design of robots, Bateman identifies cyber-fidelity as 'another name for what Ivan Illich called convivial tools.' That is because, like convivial tools, cyber-fidelity refers to robots that aid 'our commitment and our communities without simultaneously engendering our dependency.' To his credit, Bateman

however also confesses that he does not know ‘whether cyber-fidelity is even possible in a world of robots’ Yet, Bateman presses on because the alternative to the possibility of designing convivial robots is simple ‘technological addiction.’

Yet, acknowledging cyborgs as addicts may generate different insights. In his Author Notes and elsewhere, Bateman has occasion to refer to *Energy and Equity*. Illich’s critique of motorized transport was, like Bateman’s, rooted in the premise that tools shape the field of action and, in Illich’s case, also self-perception. Regardless of whether they are fueled by gasoline or the sun, cars and buses like trains and planes are designed to immobilize your feet. It follows that there is no way to make them convivial. However, what is feasible is to limit their use in a way that they are subordinated to activities that do enable you to use your feet —walking and cycling. Similar considerations may apply to thinking about a good life for cyborgs. It may be less a matter of designing digital robots that encourage cybervirtues than of discovering criteria and methods that limit their use.

In his *Scorched Earth*, Jonathan Crary also refers to Illich’s *Tools for Conviviality*. However, unlike Bateman who holds out the hope for virtue in the time of cyborgs, Crary does not think ‘the internet complex’ can be made convivial or that cyborgs can be virtuous. He makes this plain in the first line of his book: ‘if there is to be a livable and shared future on our planet, it will be a future offline.’ Instead, he invokes Illich’s later insight that the age of tools understood as instrumental means to achieving human ends might be over. He does not think digital robots and the internet are tools in this accepted sense. Instead, insofar as the internet has become the milieu of most human activity it is a ‘historically unprecedented reality,’ in which ‘any goals or ends we pursue cease to be ones we have truly chosen.’

Why can’t we give shape to our lives when the internet

is our milieu? Is not the internet today what the natural world was once —an enveloping circumstance that both constrains and enables the field of human possibilities? Crary's answer requires understanding what he means by the 'internet complex.' It lies at the core of his short, combative pamphlet that 'affirm[s] the truth of shared understandings...and insist[s] that forms of radical refusal, rather than adaptation and resignation, are not only possible but necessary.'

The internet is commonly understood to comprise all the digital devices that are connected by satellites overhead and cables underground and undersea. The internet spreads 'communication,' and, like Illich before him, Crary finds communication unseemly because it cannot distinguish between animal, human, and machine. It is not only people who communicate through computers and phones. The Internet of Bodies refers to communications about animal functions as when a smart watch sends your blood pressure data to a health-monitoring software. The Internet of Things refers to the communications about machines such as when your refrigeration updates your digital shopping list by the carton of milk you just consumed. Whatever the differences between programs, apps, or online services, they are similar in that they require you to be online. Cars are designed to lift you off your feet. The internet is designed to lift you out of your body.

The internet complex is formed when this necessarily out-of-body experience combines with capitalism. To a reader generally skeptical of 'isms,' Crary's frequent use of capitalism may suggest a catchall phrase rather than a descriptor. Yet a moment's reflection should disabuse that reader. Capitalism, says Crary, 'has always been a conjunction of an abstract system of value and the physical and human externalizations of that system.' When activities and things are captured by money, they are subjected to an algebraic calculus that abstracts them from their concreteness. Labor is an abstract category

that commensurates fishing and teaching. Tagging a tree or a kidney with a price makes them exchangeable. What does not have a price is not invaluable but valueless. In this sense, capitalism is more than a Jeff Bezos or the insurance industry. Capitalists and capitals are not new. But the throughgoing monetization of all things and activities is relatively recent. Today, no corner of the earth, sky, or water is safe from the calculator's clamor. No activity or thing is immune to being captured by the circuits of exchange value. Even imaginary things are routinely fabricated and exchanged through futures and options contracts on electronic trading platforms. Accordingly, the internet complex refers to the closed circuit between the internet and capitalism.

Crary therefore insists it is delusionary to believe that the internet can function independently of the 'world-destroying systems and operations of global capitalism.' The internet emerged from the bowels of the US war machine. Those who still hope for digital commons forget the servers on which their data reside are all either public or private property. Those who still believe that the internet could dissolve political, economic, and social hierarchies in the brew of peer-to-peer networks forget that profits and power are amassed in direct proportion to the ownership of accumulated data. That the internet exacerbates socio-economic polarization became obvious during the covid-19 pandemic. People were locked down all over the world for months on end. So called essential workers served the laptop class who remained ensconced in their ICU for the healthy. Those who still peddle the idea that the impoverished and the destitute can use the internet to right the injustices visited upon them are 'not just wrong but malevolently irresponsible.'

In three essays, Crary assembles proof of the material, social, and personal depredations that attend the internet complex—the twinned cuffs of capitalism and the internet

that shackle humans to screens. To summarize these incendiary essays would be to tame the anger that enlivens them, to narrow the learning that enriches them, and to dull the hope that uplifts them. In his explanation of why he chose the word *scorched* in his title, Crary notes its derivation from *escorcher*, which in old French, ‘means to flay or to strip the skin of a body, rendering it fatally exposed.’ He documents not only the mining and deforestation of the earth but also the shameless laying bare of the human body. In his third essay, Crary masterfully presents the accelerating homogenization of experience that results from the steady anesthetization of the senses. In particular, he focuses on how the human voice, gaze, and face have been captured and made into objects for management through biometrics, speech, and facial recognition technologies. His reflections on the dispossession by machines and money of the fibers that humanize the human animal are searing. They are reminiscent of Illich’s courses in the mid to late 1990s at Penn State and Bremen University. In some of those lectures, many of which have been published in languages other than English, Illich not only relied on Crary’s *Techniques of the Observer* but also explored a similar path into the history and phenomenology of the face, sight, and voice.

Despite their difference in orientation—Crary holds out the possibility of getting offline that Bateman denies—these two authors agree that the cultures of the ‘Global South’ offer a singular source to rediscover ways to reduce the harmful effects of the internet complex. Both recognize that traditional cultures have ways of knowing and being that could be models of how to be less dependent on technology and the economy. That may well be true. But it is also true that decades of colonization, development, and globalization have almost destroyed those traditions and that what remains of them may function as nostalgic kitsch for virtue signaling cosmopolitans.

Perhaps the deeper vein to plumb is to be found right here, in our own despoiled backyard. Illich coined the word 'vernacular' in the early 1980s to denote all manner of non-market, autonomous actions through which people satisfy felt needs. He argued that the war against the vernacular has been 500 years in the making, starting with the invention of a taught and trained mother tongue. Today, despite being enmeshed in the internet complex, millions of people are nevertheless inventing ways to get offline, to work less, to grow food in urban gardens, and to raise chickens in suburban backyards. The vernacular is always already present at hand because rooted in the enfleshed body. All it takes to unplug is—no easy task— to come to our senses.