LIQUID LOVE

VIRTUAL INTERACTION HAS BECOME A REAL FORCE to be reckoned with. The social networking site Myspace.com – now under the ownership of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation – has estimated annual revenues of about $200 million, with more than 70 million users. Online romance sites fetch $500 million a year via services that range from the broadly targeted Match.com to specialty sites like GoodGenes.com – for high-earning but lonely Ivy Leaguers. Meanwhile, MMORPGS (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games) like World of Warcraft (with 4.5 million subscribers) and Lineage (2.2 million) rake in billions of dollars offering online fantasy universes to groups of players who pay monthly subscription fees. These games, with their potential for round-the-clock interaction, are responsible for much of the talk of "video game addiction."

As fast as the influence of virtual communities has grown, a body of thought condemning its corrosive effects on society has sprung up as well, from both mainstream and academic sources. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, for instance, sees nothing to be amused about in a tendency towards what he calls "liquid life," arguing that technologically mediated interaction leads to a fluid, detached relationship to real-life others. "Virtual relationships . . . set the pattern that drives out all other relationships," Bauman laments, with reference to internet dating, "That does not make the people who surrender to them happy. You gain something, you lose something else."

Bauman's reflections on the poisonous effects of mediation fit into a lineage of radical, Marxist-inflected European thought, from Paul Virilio's recent indictment of the modern obsession with informational speed, which, he argues, renders thought impossible, to Guy Debord's apocalyptic reflections on the "society of the spectacle," to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's withering attack on the Hollywood "culture industry" as the tool of an incipient fascist consciousness. In fact, the critique of technology is such a persistent motif in modern thought, that one has to ask the question as to what ideological function it itself serves.

One thing is certain about these critiques: The blanket condemnation of technology has little to do with authentic Marxist thought. For Marx, technological innovation was always both bound up with exploitation and alienation, and at the same time a locus of radical potential. Its character is not static, serving one interest, because technology is a product of society and society is a field split by contending interests.

Unless it takes this into account, the intellectual condemnation of technology becomes a case of tilting windmills, doing battle with abstract concepts like "liquid life" rather than a specific set of social arrangements, perpetrated by certain kinds of people, and thus soaking up radical energy that could be better directed. The gloom of this type of thought is merely the flipside of economics, which sees technical innovation as eternally benevolent.

A vaguely alarmist 2004 *New York Times* article by Brent Staples condemns the lure of virtual communities, arguing that teenagers who spend too much time online substitute fantasy interactions for socialization that is important to their emotional development. But it's important to emphasize that the problem is the user, not the tool. For other groups, particularly those with comparatively few real spaces for interaction – such as divorcees – the internet often serves as a valuable conduit towards actual, committed relationships.

More importantly, in the face of ills that are authentically society-wide, blaming technology is a deflection. Even if the detached nature of virtual relationships is, as Staples argues, connected to "symptoms of loneliness and depression," this leaves unanswered the obvious question as to what, then, the attraction is, aside from some mystical appeal of gadgetry. Is the popularity of mediated, "liquid" relationships a matter of some placeless postmodern condition? Or is it driven by concrete societal pressures having to do with life in a corporate-controlled world: the overdeveloped individualism that is a product of omnipresent consumerism; the lack of time for a real social life brought by endemic overwork; or the impatience with human flaws that stems from advertising's degradation of sexuality.

The former of these two explanations makes for better apocalyptic pronouncements; the latter, a better starting point for political intervention. The medium may be the message, as Marshall McLuhan liked to say – but it doesn't have the final word.

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