THERE IS NO DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE ‘REAL’ AND THE ‘VIRTUAL’
A brief Phenomenology of Digital Revolution

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SOMETHING HAS CHANGED

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Don IHDE (1990)

“OUR EXISTENCE IS TECHNOLOGY TEXTURED”

True. But even more...
I would say...

**OUR BEING-IN-THE-WORLD IS TECHNOLOGY SENSITIVE**

Let me try to explain.
BEING AND DEVICES

Phenomenology of technology is a philosophical approach to devices considered as ‘phenomena’, i.e. as they appear to us or manifest themselves to us or influence us through Perception in a broad sense.
In modern physics, the atomic nucleus first existed as a hypothesis before existing as a phenomenon. Scientists needed to build particle accelerators in order to turn the theory into ‘reality’. Without them, the atomic nucleus could not become a ‘phenomenon’.
French philosopher of science Gaston Bachelard argued early on that ‘Modern atomic science is more than a description of phenomena, it is a production of phenomena.’

Scientific phenomena are no longer provided by Nature, they are constructed by technology. Science ‘is therefore mostly a phenomenotechnique.’
FOCUS ON ‘APPEARANCE’

I call it ‘ontophany’: the process through which the being (ontos) appears (phaino) to us, in the sense that it involves a particular quality of ‘being-in-the-world’ (Heidegger) or, I would say, ‘feeling-in-the-world’.
MAJOR RESULT

Technology has the power to generate ontophany or ‘phenomenality’. The power to generate what can appear as ‘real’, through Perception. Astonishing.
EXTENDING PHENOMENOTECHNIQUE

All phenomena, and not only scientific phenomena, are constructed or co-constructed by technical factors. The fact of appearing (as a human or a non-human) is in itself a phenomenotechnical process. There are technical structures of perception. Any ‘ontophany’ is conditioned by technique.
DIFFERENT TECHNIQUES
DIFFERENT PERCEPTIONS
DIFFERENT FEELING-IN-THE-WORLD
ONTOPHANY SHIFT

Through the ages, new technologies have generated an ‘ontophany shift’, that is to say a shaking of the dominant (technical) structures of perception and, consequently, a change of the very idea that we have of ‘reality’. Each time, it requires from us to re-learn the whole perception process and to extend our idea of the ‘real’.
IS THE INTERNET A SEPARATE REALITY?
PHENOMENOLOGICAL VIOLENCE

Digital technology has introduced an ‘ontophanic trauma’ in our being-in-the-world experience. Culture of simulation, virtual worlds, avatars, video games, internet relationships, social profiles, all those new ‘beings’, unknown from our perception, have created a phenomenological shock in our existence.
THE NEED OF AN ILLUSION

In order to absorb the shock, we needed to believe in two separated worlds. We needed to believe that this new world was a ‘second’ world. We needed to believe in a ‘Second Self’ (Turkle, 1984) or in a ‘Second Life’ (1999). So we re-activated our old outdated Platonic metaphysics. We have re-activated the Allegory of the Cave. As a refuge for our troubled minds.
The Matrix (1999)
IRL OUT OF THE URL (1990s)

‘Digital Dualism’ (@nathanjurgenson) is actually a very old way of thinking. I call it Neo-Platonic Dualism.

THE VIRTUAL (in the url)
- computer-simulated world
- based on software and abstraction
- cut off from the Body
- far from the Truth
- red pill / inside-the-Cave
- SIMULACRUM OR COPY
- Cyberspace

THE REAL (out of the url)
- physical-processed world
- based on concrete objects
- Body-grounded
- considered as the True world
- blue pill / out-of-the-Cave
- GENUINE OR ORIGINAL
- Real Life (IRL)
WHAT’S CHANGED? ONTOPHANY!

Since the early 1990s, we have learned to live within cyberspace, the Web and social networks. We have learned new phenomenological habits and we have acquired new perceptive structures. Today, we are very used to simulated beings and online interactions. We don’t feel inside-the-Cave anymore when online.
‘We have learned to take things at interface value.’ (Turkle, 1995, p. 23). Such a great sentence. This is exactly what ‘ontophany shift’ means. We have learned to consider what is displayed on the screen as real. We have extended our sense of the real.
We interacted online with people we didn’t know IRL and from whom we didn’t know anything.

SECOND SELF

We interact online mostly with people we meet everyday and/or whom we know a lot about (data).

’SINGLE SELF’
Alain Darte
2 mutual friends

Valerie Morignat
28 mutual friends

Ludivine Allix
2 mutual friends

Frederic Tordo
51 mutual friends

Benoît Drouillat
87 mutual friends

Etienne Armand Amato
75 mutual friends

Ameni Feki
59 mutual friends

Margherita Balzerani
99 mutual friends

Benjamin Servet
8 mutual friends

Gaëlle Kikteff
18 mutual friends

Stéphanie Cardoso
32 mutual friends

Roland Lemoine
22 mutual friends

Patricia Ide-Beretti
14 mutual friends

Claudie Vial
3 mutual friends
IRL IN THE URL (2000s +)

Welcome to Digital Monism.

We now live in a hybrid environment made of intertwined systems, constantly interlinked, both digital and non-digital (a), online and offline. We now live in the ‘digital ontophany’ as a digital-centered unique environment providing new kinds of perception.

(a) I prefer to say ‘non-digital’ instead of ‘physical’ because all that is digital is also physical (electronics)
DIGITAL ONTOPHANY (irl in the url)
digital-centered global environment
based on pervasive computing
online and offline mix of everything
the Truth is no more a problem
impossible to separate the 2 aspects
REAL WORLD
Augmented Reality

VIRTUAL (in the url)
computer-simulated world
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cut off from the Body
far from the Truth
red pill / inside-the-Cave
SIMULACRUM OR COPY
Cyberspace

REAL (out of the url)
physical-processed world
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Body-grounded
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blue pill / out-of-the-Cave
GENUINE OR ORIGINAL
Real Life (IRL)

THE SHIFT
NO DIFFERENCE?

There is no difference between the Real and the Virtual considered as Essences (against Neo-Platonic Idealism). But the Digital and the Physical remain different as Materials (Rational Realism). I agree with the ‘Mild Augmented Reality’ position as defined by @nathanjurgenson: one reality, different properties. My goal is to get rid of the myth of two realities, which is a major metaphysical fantasy.
Theorizing Technology through Design is the way I undertake research on Technology. I love designers. They have the greatest awareness regarding the future. They can feel what’s happening before everybody else. They are not afraid of new technology. They are working with it in order to improve the “habitability” of the world (A. Findeli, 2010). Because ‘Design is the central factor of innovative humanisation of technologies’ (International Council of Societies of Industrial Design).
HYBRID EXPERIENCES

As has stated French designer Remy Bourganel (@epourkoapa), designers work on ‘the user experience qualities’ (WIF, 2012). What kind of ‘user experience qualities’ are digital designers working on today? They are working on hybrid experiences.
Etienne Mineur is a creative director at ‘Les éditions volumiques’, a French design studio inventing new Games and Toys, ‘focusing on the relationship between the tangible and the digital.’
(i) Pirate, your smart phone is the pawn
émienne mineur | @volumique | volumique.com/v2/en
a new kind of hybrid board game
étienne mineur | @volumique | volumique.com/v2/en
SpellShot (official video published by Hasbro)
etienne mineur | @volumique | volumique.com/v2/en
CONCLUSION

Digital Revolution is not only a technical event. It is a philosophical circumstance that affects our being-in-the-world experience. It is bringing us into the ‘digital ontophany’ era where the ‘real’ and the ‘virtual’ are no longer separated and, in a sense, no longer exist.

Welcome to the (new) real world.

“We don’t like that expression: IRL -- In Real Life. We say AFK -- Away From Keyboard. We think that the internet is for real.”

Peter Sunde, ThePirateBay.
(via @CleoCollomb)
ONE MORE THING...

I just finished writing a book in French about this subject. *Being and Screens: how technology affects the way we perceive.* If you’re interested in publishing it in English, feel free to contact me ;-)