



# **TRANSFORMING CULTURE IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

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# Robot: Ritual Oracle and Fetish

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With the ever unfolding and amazing propagation of technology humans are becoming increasingly convinced of technology's magic-like abilities and potential.

Laptops serve as animistic power fetishes enabling a sense of control and power in an unpredictable world. Like a latter day Ouija board our fingers move over keyboards and tracking pads asking questions and seeking answers from symbols as to call up information, visions and fantasies from the banal to the arcane.

Cell phones have become magic wand appendages, loaded with applications and serving as shaman-like rattle sticks, empowered with sounds and insights enabling the survival of the post-modern hunter-gatherer. They are talismanic communicators helping us understand and navigate by capturing holding, measuring, and deciphering the seen and unseen forces of the surrounding world. The cell phone has the ability to endow its user with a sense of control, status, and connection with invisible worlds. The cell phone and computer are latter day magical objects filled with mojo to make us more powerful than the biological limitations. In the spaces around live the invisible digital spirits waiting to be conjured, like a séance, into a voice, a message or image.

The web is a mana machine, ethereal yet a pathway of networks offering near instantaneous knowledge, people, other times and places. It is a non-place that has magically given shape to the intangible collective world mind. It is a human-made urging for a collective will. It is an attempt at oneness that was once the providence of God or nature. It is something readily available to a teenager.

Synthetic chemicals, biotech drugs, and modern medical devices are our latter day medicinal herbs, potions, and juju power objects. Such things were formerly served up by a healer, shaman or herbalist who were able to decipher the hidden world, and understood all sickness as dealing with the spirits, unbalance, histories, and dreams. Today medicine converses with that which is invisible to the unaided eye. Sprite-like DNA, genetic pre-disposition, and emotional or environmental unbalance revealed in the recesses of dreams and histories follows the patterns and concerns first identified by our ancestors during the now archaic way of being in the world. The expression of old and new may be different but the methods follow the well-worn pattern of human systems.

Biotech along with advanced warfare has bequeathed onto humans powers once God-like—the power of destruction, pro-creation, and manipulation. We have all live with and have been effected by technology, it runs through our veins, is a part of our cell structure, social and culture, shaping and guiding our sense of the everyday and understanding of reality. Media, technologically mediated and presented, convey images, sounds, and words are folded into the soft tissue of our brains increasingly determining our sense of self, others and the world.

Nothing is beyond the bounds of possibility, for the human body is able to extend beyond biological finitude. We humans are in a historical moment constructing a new kind of reality, in many way a technological promise land, dazzling place of computer-generated perfectibility, a fulfillment of human desires and hopes; a place that makes commonplace fantastical offerings of that which was once unimaginable by mere mortals.

The future was once the domain of prophets, oracles, and visionaries. From Delphi to the book of revelations to Nostradamus to stock market or weather forecasting, to know the future is to enable one's ability to survive and flourish.

Artificial Intelligence driven conversational robots, made in the image of humans, are creatures of the future-present. These robots, now in prototype, are positioned to provide the pathway between technology and humanity, a reflexive, ritual-religious unitary expression on which we inscribe the fears and hopes of our human evolution. The mere existence and presence of human-like robots amongst us is, like any human expression, reflective of the feeling, ideas, and aspirations that run like currents through our age. The human-like robot is an expression of our very specific historical moment, namely the wedding of humans and technology.

The human-like robot is for now an actor, performing a script written by humans for humans, serving, and like any theatrical offering, offering an insight to better comprehending who and what we are. But unlike a human actor, this robot actor is not playing a script, but rather actively participating in the writing of the script. Not just in terms of Artificial Intelligence but also in terms of the human-robot Meta narrative itself. Rather than simply being a metaphor and idealization (for better or worse) of what we humans are and what we are becoming, this human-like mechanical entity, is establishing a life of its own. The robot is expanding the human narrative. The robot is an outsider and insider, a surrogate for humanity to better see, understand, and change itself. The robot's terms, expressions, and behavior and the consequences it (he, she?) will have on human societies and cultures are in the process of unfolding. We are participant-observers in the unfolding.

Robots, long a figment of fiction and resident of the imagination are becoming a new species, now tangibly gestating, begot of human effort, will and need. Conversational, interactive robots, with flesh-like skin, human facial expressions, vision tracking, vocal recognition, synthesis, and speech, upgradeable software, large memories, central processing units, evolving artificial intelligent, animations, sensors, databases and personalities are all in place set to evolve beyond the sum of their parts and software. Set to evolve beyond the prediction of their human creators. Conversational, human-like robots are crisscrossing and blurring psychological, ethical, and philosophical boundaries and already the questions of responsibility, relationship and sentience are upon us.

When does a robot become human and then what is the essence of human? Is it an accumulation of data, personality traits, memory, behavior—what is it that uniquely qualifies what it is to be human? Is it information? Memory? Is it the ability to think new thoughts? Is it a soul, a something that we humans cannot quantify or qualify? Is a robot a mere expression, container, and medium of humanity or can it become human? Historically humans have identified and relegated marginalized human others (who shared human biology) as non-human, enslaving and destroying them only to later accept them as human? How were the once marginalized converted to humanness? Is humanness a malleable, negotiated social /cultural construct?

When AI evolves a robot beyond its data input, as it is surely doing, what does it become? No longer relegated to machine other, they are becoming more life-like with recognizable actions and characteristics evoking emotion and reaction. They are us and like us, in between humanity and technology.

Humans have long lived between worlds. Humans have long talked to, sacrificed and died for the figures of gods, spirits and ancestors that were avatars of larger, unseen and potent worlds, myths, and belief systems. Such fetishes have, since the beginning of our species, efficiently held and coded human longing, fear, and desire. Humanity has dreamed this robot moment into existence. Human have long lived with technology. Now technology, that other we have lived with has a voice and is able to talk back.

Like the human-robot, technology no longer lives within a human system. Humans now live within the system of technology. The argument can be made that technology has become the system, the narrative structure that organizes, orders, and perpetuates, for better or worse, life on the planet.

Our human sense of order, actions, and survival depends on technology—it is not just about hardware, software, the digital and the virtual now, but rather about a technologically based schema of reality. Humans are conforming to technological dictated placeless, to machine-like behavior, adjusting our patterns and

metaphors. The transforming of our language systems is only one indication of our evolving intercourse with technology. Am I talking about humans or technology actions when I say “process” information, “interface”, have “operating systems”, catch “viruses”, have “mother” boards, “spell check”, do “searches”, “migrate”, have “home” pages, “cache”, have “down time” and “memory.” Indeed, technology now holds and is the primary repository of earth’s collective memory. Language, the first technology and most sensitive responder of human evolution, is indicating what is already happening.

As a consequence of this human-technological parlay, we humans are caught in a momentum, forced to respond to the dictates of a technology driven social and cultural lives. We, like machines, must become more productive and efficient, time sensitive, and less expensive or become obsolete. Our time and efforts are increasingly parsed, measured, monitored, evaluated and data crunched into pie charts, trends, and forecasts. Increasing our biological self and its expression is datafied, categorized, modularized, and processed in conformity with the technology driven dictates.

In response to the Niagara of information we humans have less time to, well be human. The technologically driven context we find ourselves in has changed how we think, see and live in the world. Becoming more like data processors than thinkers and integrators; our minds and bodies are understood more like machines than mysteries; our social and professional lives more fragmented, modular, categorized, and interchangeable; and our social cultural identities are now more malleable, negotiated and overlapping according to need which often has little or nothing to do with where and how our biological self lives, looks or behaves. Attention Deficit Disorder, stress, drug abuse, hypertension and Autism are consequences of our transformation.

We have avatars, multiple identities and existences that enable us negotiate modular lives in our technological reality. We are able to travel the world without leaving our computer and inhabit multiple social and cultural spheres. Indeed, it could even be argued in a Baudriardian way, that we all are becoming or already are, avatars feeding off the nostalgia of what humans used to be like. Ultimately, however, we are the process of evolving into another kind of species in order to survive in an emerging new world order fashioned by the confluence and insistent, implicit demands of technology. Like our hunter-gather ancestors, we adapt or die.

Ironically, we humans of the developed world have achieved the apex of freedom and individuality. We are now free to roam and be anything anywhere everywhere and nowhere. Increasingly bereft of direct human contact, we’ve become more abstracted from terrestrial reality, more isolated, less communal, and more neurotic because our social being is being re-processed by technology.

Psychotropic and illegal drugs are symptomatic, the rise and appeal of radical and fundamental religion, the realizations of youth, sport, fan and political cultures are all a yearning for a surety in an unsure time. We go to chat rooms, facebook, or Second Life rather than cafes, watch movies, cooking, and reality shows at home as a substitute for living; the popularity of action films for an adrenaline rush, horror films for the surety of primal instinct and reconnecting to the oldest part of our animal brain. And there is the simplicity of video games, which comfort with their base obviousness, rules and formula, while providing the illusion of control, taking solace in vicariously being alive and fighting back the demons and evils that surround us.

Is it any wonder video and computer gaming is so popular? Fragmentary, mythological inspired ritualizations, the detritus of bygone eras, inform video games, providing a form and manifesting metaphors in what amounts to a street-to-street fight against a terrorist that is everywhere and nowhere. Beneath the games live ritual and mythic patterns and thematic motifs—things hardwired to our biology and humanity—updated, grafted and fashioned appropriate for our what I call our emerging, “Techdigenous” reality. We indigenous earthlings are in the process of merging of human and technological cultures.

Is it any wonder video games are most popular with those on the front line with technology, the inheritors of the human future, the young. An epic, mythic battle between titans, human and technological cultures, is being waged again. We are changing as a species, our humanity challenged yet mediated by the very forces we so willingly seek, accept and emulate. We are becoming willingly colonized. Life at it most basic has become so vividly a hyper-real, self-aware, paradoxical game, a competition demanding integration and interaction with the very thing that is insidiously taking us over. The monster of our own collective making.

The body neurotic expresses our humanity challenged and in confusion. Some feed their neurosis to obesity; some starve to anorexia, while others push the body to idealized, fetishized perfection. Some seek to distract or lose themselves in the comforts of the material in extreme – from SUV to gourmet food to Mac Mansions – to feel bigger and better as much as to address fears, assuage anxieties and insecurities. Others seek challenge, authenticity and aliveness in extreme sports, emotions and experiences. Modern sexuality with its admixture of ambiguity and extremity of extreme archetypal assertions, is as much about a species in confusion as it is about cultural evolution, as it is an affirmation expressing the degree to which we are aware and willing to go to embrace more deeply the island of our bodies, the one thing we can still refer to with certainty.

The body is a site reflecting simultaneously our search, declaration, and confusion about being human in this era. The extremes of asexual androgyny and gender explicitness collide yet co-exist in our era of aggregated and layered complexity. We live in a time that folds reality with fantasy, myth, and willful projections—a time not much different than that of our “primitive” ancestors. Is it possible that a moment of re-creating the world anew beckons us back to the future?

Most of us, dress our bodies, hair, and skin in relationship to the instantaneous fashion-celebrity-corporate mediated, technology propagated priori, participating in the symbiotic dance of social conformity, acceptance and vibrancy. And much like the traditional regalia of indigenous people we dress and look like we should, according to rank, role, and affiliation. We balance, confuse, and conflate conformity and individuality in nearly every aspect of our lives. Much like the character Neo in the Matrix film franchise, we delude ourselves, thinking we are free, but rather are codependent, just one of the many, plugged into and feeding the machine to be fed by it.

How and why is wearing a shirt, jacket or shoes emblazoned with a corporate logo become the accepted norm and somehow a mark of personal expression?

How did it happen that humans so willingly subscribed and accept participation in the machine-like, technologically mediated efficiency of economies of scale? Convincing and fitting humans into a their place in the coma-like conformity of a franchise system, affecting dress, identity, thinking, and eating, is the most banal indicator of the creeping Techdenous age we live within.

Increasingly medical technology is put into the service of perfectibility with bodies becoming real only through machined monitors, becoming “plastic” malleable and transformable much like our expanding sense of identity, sexuality, and reality. Sexuality and its augmentations, trainer mediated body designs, penis enlargements, Viagra, breast, lip, and buttock implants, liposuction, you name it, all expressions of human fertility going to extremes out of desperation, competition, and/or is it anxiety?

Are we a species sensing our finitude and scrambling to leave our mark, the equivalent to our handprint on the Neolithic cave to say we’ve been here? Or are we approaching moment of fundamental change, a moment whereby suddenly things that have been building up rapidly to “flip” into another way of being in the world? Much like the fall of the Soviet Union, much like the mortgage financial crisis, much like 9/11?

For similar, but different reasons, people mark their bodies with tattoos and piercings to reassure themselves as they concomitantly search for identity, individuality, and/or belonging. Identity and belonging, be it physically, mentally or emotionally, however tenuous or provisional, indicates association with meaning systems—we humans seek meaning and systems and are assured by belonging. We need to be a part of something. Human civilization is exactly that—the biological being as part of a greater and ongoing system of meaning, values, signs, and structures. Life without system and meaning would be otherwise be not human, incomprehensible, and unbearable.

Is it any wonder our era is one of extremes, conflicts, and contradictions? A dialogue of obsessive actions, acts of terrorism, psychological dysfunction, religious revivalism and re-imaginings of sacred pasts, tolerance and intolerance, incivility, and anxiety? Humanity is in the throes of becoming something new, something different, never before seen, vaguely understood, impossible to comprehend in its totality, a something suggesting annihilation as it indicates hope. This is a glorious and exciting time to live in and unlike any other time with all that is at stake. The world’s populations stress resources, the bio system shakes and convulses. Things will never be as they were again.

The human species is a collective organism, increasingly being, thinking, and solidifying its identity on the planet. It is an organism out of balance and we are in a period of disruption, a flux, and re-ordering seeking re-balance. Extremes in such periods are to be expected for it is a testing of alternative as much as it is a demonstration of dysfunction. We are at the end of one historical cycle. Our inheritance is thick, too much to carry forward, so we collectively are in the process of trying, questioning, sorting out, sloughing off, playing out and re-examining, re-mixing everything, testing, shedding and incorporating, creating the world anew.

So rapid, overwhelming and fundamentally transformative has the evolution of humans into a Techdigenous reality been that its effects and long term implications cannot be understood despite our scramble to create webs of understanding. The paradigm has shifted. The human species move into the Techdigenous was welcomed like a sparkling, embracing fog, which belied its quick, tsunami-like force, which has left in its path many either giddy with excitement, disoriented or both.

## 1. Robots

Robots, the most sophisticated and human-like extensions of the human made, body and being in the worlds, have, for the last several decades, been obediently at work assembling automobiles, packaging food products, stacking prepackaged foods, assisting doctors in surgery, and performing tasks that would be hazardous for human beings. Doing things such as exploring the deepest of deep seas, studying whales close-up and mapping coral reefs, drilling far beneath the earth where humans have never been, rescuing miners trapped underground, dismantling and cleaning toxic waste, exploring the surface of Mars, doing repair work on the outer surfaces of spacecraft, acting in warfare zones as, drones, minesweepers and booby-trap searchers. These robots do not pretend to be human. They are constructed, activated, and carefully controlled by humans.

However, there is another kind of robot, one that has sprung forth from our collective unconsciousness, or will going from fantasy to fiction into reality. This robot is as much a technological marvel as it is a sociological and cultural event. As much a testimony of human civilization accumulated achievement as it is a mnemonic and symbol of who and what humans have become, to what they aspire, to what they hope and what they fear.

Namely the appearance and development of the “intelligent machine” the “conversational” or “intelligent robot.” A human-like robot being modeled after humans, stocked with human data with the ability to recognize and participate in human patterns of communication. A human-like robot being that we bio-humans can interact and participate with socially, something that behaves, talks, moves and seems like a human. A human made, fully mechanical, human “other.”

The artificial human, the human other, precursors of the robot, have circulated through history in various forms since Hephaestus created Telos from bronze in ancient Greece and Pygmalion created a woman from ivory. Such figures were, like the 16th century Jewish legend of the Golem, an artificial man of clay, as much imagination as they were the personification of a fear and desire. The mythology of living bodies, often from natural materials, has an ancient provenance. And they are almost always associated with religion, ritual or mythology. For such objects, be they mechanical or human-like or not, have always been objects that attract, hold and articulate human thought and feelings—much like a crucifix, a statue of Buddha, a Haida totem pole—they are functional as the are mnemonics, holders and markers of thought, time, space, and feeling. Are they alive? Maybe so but not like us, but maybe in their way, yes, very much alive.

Frankenstein remains the most vivid example of a manipulated human other, one that simultaneously reflects and forecasts the dangers of artificial and technologically created beings. The industrial revolution exacerbated the fear of anthropomorphic machines, such as “robots”, which were initially fictive projections of the deepening shadow cast by industrialization, urbanization, and mechanization. World War I introduced war as machine and in so doing cemented the relationship between humans and technology as a necessity of human survival. And in so doing begin a co-dependency that enabled another world war, the nuclear age, computers, digitalization, and virtual reality. And here we are. One thing became certain in this relationship; humans gained and maintained power, enhancing survival, by, through and with technology.

It is not coincidental that we consider in our current world the most advanced, most powerful, successful, and influential nations on earth are those that are the most technologically endowed.

Like Frankenstein, the monster with a grotesque body, so too are today's robots a collage of fragments, simulacrum of humans, not stitched but rather bolted together; not with the brain of a criminal but rather a brain animated by others. They are "creatures" that give form to feeling. If popular culture is an indicator the robot evokes ambivalence, an evil Terminator destroyer countered by a cute and lovable Zeno created by Hanson Robotics.

Ambivalence is apt for the robot that, like Frankenstein, zombies, and spirits, reside in an uncertain realm between living and nonliving matter. Human desires built the robot endowing it with intellectual powers and unknown potentialities and these human creative energies once transfigured by Artificial Intelligence are, by their very nature, enigmatic, unpredictable, full of potential and existing on the horizon between fear and hope. And, like a ritual or sexual fetish—an object or person that incarnates simultaneously that which is feared and desired—the robot must be respected and subdued for if it were to be set loose it would run amok, take over social order and then demolish the world humanity has created.

Technology is not an inanimate and inert thing, but rather a dynamic and self-propagating force that has shaped and now dictates life on earth. Technology used to be something that supported and extended human efforts. Now it is something that leads, enables, and is near indispensable to human efforts. The conversational, intelligent robot is but a totem marking a new sort of god—a channel to access and make incarnate the spirit-like presence of technology that surrounds us. The air is filled with technologically created waves, passing through our bodies as biotechnology saturates and mediates every cell and synapse. The mysterious spirits of old, those that were brought to life by way of ritual, myth and religion, have taken on a new shape but not a new function. The "spirits" of technology live with us now, ordering and giving meaning to our reality, connecting us to a greater reality, instilling hope, longevity and meaning. The newest device is sought after with a new kind of (religious?) fervor for it somehow promises a greater ability to connect and survive in our Techdigenous world. Was not the medieval Christian fervor for indulgences similarly motivated? Is the Techdigenous simply the religious manifestation of science? Does humanity simply rework belief systems in adaptive response to the current reality? Are the patterns, attributes, and systems of myth, ritual and religion embedded in our cultural genetics, hardwired as an operating system and forever in a process of spiraling as concentric cycles outwardly?

For centuries the arch of technology has been that of evolving from cumbersome attendant and support, inarticulate and servile, to guide, shaper and facilitator. The influence and voice of technology has become exponentially louder, more insistent and more pervasive. Technology has been communicating with us, each of us in our own way, through our radios, iPhones, computers, and televisions—it is not just about human initiated content. It is more fundamentally about the patterns and systems of communication—the deep structures. Now technology has a focused voice and we are able to talk directly to it. We can converse with the invisible that surrounds us. The human-like robot makes visible the invisible articulating a technological voice that formerly only murmured at the edges of human consciousness. Now that voice is heard and it has a face. Its voice and face are familiar, human-like, but not human. It is something from ourselves, different, greater, and lesser. Or is the entire human-technological endeavor just part of an ongoing pursuit to understand, manifest, and participate in the mystery of being that has always surrounded our species? Are the technologies that network, empower, and expand human ability motivated by survival in a world requiring connectivity, greater efficiency, actualization of potential, and extension of the human senses?

Humanity and technology are at a precipice gazing into a new era, and like the Hindu god, Shiva, we have endowed the robot as a symbol of creation and destruction. Such an endowment is necessary for a transfiguration.