Feeling Objects and Fearful Symmetries

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> "(T)he ties we form through the internet are not, in the end, the ties that bind. But they are the ties that preoccupy."
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> – Sherry Turkle

Sherry Turkle (2012) argues boldly about our fascination with machines, and how this relationship with objects that seem to "feel" is simultaneously attuning us to machine-ness ourselves. Turkle asserts that individuals in the twenty-first century are eschewing our human relationships—that element which makes us most human despite our insistence on personalizing machines that claim to nurture *a sense* of relationships. *Alone Together: Why we expect more of technology and less from each other*, published by the MIT Press in the 2012 paperback and e-book edition, surfaces controversial issues in the way we unload our emotions onto technology in an attempt to seek connection, but only find what she terms "cybersolitude." Turkle uses two of the most popular artifacts in technology that have invaded our daily lives: robots and social network sites.

Turkle, a licensed clinical psychologist, with a doctorate in both sociology and personality psychology from Harvard University is one of the preeminent scholars on the transformation of human relationships in an age of pervasive and ubiquitous technology, digitality and high volumes of information. In a vastly networked world, Turkle says we talk on and

through machines, but are actually far from having a conversation. We are tied to our sleek and shiny machines, less to each other, and increasingly shutting down possibilities for meaningful, messy, human relationships.

In part one of her book, Turkle discusses the robots that have "connected" with humans in a peculiarly emotional way, calling up the Tamagotchi craze that swept a generation of children in the late 1990s to early 2000s in the United States and Asia, through experimental robots in MIT, to Aibo and Paro, which are manufactured and marketed to specific consumers. Turkle interviewed children, parents, young adults, elderly persons, and scientists about their daily experiences with "sociable robots" and argues for how we have reached the robotic moment, the point where what a robot knows how to do is construed as also embedded with purpose. Artificial Intelligence is often described as the "art and science of getting machines to do things that would be considered intelligent if done by people" (p. 63). We are coming to a parallel definition of artificial emotion as the art of "getting machines to express things that would be considered feelings if expressed by people." (p. 63)

Turkle controversially discusses how the most vulnerable sectors of society—namely, children, the incapacitated, and the elderly—have turned to objects for companionship. *Alone Together* inhabits the delicate boundary straddled by awe and pride in human innovation, and the arguably unarticulated fear and moral panics that weigh heavily on the likes of parents with young children and children with old parents. Through her observations, Turkle witnesses how easily human beings inscribe human-like qualities onto the objects before them, easily associating behavior for feeling. This preference for such machinic company is seen as a welcome replacement for the messiness of human relationships and awkwardness of human interaction, especially among those who demand the most attention. Most telling, says Turkle, is the apparent widespread consideration of such machines as "caring" for children and the elderly—human beings at their most delicate and most "troublesome" to care for.

Turkle says that the assimilation of machines and robots in everyday life seems to be the path that our species is on (if not already there), and as such may take on more intimate spaces in our lives. It helps the younger generation leave their older relatives in the "care" of objects to fill in the relationship gap that grows out of the necessary struggle of living in a hypermediated, hypercharged world, where things never get done, and time is never enough. However, despite the computational, mobile capabilities of doing things on the go, humans never seem able to slow down, and instead have to keep catching up, leaving no time to look up from the screens that dominate a digital life. There is a double irony here: the very machines that

separate the younger generation from their elder loved ones are the very ones they seek to fill in for their own inadequacies towards their relatives. Their failings, faults, weaknesses are answered by the robots; and yet—here is the mirror of the irony—at the same time, humans seek to hide from these very same shortcomings by publishing them on social network sites.

In part two of *Alone Together*, Turkle discusses the enchantment of connectivity that comes from being "tethered" to technology. This is particularly true among high school students through to the early twenty somethings who see technology not only as a tool to increase their efficiency and access to information, but actually a way of dealing with other people: people need to be "dealt with," the way some mundane task should be ticked off a list. This effectively distances human beings from the complexities of establishing and nourishing relationships.

> With sociable robots, we imagine objects as people. Online we invent ways of being with people that turn them into something close to objects. The self that treats a person as a thing is vulnerable to seeing itself as one. It is important to remember that when we see robots as "alive enough" for us, we give them a promotion. If when on the net, people feel just "alive enough" to be "maximizing machines" for emails and messages, they have been demoted. These are fearful symmetries. (p. 168)

This warning comes close on the heels of the proud declaration of Facebook having a population second to China and India. Filipinos are some of the most prolific posters on the social networking website, with nearly ten million of them working as overseas contract workers or living as immigrants in other countries. In an effort to keep ties with family and friendship alive, Facebook, video messaging and SMS have emerged as a convenient way to communicate. It is a vital link for those abroad to continue being grounded in events back home. However, according to Turkle, there will always be a sense of alienation, because just as some look to technology as a way to alleviate loneliness, those on the other side may construe the action to respond as a chore. "As we distribute ourselves, we may abandon ourselves. Sometimes people experience no sense of having communicated after hours of connection." (p. 11). The web and social networks have spawned, according to Turkle, practices that seek to simply "occupy" a person's time online (building profiles that create "presentation anxieties," allow a form of "creativity without pressure," lengthy "confessions" online instead of apologies). In short, says Turkle, individuals exist without

committing to anything but a performance, a showing up in public while hiding from the complexities of human contact and community. "…[We] defend connectivity as a way to be close, even as we effectively hide from each other. At the limit, we will settle for the inanimate, if that's what it takes." (p. 280).

This social crisis is imminent in societies in developed countries, but what of those in emerging economies? Turkle assumes that all societies are shaping up in the way the United States or Japan is, and are therefore similarly mired in this crisis from which there is no escape. Turkle stops short of a social analysis of the implications on third world countries, where most of the manufacturing of parts, assembly and labor for these tech tools are located. From these same countries come the orderlies and nurses that will care for the aging population of these high-tech societies, transplanting their roles as parents, siblings, children and acting as surrogates for these geriatrics' relatives who are too "busy" sending the emails and texts that keep the high-speed economy running. Ironically, these very same tools marketed in the third-world societies are veiled in the rhetoric of extension and empowerment digitally, but seem to effect a different scenario offline. The actuality of what Turkle terms cybersolitudes sounds like a desperate, inescapable doom that threatens to consume wired societies—societies that project themselves as, interestingly enough, extremely orderly, privacy-paranoid and risk-averse.

Despite her call for a *realtechnik*—a self-awareness and cautious lens worn over triumphalist notions of technology—Turkle is still unsure of how to articulate the tenets of such a mindset. The prescription for a *realtechnik* still critiques on the side of caution, and is careful about making a sweeping recommendation for how individuals should live their lives alongside technology. Perhaps her next book might show how other societies and cultures are navigating this shifting technological landscape and there find multiple ways of apprehending the changes we are experiencing. Until then, this tome has much to contribute to students and scholars in futurist studies, new media and human-centered computing; above and beyond the compelling arguments, innovative ethnographic methods, and analyses, it opens up a space for conversation and critique on the blanket assumptions about technological uptake. The book challenges the reader to reflect on the exigencies of human living and relationships, question one's own almost-invisible and ubiquitous encounters with machines, and how we might ambitiously form our own version of a *realtechnik.*

Too much "I"-ness, as *Alone Together* has reiterated through interviews and ethnographic research, is exposing how—in our attempts to define our newness/openness to the predictable results of technological

"empowerment"—we are likewise giving up our openness to chance, risk, and the rewards that come with it. Where wired societies might thrive technologically, they may fail relationally; where the diasporic, distributed societies connect, we may find how individuals continue to expand the idea of a new community and find new ways to bind as one, as they navigate *along together,* no matter how physically distant they are.

References:

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