



‘Ghost in the Shell’: Solitude in the Technical Environment

(Introductory Thoughts
to Cybertheology)

The cyber-theological concern about the future is how human beings can stay human beings in our new technological environment. This problem touches upon the fields of creation as an act, the relationship between Creator and creation, and the question of Imago Dei, the image of God in the human.

Cyber theology is a solid branch of postmodern theological thinking. The problem of solitude is one of the main questions of postmodern philosophy, for example in the thinking of the French philosopher Jacques DERRIDA. Concepts of alienation and separation are basic terms in philosophical deconstruction.

Let us recall Heimholz’ poem in Aldous HUXLEY’s famous negative utopia, the Brave New World (1932). Postmodernity surpasses loneliness as solely pain and suffering, and instead finds value and power in solitude, isolation and alienation.

Loneliness is suffering and freedom at the same time. Aldous HUXLEY is very strong and modern in these ideas when he finds the essence of human being in solitude, isolation and alienation.

This essay tries to show the negative and positive aspects of solitude, in a creative tension with the idea of security. We must distinguish between these two dimensions of human life, as one concerns community relations and the other personal relations.

Solitude in Religious Community

After Aldous HUXLEY moved to Hollywood, he gradually became interested in *Buddhism* and other Asian religions. As far as we can see, two of these religions appear very strongly in *Brave New World*. After all, the story of religions in India is very exciting in itself, as it faces the same conflict which appears in Aldous HUXLEY's first utopia.

Prince GAUTAMA lived in a sealed-off virtual reality of perfection in his father's court, who happened to be a king. All the people around Prince GAUTAMA were young and healthy; there was only peace, joy and happiness.

According to the tales depicting Prince GAUTAMA's Great Leaving, the break in the life of the Prince happened through some accidental events, when he suddenly encountered the three main forms of suffering—aging, sickness and death.

The story of Prince GAUTAMA (later commonly referred to as Buddha) directly appears when, in *Brave New World*, Bernard and Lenina arrive at the tribal village on top of the mesa, among the savages.

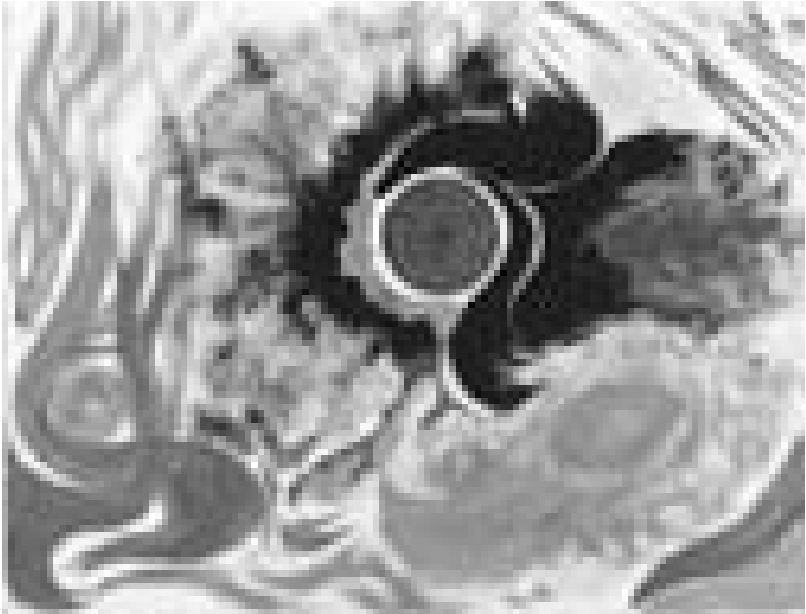
They face the shocking experience of aged people, the dirt which covers everything, the dirt which is infection incarnated as the opposite of the hygienic cleanness they are used to, the dirt which is the sign of passing and mortality. And the reality of dirt and suffering is dramatically embodied in a weird couple, Linda and John.

It is important to note here that Buddha is probably the only one among the founders of any religion who does not claim any divine origin for herself or himself. He claims that he is one in a million, as human as anyone else.

His speciality is *enlightenment*, which is a condition, not the essence of the chosen ones. This kind of personal dimension of Buddhism gave a special meaning to human solitude, teaching that all people can have their own individual way to reach peace and fulfilment.

The brave new world, the *World State* itself, is a reconstruction of *Hinduism*. The caste system as the basic organizing structure of a society is an important point in Hinduism. Alphas, betas, gammas and deltas are the vague parallels of *brahmins*, *kshatriyas*, *vaishyas* and *shudras*, and the epsilons are a kind of social outcasts, so to say *dalits*.

Hinduism is a late reconstruction of the classical feudal society,



which was supported by Brahmanism. Around 800 Abbot SANKARA “initiated” Hinduism, whose spread had one main aim: to gather all who lived in the territory of India under the banner of one religious system.

Buddhism was a drastic revolution against the oppressive caste system, which was heavily supported by Brahmanism. According to the then-status quo, all forms of organisation, punishment and retaliation were administered by religion.

Contrary to this, Buddhism was built up on the decision, capacities and efforts of the individual human being. As a religion, Buddhism is open to all and accepts different and individual ways and roads.

After the revolution comes the restoration of the caste system. The effort of Hinduism is to conserve oppressive feudalism, where religion comforts the members, saying: ‘Fulfil your job at your own place, and that will bring your reward and clean your karma.’

And the success of this *brave new world* has really been amazing. Today we can say that Buddhism has been almost fully eliminated from the Indian subcontinent, which is quite an astonishing phenomenon.

Both of the religious movements, the despotic caste system of Hinduism and the individualist Buddhism, offer their solutions to the issue of solitude, providing security in their own distinct way.

But we have to face one crucial question in this context: Who has real security? Freedom and the burden of personal responsibility or fitting into a well designed and oppressive system? These ways are also very contemporary to us, and we must have our own Christian understanding of the chances and defects of any given brave new world.

Aldous HUXLEY's Brave New World is also interesting in its conception of a highly technological society, which at the same time has a high proportion of active population, composed of workers and consumers. Today's conception of technological progress tends more towards the idea that as technology progresses, machines replace people and there is less and less need for active persons. We can still see an important parallel in Aldous HUXLEY's utopia and our world.

As the human can become a well-programmed machine operating perfectly for the sake of the World State, likewise the machines can acquire some kind of spirit or soul from us, as we love and hate, praise and blame them, of course heavily impersonating them all the while. When we begin to treat machines as persons, real human beings and individuals step by step become unnecessary.

Solitude in Personal Religiousness

Through technological advancement and the creation of machines, humanity builds up an artificial environment. Cyber theology deals with the fate of the humankind in this technical environment.

And this is the framework in which we must orient ourselves to avoid dystopias. The artificial environment appears as a twofold reality, the environment of machines and the environment of the cyberspace.

Now let us turn our attention to the relation between human being and machine. Ideally, the aim of tools, and also of the complicated tools called machines, is to ease the life of humanity, to help in our work and to reach goals which could not be attained without these tools and machines.

As far as we can see, tools have had some kind of mystical relationship to their makers or users from the very beginning of human

history. Even in ancient times, weapons, musical instruments and other items were ascribed supernatural or even religious qualities. They were helpers sent from above.

Through technological advancement, as tools became more and more complicated and sophisticated, as common people understood less and less how they operated, machines were personified more and more naturally.

Today common people are largely unable to understand the operation of complex machines, but we do not have to understand, because they are there at our service, so we just use them as we can. Using also means some kind of taking care of them, cleaning, protecting and feeding them with the needed resources. This situation leads us to a rather complicated relationship with machines.

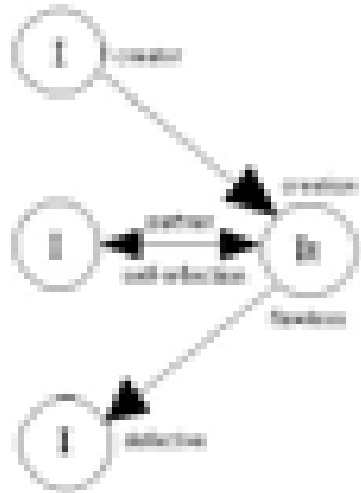
Cyber theology seriously deals with the idea of the *robot*, which is taken from science fiction literature. The idea of the robot is much more ancient and much more serious than we think at first.

As a definition, we can say that a robot is an artificial creation which is the perfect and flawless tool for humankind—the perfect machine. And of course it is the perfect human at the same time. The robot is the ultimate creation, where the terms *operation* and *life* blend together.

Let us recall two films which can not be ignored in the framework of cyber theology. The first is the black and white *Metropolis* (1927) by Fritz LANG, based on the novel by Thea VON HARBOU.

The second important movie concerning our topic is the anime *Metropolis* (2001) by RINTARŌ, the adaptation of the comics of Osamu TEZUKA, which touches even more, very serious theological questions.

Let us have a look at the diagram above, which we can sum up with the help of personalist philosophy, namely the concepts used by Martin BUBER in *I and Thou*. The personal human being is named as *I*, and the machine is named as *It*.



The *I* is the human, the subject. The *It* is the object, the artificial, the machine, the robot. There is no *I* three times, the relation is between one *I* and one *It*. The multiplication of the *Is* is just to show the subordinated relationality between the participants.

This diagram is more like three cases in one picture. If we think about the anime *Metropolis*, all the relations are gathered around Tima, and this diagram can map all those connections.

On the top of the figure there is the subordinated relation of maker and creation. The situation is simply degrading for the creation.

We human beings possess the power of production; actually we *are* the power of production. Our products are there only in order to serve us and to satisfy our well-based needs and desires. They are items for personal use, which can be disposable and which become obsolete as time goes by.

On the bottom of the diagram there is the opposite of the drastically subordinated relation. The human being, who realizes that she or he is defective, imperfect, insignificant and vulnerable, wishes to create the flawless and the perfect outside of herself or himself.

This is how Tima is produced—or rather, created—a machine-entity but also a perfect human. The *I* adores, admires and worships her or his own creation and raises it above everything else.

In the middle of the diagram there is a strange relationship, which we can understand as a coordinated and mutual connection, mainly because there is something in it which can rightly be called love.

There, an equal level of mutual relation was formed with the artificial object: *I* needs *It*, but *It* needs *I* as well. *It* helps me, but *I* support *It* with energy and resources. The relationship is formed on the same level.

The machine becomes our partner and our companion. Involuntarily emotions are forming, ties and affections or even hate and anger are rising. Formidably, the *It* can become *You* in this very case.

This development can be very complicated, but we can be certain about one thing: the emotions towards the partner-machine work actually towards ourselves. The *partner* feeling in itself is a projection of ourselves into an inanimate object, a kind of self-reflection.

We can interpret all these three levels as escapes from solitude, based on a desire and a specific solution for security. These relationships are more like symptoms, and we are called to find their causes.

Hopefully we were able to emphasize the depths of the cyber theological question: How can a human being stay a human being—human in the sense of the creature and image of God—in this technological environment?

How to Stay Human

The theological conclusion is the following: the fulfilment of the human role is hidden in the sinfulness of the human being. This is our real heritage. *Sin* is the one thing we have to hold on to and stick to. Clinging to our sinfulness is the way to understand ourselves as God's children, and to avoid a Brave New World or any other dystopia.

In a way, it could be more gentle to say *free will* instead of sin. Free will sounds more like a gift, but if you think it through, you will see that finally they mean the same thing. Sin is the curse and also the blessing of human life. Following the Irenean logic, we can experience and value the good only if we have any idea and experience of the wrong.

If we have never bitten into a rotten apple, we cannot enjoy one with a perfectly sweet taste. Good things get their value in the mirror of bad things. Sin gives meaning to goodness, care, meekness and love.

Also, in a perfect world without sin, pain and suffering, there is no art, no poetry and no fine arts. In short, without our weaknesses, longings and desires, there are no dreams or fantasies.

In this framework, being good and pure cannot be a social aim, but an act of redemption. Goodness is not something we do, but it is something that is done to us. It is the act of God, Who redeems us.

The great chance of a religious human is that she or he can be free from automatic bindings, the shackles of sinfulness. This is what Martin LUTHER refers to in the *Large Catechism* in connection with the theme of baptism, when he is speaking of *each-day-baptism* or *each-day-conversion*.

We do not have to be bound by our sins and wickedness of yesterday and the distant past; we do not have to say that we are on the path of sinfulness and in no way can we ultimately leave it for good.

There is this renewing chance to say no to our behaviour of yesterday, and to get a new day, even a new life in terms of baptism,

with a new start as a *tabula rasa*. There is power in our free will to willingly decide for good and love.

So, let us go back to the *Brave New World* and other dystopias, and back to solitude either in wider society or in personal depths. We could say that the idea of absolute goodness and purity realized in a strict social structured utopia is a wilful perversion of human life.

This perversion is a real trap of perfection. If we want to stay real and full human beings, not only robots and automated machines, the “gospel” of flawlessness brings a living hell into human society.

It is mentioned in Aldous HUXLEY’s *Brave New World* that the T-sign of Ford comes from the cross of the Christians. Only the top line got severed. So let us just stop for a moment and think: What happens when we remove the upward direction from human life? Is the answer is a Brave New World?

Suggested Reading and Watching

- BUBER Martin, *Ich und Du*. Berlin, 1923.
DERRIDA Jacques – DUFOURMANTELLE Anne, *De l’Hospitalité*. Paris, 1997.
HARBOU Thea VON, *Metropolis*. Berlin, 1926.
HUXLEY Aldous, *Brave New World*. London, 1932.
LANG Fritz, *Metropolis*. 1927.
ORWELL George, *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*. London, 1948.
RINTARÓ, *Metoroporisu (Metropolis: Robotic Angel)*. 2001.
TEZUKA Osamu, *Metoroporisu (Metropolis: Robotic Angel)*. Osaka, 1949.

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