

Being and the screen: How the digital changes perception

Published in one volume with *A Short Treatise on Design*, by Stéphane Vial, translated by Patsy Baudoin, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019, 280 pp., \$29. ISBN: 9780262043168

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for cyber security. Hacks and ‘cybercrime’ erode corporate reputation and customer bases as well as threaten organizational processes, which catalyzes a thriving industry of software tools, consultants, and tech companies promising security solutions. Here, the political economy of hacking receives the attention it deserves.

Through clear and close analysis of numerous disquieting cases we learn more about how institutional power operates in network society. Yet, as the reader follows the authors on this quick-paced journey, they might find themselves wishing for consistent conceptual scaffolding throughout the text, reminders of what is most important. Considered together, this book is hugely successful in educating the reader on the issue of hacking and all that it exposes.

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The impact of digital technology and media on our lives has been studied extensively since the 1990s across disciplines. While the bulk of the research has departed from economic, political, and social perspectives, Stéphane Vial introduces a novel philosophical approach to the matter. *Being and the Screen: How the Digital Changes Perception* provides a coherent and systematic epistemological analysis of digital technology. With this, he follows in the footsteps of previous notable contributions to the debate and attempts to connect philosophy of technology to design. This book is an original addition to this line of thought and answers to the current need for a philosophical clarification of the concept ‘digital revolution’ and the question to which extent the digital revolution is also a philosophical revolution. The volume contains two texts that were originally published in French in 2010 and 2013 and have recently been translated by Patsy Baudoin into English with a foreword of philosopher Pierre Lévy, as part of the MIT Press series ‘Design Thinking, Design Theory’. The first part presents the main theoretical contribution and consists of six chapters and three supplements. The second part includes eight brief essays that apply the theoretical framework to more specific questions in design theory and practice.

The book opens by questioning the phrase ‘digital revolution’ itself: ‘What makes these changes in digital technologies worthy of being considered “revolutionary”?’ (p. 8). Vial’s main thesis is that our relationship to the world is always already fundamentally conditioned by technology, but that only thanks to the digital revolution has this become visible. The digital revolution, in this sense, makes manifest that the questions of ‘being’ and ‘technology’ are one and the same (p. 9). Vial’s book is thus not a normative assessment of digital technologies (as prevails in scholarly debates), but a nuanced and careful attempt to adequately *describe* and *understand* how digital technology exactly gives rise to a new relation to the world, attending both to what is lost and what is gained. This way, he escapes the general anxiety towards technological development as has prevailed in philosophical accounts of technology initiated by Martin Heidegger, Herbert Marcuse, and Jacques Ellul.

The first two chapters lay the groundwork for his philosophical analysis. Chapter 1 reflects on the systematic character of technology and therefore brings clarity in the different ways that technologies relate to each other and how these relations shape society. Drawing from the work of Bertrand Gille (1978), he distinguishes four levels of technological combination with increasing complexity: a technical structure, a technical ensemble, a technical concatenation, and a technological system. The latter appears when a set of technological combinations reaches a general coherence and becomes interdependent. What all technological revolutions have in common is that each introduces a new reign of machines, gradually leading to a complete change of technological system. While it is often thought that the ‘computer’ is the machine that reigns in the ‘digital technological system’, Chapter 2 suggests that the fundamental technologies whose *combination* structures the digital technological system are electronics, computation and networks, taken together: networked digital computing. Vial concludes: ‘While the computer is the central star of the system, the internet is the orbit structure that allows this star to glow in every place and in every part of the world’ (p. 39). While Vial convincingly moves beyond the narrow focus on the computer here, it is remarkable and perhaps regrettable that the subsequent chapters retain that focus on the computer as a key technology that changes our perception.

The core and most philosophical contribution of the book is found in chapter 3, ‘The technological structures of perception’. Here Vial develops a theory of technological revolutions as *phenomenological* revolutions. Perception, he argues, is more than just a function of the body or consciousness. It also has a deeply social function and is conditioned by cultural factors such as artistic, scientific, and technological innovations. Every technological revolution brings forth a temporary perceptual shock or ‘phenomenological trauma’ (p. 65). This occurs when we are confronted with objects for which we have no habits of perception yet. To learn to deal with such novel appearances we *all* need to reinvent the act of perception itself to make it compatible with the particular way in which such new beings appear. Herein lies the difference with previous technological revolutions like the Euclidian revolution or the rise of quantum theory. These were first and foremost *intellectual* revolutions, whose implications were limited to a restricted circle of scholars. The digital revolution, on the contrary, is a *social* revolution that affects the whole of society and disrupts the ‘ontophanic experience’ of millions of people.

To ground this claim, Vial draws from Gaston Bachelard’s (1934) analysis of modern science in terms of ‘phénoménotechnique’. This concept emphasizes that scientific work does not consist in ‘describing’ phenomena but *building* phenomena from scratch and letting them appear through technological devices. Vial uses Bachelard’s epistemological constructivism to ground his own *phenomenological constructivism* to develop a philosophy of technology. The hypothesis in this chapter is that *all* phenomena of the world owe their phenomenal appearance to technical factors. What this implies is that not only the *object* of perception changes according to new technical devices, also the *act* of perception changes. Contrary to postphenomenologists like Don Ihde and Peter-Paul Verbeek, perception is for Vial not just technologically ‘mediated’ but technologically *produced*.

Subsequently, the philosopher’s task today is to clarify how digital phenomena are given to us in perception. A widely adopted hypothesis in answer to this question is ‘virtuality’. Chapter 4, ‘The Life and Death of the Virtual’, deconstructs the different meanings that have been attributed to ‘the virtual’, as found in ancient philosophy (potentiality), optics (unreal), computing (simulation), and French psychoanalysis (imagined anticipations of reality). Vial explains how early scholars have embraced the concept of the virtual while confusing its technological and optical meaning, leading to a misconception of virtual reality as a deceptive and illusory sphere *outside* of reality. Vial responds that those who still believe that we are living in

a world of unreality thanks to digital media are ‘trapped by the Platonic metaphysics of the image’ (p. 77). A contemporary philosophical account of digital technology should acknowledge that, parallel to how we accustomed ourselves to the initial shock of telephonic technology, ‘we have learned to live with computer-simulated realities and to consider them things among things’ (p. 78). While the concept of ‘the virtual’ is the most widely adopted one to make sense of how the digital structures our perception, Vial shows that this is only one among (at least) ten other aspects that shape the ‘digital ontophany’ – as the title of Chapter 5 promises. The 11 categories that Vial presents in this chapter, considered as phenomenological concepts, shed a light on how digital phenomena come to appearance in our lifeworld. This results in a rich understanding of digital phenomena, bringing together existing and novel adjectives to account for them, and that characterizes them as noumenal, ideal, interactive, virtual, versatile, reticular, instantly reproducible, reversible, destructible, fluid and ludogenic.

In the sixth and final chapter, ‘The (Digital) Design of Experience’, Vial brings home his point by drawing conclusions from his analysis for the field of design. Given that digital devices have the capacity to ‘fabricate’ experiences, designers are burdened with a major responsibility: they ‘choose which possible world experiences are available’ (p. 112). Vial further unpacks this argument by discussing the role of objects more broadly in constructing our perception of the world and our relationship with others. The shape of a table, for instance, can condition significant parts of our daily lives. Practicing design thus involves projecting into an object ‘some factitive delight’ (p. 116), i.e. intentions that make the world appear in certain ways. Therefore, ‘we need more than ever before to continue to shape digital ontophany in a way that makes sense to us humans’ (p. 120). Rather than a mere ‘phenomenological impoverishment’, digital technology can help us differentiate and make strategic use of different modalities of experiencing the world. Computer-mediated communication technologies do not reduce the importance of face-to-face contact; if anything, they make it even more meaningful. Rather than trying to keep our children away from digital environments, Vial advocates that we should teach them to meaningfully navigate those and other environments. ‘It is where they are assimilating new structures of perception and acquiring the meaning of reality—their own reality’ (p. 123).

The first part of the book leaves us with three supplements that apply the theory of digital ontophany to otherness, feeling and the myth of digital dualism. The second part of the book presents eight brief yet engaging essays gathered into ‘A Short Treatise on Design’. Ranging from reflections on the interrelations between design and marketing, the ethics of design, and the very concept of ‘design’ itself, Vial convinces the reader of the usability of his own theory for a variety of scholarly and practical contemporary issues.

Overall, the book presents an insightful and well-supported philosophical account of the digital revolution. It succeeds in making complex philosophical theories accessible to a non-expert audience and at the same time convincingly illustrating their relevance for recent debates on digitalization. It should be noted that the accessibility of the book comes with a price. The reader will bump into several repetitions throughout the book that might help to follow the argument, though for some might feel unnecessary. Readers that have specialized in the modern philosophical tradition might get slightly frustrated with the fact that some concepts are more superficially employed than others. For instance, while Bachelard’s concept of ‘*phénoménotechnique*’ is very well unpacked, Immanuel Kant’s distinction between *noumenon* and *phenomenon* is less well developed though seems central to the argument. This leaves the reader wondering whether these concepts are effective enough to support the argument. As the overall contribution of the book lies in the introduction of a particular French perspective to the ‘digital revolution’, it succeeds less in thoroughly connecting this

perspective to well-established and more recent streams in contemporary (Anglo-Saxon) philosophy of technology and STS, such as Don Ihde's postphenomenology and new materialism. The author could have made the advantage of his approach over others in the current debate more explicit. While this strikes me as a missed opportunity, the book does provide a firm basis for further (comparative) research into these connections as well as into more concrete instances of user-interface interactions. The book especially deserves praise for introducing still largely absent yet deeply relevant insights from 20th century French philosophy of science and technology into internet studies, a perspective of which the benefits are now to be discovered thanks to Stéphane Vial. The book will be of great service to students and scholars in philosophy of technology, STS, and media studies who seek a fresh and fundamental reflection on what is at stake in the 'digital revolution'.

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