



Philosophy of technology

Filosofia da tecnologia

Andrew Feenberg^[a], Jairo Dias Carvalho^{[b]*}

^[a] Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada

^[b] Universidade Federal de Uberlândia (UFU), Uberlândia, MG, Brazil

Jairo Dias Carvalho - If you could say in one sentence what is the point of thinking about the philosophy of technology what would it be?

Andrew Feenberg - Since our whole way of life is shaped by technology today, we had better think about it and try to understand it.

Jairo Dias Carvalho - It is correct to say that his philosophy of technology is also a philosophy of design? What is the design for you?

Andrew Feenberg Design is the choice and assembling of the components of a technology in view of creating the features that

* AF: PhD, e-mail: feenberg@sfu.ca

JDC: PhD, e-mail: jairodc_8@hotmail.com

serve the functions of the technology. Design is the primary responsibility of the technical personnel who make and improve the technology, but they work under the influence or direct control of management, government, and public opinion. So design "translates" many non-technical concerns. It is one of the most important meeting places of society and nature.

Jairo Dias Carvalho - What is the role that aesthetics play in the transformation of technology?

Andrew Feenberg - Aesthetics in the sense of technical elegance is a concern of technical workers. An elegant solution to a technical problem is one that uses fewer parts to accomplish many goals simultaneously. This is a quite fundamental feature of technical work, an intrinsic norm. In another sense aesthetics refers to beauty as appreciated by users or observers. There has been a long debate about the relation of function to beauty. The Bauhaus was famous for emphasizing the beauty of function itself, in opposition to traditional design based on ornamentation reflecting historically acquired meanings. Every city has a library with pseudo-Greek columns exemplifying the latter approach and modern glass walled high rise buildings exemplifying the former. But in a way these debates have been outdated by the proliferation of computerized games and gadgets that appeal to an aesthetic sense that is neither functional nor historical. Schiller associated the spirit of play with aesthetics because play is free of moral and utilitarian controls. The appeal to the spirit of play in that sense is now an essential aspect of design of many consumer goods. Marcuse was a great admirer of Schiller and projected the extension of this aesthetic from the realm of consumer goods to the foundations of industrial society. He argued that the aesthetic sensibility was linked to the affirmation of life and imagined a reunion of art and technology along lines anticipated by ancient craft. These radical ideas are still interesting although we must adapt them to our current situation to make a

proper use of them. I think for example that it would be interesting to consider the concept of technical elegance in relation to ecology, incorporating natural features and limits into design, as an aesthetic of respect for nature.

Jairo Dias Carvalho - What are the dangers we should be aware of the artificial intelligences construction project?

Andrew Feenberg - I think the main danger is believing all the hype surrounding AI. Already billions of dollars have been poured into the hopeless project of making a machine that can think like a human, mostly by the Pentagon in the hope of creating robot soldiers. What a waste! Hype is the peculiar form of propaganda by which scientists and the corporations that employ them extract money from ignorant tax payers. Even the pure and innocent science of finding the Higgs Boson had to be billed as the pursuit of a "God particle"! Poor science, poor tax payers!

Jairo Dias Carvalho - What does the democratization of technology [mean]?

Andrew Feenberg - This is a good question. If we understand democratization in terms of the existing political arrangements, it makes no sense to apply it to most technological decisions. Who can believe that all or even a large proportion of these decisions should be made by majority vote of the whole citizenry? Of course a few major issues such as whether or not to use nuclear power need to be debated and decided by the usual democratic processes, but this is a small part of the technical decision-making that affects everyone's lives. Rather than projecting the generalization of such procedures in an imaginary future, I think it is more fruitful to consider the existing democratic resources deployed by individuals and communities today. For example, those immediately concerned by technological plans or installations sometimes mobilize to protest side effects

or other undesirable consequences. This happens in neighborhoods and companies where residents or workers feel they are adversely affected. Boycotts have also influenced technical decisions. Sometimes companies involve users in evaluating products. Such procedures inflect designs. These are all what I call “democratic interventions.”

Jairo Dias Carvalho - What would be the role of philosophy in the transformation project of technology?

Andrew Feenberg - Philosophy is an aid to self-awareness. Remember Socrates! In a technological society self-awareness must include a realistic understanding of the technical mediations that surround us and shape our lives.

Received: 03/05/2015

Recebido: 05/03/2015

Approved: 03/18/2015

Aprovado: 18/03/2015