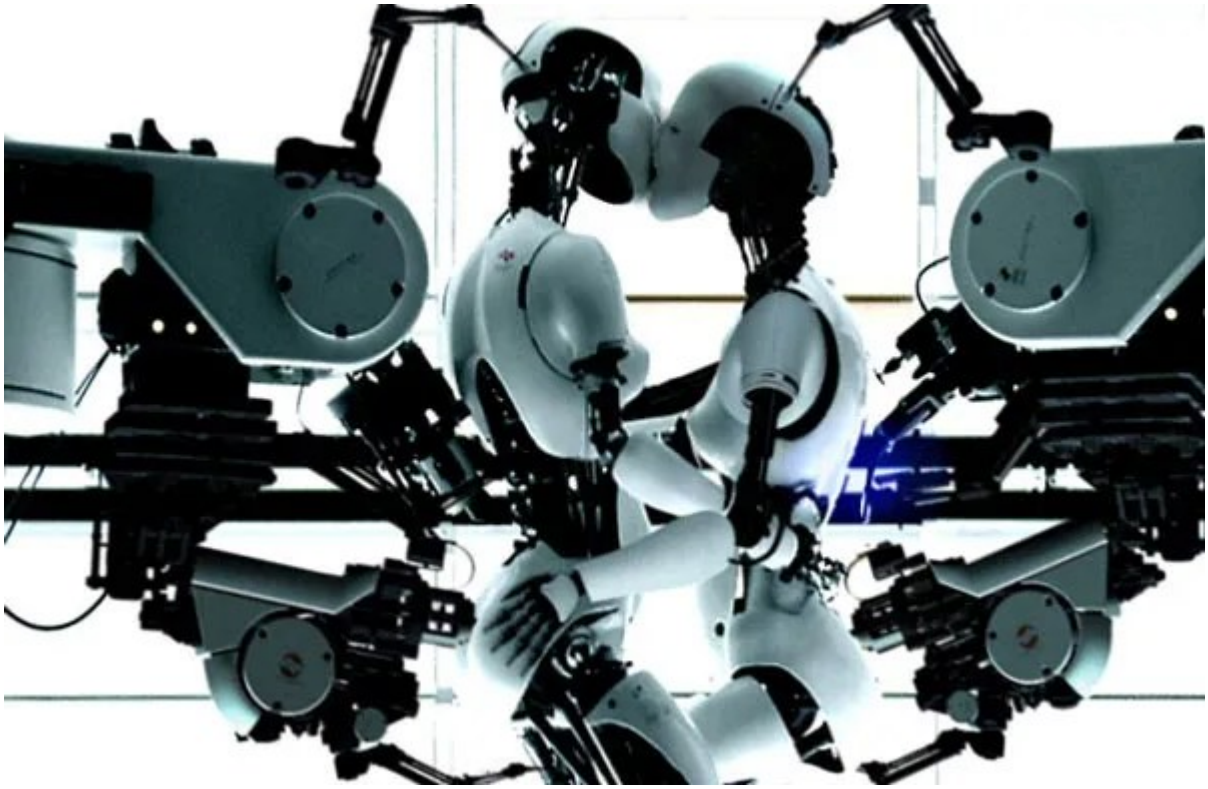
HUMAN CENTERED DESIGN?



More thoughts arising from our class in the d.school on Transformative Design.

I have always liked Don Norman's ideas and attitude. A couple of weeks ago at Core 77 he questioned the feasibility of human-centered design – [Link]

In today's connected world and global market, he argues, culture matters little to design. Designers should center their effort less on establishing people's needs and more on understanding activities:

A few decades ago, I believed that cultural differences were fundamental. Moreover, they were exciting and interesting. Today, I believe that cultural differences are still just as fundamental and exciting but they primarily exist in governing social interaction, the types of foods that are eaten and stylistic

preferences. Modern products are designed to support particular activities, so that it is the activity itself that controls how they should be designed and used. Traditional activities are heavily determined by culture, but modern office practices, manufacturing, communication, financial accounts and transportation are dominated by the technology used to accomplish them, or in the cases of financial accounts, by world-wide standards intended to make transactions and accounting uniform. As a result, many of our activities are determined by the technologies we use, such as the automobile, computer, cellphone, train or airplane, or by the need to interact smoothly with other countries and cultures across the world. Once the technology determines the activity, the influence of culture dissipates.

These observations have important implications for design. Modern products are driven by technology, which in turn dictates the activity. Designers talk a lot about Human-Centered Design where it is important to design for the needs of the person. Well, this doesn’t work when the goal is millions of people all across the world. Computers and software, phones and applications,

automobiles, kitchen appliances and housewares are intended for consumption by millions. Human-Centered Design can no longer apply: what does it mean to discover the precise needs of millions of people? Instead, I have argued for Activity-Centered Design, where the activity dictates the design.

Don is assuming, as many do, that culture accounts for human difference and individuality and can be radically separated from function, activity and technology. (see also his piece on activity-centered design a while back – [Link])

But what happens if we deny this separation of culture and technology? What happens if we question this model of what it is to be human? (See my previous comments on the nature of humanity – [Link])

As an archaeologist I work on the material remains of things, places, people and their activities in attempts to understand what was going on. For a long while many archaeologists have felt considerable guilt over their focus on things. Mortimer Wheeler, an influential archaeological character back in the 1950s and 60s and Director of the Institute of Archaeology in London, famously declared in his book *Archaeology from the Earth* that the whole purpose of archaeology was to find out about *the people* behind things – societies and cultures are the true object of archaeology. This was archaeology's higher purpose – to move beyond material goods and technologies to human-centered accounts of the past.

Many of my colleagues who are cultural anthropologists share such an embarrassment about things, holding that it is the world of cultural values and meanings that makes us truly human. Too much focus on material goods can be a symptom of commodity fetishism, of a reductionist materialism, or even of our consumerist modernity.

In contrast, my colleagues in design and engineering schools are rightly looking beyond their focus on materials and processes, beyond artifacts and things, to

embrace human factors, interactions with things, experiences and emotions, putting people before technology, as Don says.

But while I usually play the role of an archaeological humanist and argue that engineers and designers do indeed need to understand how people get on with things, I also find myself making the opposite case to my archaeological and anthropological colleagues, arguing that they need to take artifacts and materialities more seriously and not put them in second place to cultural values and structures of meaning (see my new book about all this – [Link]).

This is a curious academic schizophrenia, and, of course, another manifestation of C.P.Snow's old notion of two cultures – Science versus the Arts and Humanities. I believe we are still bedeviled by such a separation in our schools and colleges. In spite of all the calls to be inter-, multi-, trans-disciplinary, the norm is segregation. But I don't want to elaborate on this here. I explore it enough elsewhere in this blog.

I suggest that design, as practiced and taught in the likes of our d.school, offers a modest resolution of the separation of humans and things, culture and technology, and also entails a quite radical redefinition of what it is to be human/inhuman.

The modest resolution comes from centering learning and education on practice, projects, and iteration rather than academic disciplines and schooling – practical worldly mixtures.

The radical redefinition of the human?

What makes us human is engagements with and through things. And, crucially, these practical engagements *precede* our definitions of person and artifact. Distinctions, and they are very real, between the likes of culture and technology, are not absolute, *a priori*, but *achievements* – local, historical, provisional.

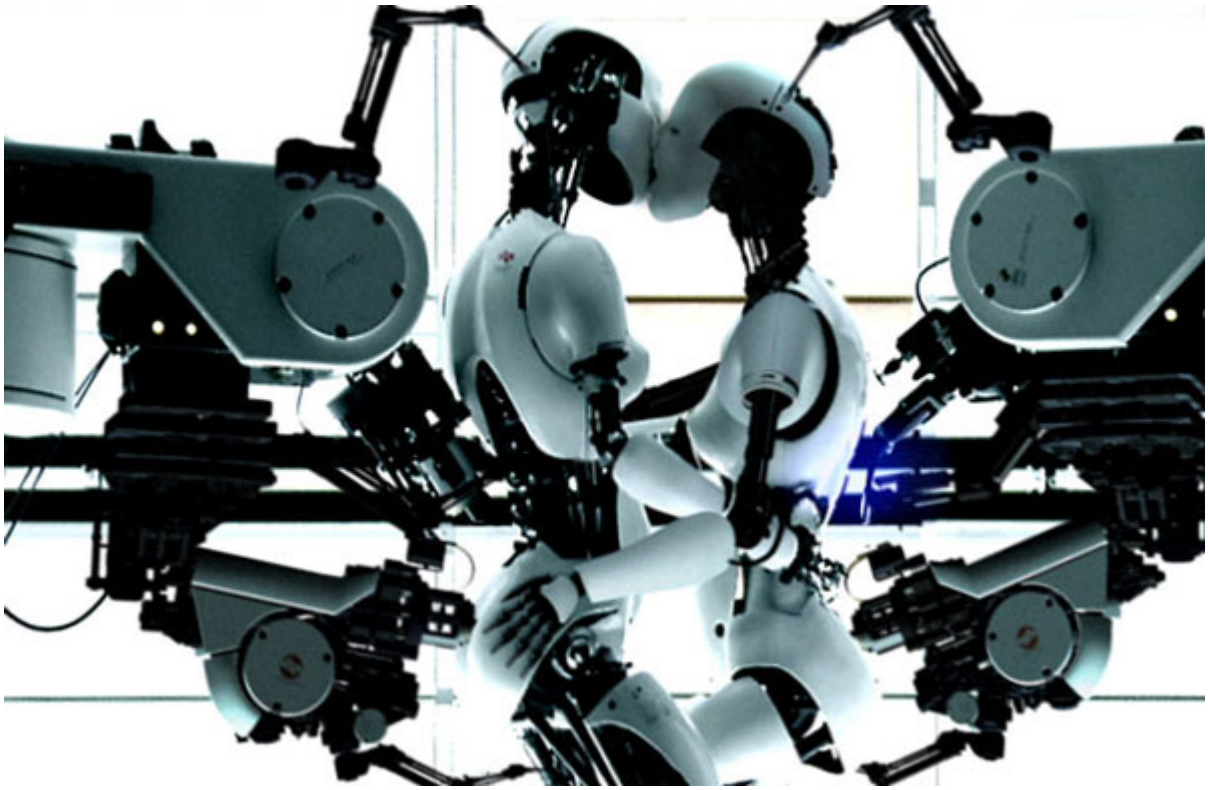
My friend Cliff Nass wrote a book about some of this with Byron Reeves – *The Media Equation: How People Treat Computers, Television, and New Media like Real People and Places* [Link]. People treat their machines like people, because the distinction between things and people, between technology and the social or cultural is local and provisional, rather than abstract and absolute.

If being human is all about making and getting on with things, then human-centered design is simultaneously about activities and technologies, materials and processes, values and experiences, the tangible and intangible, individuals dispersed through networks of material flows, human being flowing through cultural assemblages of artifacts, people, values, architectures, landscapes, emotions …

See my comments last year on city planning in Rotterdam – [Link]

So human-centered design is not about people and cultural differences, in contrast to other kinds of design that deal with materials and mechanics, activities and technologies.

Human centered design is as much inhuman as human, because for as long as we've been human we've been cyborgs!



"All is full of love" – video by Chris Cunningham for Björk – from *Homegenic* (1999) [Link]