

*Digital Vertigo: How Today's Online Social Revolution Is Dividing, Diminishing, and Disorienting Us*

By Andrew Keen, St. Martin's Press, 2012

Reviewed by David Lovekin

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Keen begins with a reference to Alfred Hitchcock's remark, ". . . that behind every good picture lay a great corpse" (1). Keen notes that Hitchcock's *Vertigo* is a film about a man in love with a corpse. Keen then moves to the corpse of Jeremy Bentham, British philosopher, founder of utilitarianism, and visionary of the prison—the Panopticon—who died 1832 and whose body ended up in London's University College. The body is in a mahogany case with folding glass doors and is seated in a chair with a walking stick across its lap. The head is made of sculpted wax. The construction is labeled an "Auto-Icon." Bentham, it seems, had made an image of himself. Keen writes that the idea for his book came to him as he stared at the cabinet in the university building on Gower Street, with a Blackberry in one hand and a Canon digital camera in the other (2). He had come to London from Oxford, where he had been at a conference titled, "Silicon Valley Comes to Oxford," with Reid Hoffman, Biz Stone, Mike Malone, Chris Sacca, and Phillip Rosedale, social media experts and entrepreneurs. Against prevailing views, Keen argued that social media such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Zynga, etc., have not brought us together, have not made us wiser, and have left us in a place devoid of history and a clear sense of a present, or at least that's my read on it.

The thesis of Keen's book is that social media have made us images of ourselves, absolutely real fakes in the realm of the *Hypervisible*, to cite Umberto Eco (14). We are imprisoned in the image, with a nod to Foucault's treatise, *Discipline and Punish*, on Bentham's prison, and to Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*. In fact, there are numerous citations—37 pages of endnotes in a 232-page book. I do not mean this as a criticism but as an observation; much social criticism has become journalism. To know is to be loaded with information, although, as Keen maintains, information is not necessarily knowledge. Facts require wisdom for interpretation. He tentatively writes, "I UPDATE, THEREFORE I AM" (12). Thinking better of it, he adds, "I UPDATE, THEREFORE I AM NOT" (15). What is and what is not are often conjoined.

The strength of the book lies in the metaphors between the prison—the house of inspection—and the movie house. Finding all come together in the entombed body of Jeremy Bentham is ingenious, though not without problems. Keen states that Bentham willed his body to University College, and then put himself on display, an exemplar of utilitarian greed at his death, in 1832. A website for University College, however, attempts to dispel several myths about Bentham. Bentham had no real connection—other

than as a spiritual father—to the university. Further, he had willed his body to his friend Thomas South Smith. The body was to be dissected in the interests of public health and the greater good, the goal of utilitarianism. Bentham’s motives, thus, were not clearly selfish. Finally, the body was then moved to University College in 1850. Warning: some of this information was found on a website. History dogs most claims. Keen’s facts may be wrong while being nonetheless on track. There are no facts, finally, without a story.

His over-riding contention is that the image has come to control, and that pleasure, as it was for Bentham, is the greatest good that is now found in the image. The image is like Narcissus’s mirror—a presence without depth, the locus of society’s current pleasure that obscures the importance of history and speculation. Beneath surfaces lie more facts. The true, I believe, is the whole, to invoke Hegel and Jacques Ellul, neither of whom is in Keen’s entourage. The box of our auto-iconhood is larger and more complex than Bentham’s. Again, *what is* often resides in *what is not*.

We suffer, Keen claims, from digital vertigo, not unlike Scottie Ferguson, the detective in Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*, who has been hired by industrialist Gavin Elster to shadow his wife, Madeleine, who is acting strangely and distant. Elster’s mistress, Judy Barton, has been hired to impersonate Madeleine. Elster knows of Scottie’s malaise that he will use in a plan to murder his real wife in a faked suicide. Elster tells Scottie that his wife feels she is possessed by a great grandmother—Carlotta Valdez, who did commit suicide—and Gavin wants to know what she does with her day. We see Judy, the fake Madeleine, buying flowers, traveling to Valdez’s tomb, and then sitting in a gallery before a painting of Carlotta. The flowers and her hair are a near-perfect match. She appears captivated by the image, but it is Scottie who is transfixed.

She travels to the home, now a hotel, where Carlotta lived, and then goes to the Golden Gate Bridge and jumps in the water. Scottie rescues her, takes her home and dries her out, and falls in love—in love with her image, it turns out. They spend time together, go to a forest and wax on about history and nature, and end up in a small church in San Juan Bautista. Judy appears possessed. She runs into the church, with Scottie following, up a winding staircase. He suffers vertigo, as does the viewer, and is unable to get to the roof, where Elster and Judy are hiding with the real Madeleine, who has been killed. Scottie sees her body fall by a window; he is traumatized and then institutionalized. He suffers, the doctor says, from acute melancholia and is unable to speak.

Apparently cured, he returns to San Francisco where he finds Judy, abandoned by Elster. He begins to date Judy and forces her to dress and to look like Madeleine. Clearly he is in love with an image. Judy asks him what he wants—confused, guilty, and frightened—and he says, “We could just see a lot of each other.” I have here fleshed out a bit more than Keen, but his analysis is useful and sharp.

Judy seems to give in to Scottie’s obsession, but then absentmindedly wears a necklace that Carlotta wore in her portrait. They race back to the church, with Scottie saying, “There’s one last thing I have to do, and then I’ll be free of the past.” Of course, his past is a fake past: a past he has helped fabricate, and from which he is a victim. He forces the

truth on Judy while pushing her back up the staircase, the scene of the crime. As the tension builds, and as Judy recoils from Scottie's accusations, a nun appears from the shadows and frightens Judy, who falls from the roof. "I heard voices," and "God have mercy," the nun says. Keen notes that Scottie has been in love with a corpse who is an image. I add that Judy is both image and woman who cannot come together, and she dies for it. Scottie is finally in possession with a past that he cannot possess. Such is a present without a past.

Of course, we, the audience of spectacle, like Scottie, are in love with movies, with real fakes who often guide and direct our desires and our lives. We have become detectives in the mazes and mansions of advertising, hoping to solve the crimes of embodiment, of appearing and being less than perfect; we wish to become American Idols on stage, to be worshipped in a Being that is to be seen, the essence of techno-being.

Between the discussion of Bentham's prison and auto-icon and the film *Vertigo*, Keen explains social media further. Web 3, a development of Web 2, provides the ultimate prison in which we willingly wear the shackles of *being seen*. The Facebook of Mark Zuckerberg—where everyone will be united in frictionless sharing, where what we read, think, do, hope, and dream—will be our auto-icon (63). We will all share together in the once-mythical global village forecast by Marshal McLuhan, in a nostalgia for the future (112–113). We become images far and wide. Our cell phones, our computers, our navigation devices, which are no longer separate, give away our locations, our buying preferences, and even our political proclivities (40). Sherry Turkle, one of Keen's favorite sources, writes, "We have so many ways of communication, yet we are so alone" (58).

Attempts at political rebellion, Keen contends, are often co-opted. The much-touted Arab Spring failed for lack of leadership and direction (72). Many had their "say," their 15 minutes of fame, but the movement went away, like the changing of channels. The same appears to have happened with Occupy Wall Street (71). The police have now come to peruse Facebook accounts.

Aware that modern viewers lack a sense of history, Keen shows how the development of the transistor led to Silicon Valley and to the monopolies of hardware, which also led to the hegemonies of software, to the gods of social media (41–45). In all cases, Keen contends, the masses do not financially benefit (74–76). Instead, they become more efficient shoppers. Communication leads to the largesse of the few, who promulgate the myths of sharing and togetherness. Zuckerberg's Law is that in each year twice as many people will begin to share (58). This law is echoed in Gordon Moore's law that the number of transistors on a computer chip would double every two years (96). In turn, architecture takes a turn toward transparency, visibility. The 1851 Crystal Palace, together with Bentham's prison house, the space of inspection, embodies these concerns (136). Much more is connected and inferred. Keen is a genius of analogy. For example, he connects Elster's mahogany desk with Bentham's mahogany cabinet. All serve to show the universality of the move to visibility, which leads to separation and ultimately to enslavement (85).

Strangely, Keen holds individual and social character to be at fault (107). Technology is off the hook, regarded simply as a collection of tools, machines, and devices (106–107). He does invoke the problem of genesis: is it character that influences practice, or does practice—like tool-using—influence character? Ellul could have helped. As Ellul explains throughout his works, technique is a mentality brought to bear on multiple elements of western civilization after 1750. The symptoms of this mentality are the reduction of all to images and to the silencing of the word. That is, the logic of identity trumps the logic of metaphor and contradiction. One cannot be both something and another opposing thing at the same time. Judy Barton cannot be a salesperson from Kansas, the mistress of Elster, and Madeleine at the same time, and yet she is. Keen is what he uploads (his social being), and yet he is also his privacy, his silence, and his words that invoke a dimension like history that surrounds and gives meaning to a present. This is the domain of the word, what he is not, that has been eclipsed by the image. The photograph, we can remember, is a *slice* of life, no matter how much it moves, to continue the corpse metaphor. But like any concept, it will be an abstraction. For Ellul, concepts are embodied and then forgotten, are technical phenomena parading automatically, geometrically, and endlessly in a manufactured and false paradise where what can be done will be done.<sup>1</sup> Bentham’s cabinet and prison would make sense in this spread of technology, where the body is disciplined, contained, and constrained.

*Vertigo* begins with a mouth trying to speak filling the screen; then in an upward pan we see two eyes looking left and then right; and then one eye fills the screen, widens, and then the film unfolds in a spiral that ultimately explains Scottie’s vertigo—he is unbalanced bodily, gravitationally, linguistically, and socially. He simply wants to look at Judy and to revisit a fake history that was his undoing. His world collapsed into the images of Madeleine that define and ultimately kill Judy Barton, who, tragically, is what she is not. A nun has the last word.

Technology disembodies, as Ellul has shown, and turns us into Facebook images and virtual friends with no substance beyond fascination, as Keen understands. Born in North London and educated both in England and America, Keen did his stint as an entrepreneur in Silicon Valley; his venture Audiocafé.com failed, but his interests in the impact of internet activity have not. His insights could be strengthened if joined to those of Ellul and moved beyond a journalist’s collection of data. A larger history of technology is needed to go beyond Bentham’s box and even beyond Foucault’s prison (Foucault, of course, does visit the asylum and the clinic in *The History of Madness* and in the *Birth of the Clinic*). The metaphor of a digital vertigo then can be more fully fleshed out.

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed account of Ellul’s logic of technique, see my *Technique, Discourse, and Consciousness: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jacques Ellul* (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 1991).