"THERE'S A KIND OF MORAL HYPOCRISY…"
An Interview with Simon Critchley

(Интервью с Саймоном Критчли, профессором философии в Новой школе социальных исследований (*The New School for Social Research*), Нью-Йорк. Интервью проводила учёный секретарь журнала Александра Логвинова.)

Alexandra Logvinova: The second half of the 20th century has marked a particular countdown in the development of bio- and information technologies. Intense embedding of the latest scientific technologies into such crucial areas of human life as communication and health has led to previously unknown convergence of science and everyday life. The result of these processes is not simply an increasing of the competence of the individual, but the reshaping of sociality itself, the emergence of new cultural practices. So my first question is very general: how would you name the most significant or most problematic social effects of these new technologies coming into our life?

Simon Critchley: I think, it's a kind of subjective deadness, I think there's a risk that people become dead and disconnected from each other. One of the worries I have is about internet pornography, how internet pornography affects the intimate relationships people have, and I think it affects it pretty profoundly – it induces a kind of indifference, coldness, distance and cynicism. So I think that is the worst side of it. There's one level where technology is burring down deeper and deeper into life, into subjectivity – and that's just effect, but the one that induces coldness and distance – that really bothers me.

A. L.: Yes, and it's surely concerns the question of information technologies. But if we step back and consider the changes in the structure of biopower, as for example evoked by the development in the sphere of human biotechnologies, it turns out that the body itself becomes a kind of commodity and enters the whole new discourse and practices, when you could clone and multiply an individual for example.

S. C.: Yes, you know the future is extremely worrying, it's entirely plausible to imagine within five years every aspect of our behavior is biometrically recorded with different devices like watch – our feelings, our emotions, what I'm feeling right now or you're feeling right now, we'll have a kind of flow of emotions and those things will be publicly available, recordable. And we'll right down the condition of our body – the heart-rate, whether we're sweating or not. You know there's a prospect that biopower is going to be total, and the question is going to be: "Well, is resistance to it possible? What do we do in the face of that?" I also have to remember when people thought that the Internet was going to be subversion. People really thought that the Internet was going

to lead to new forms of democracy, empowerment, when everyone gets the voice and everyone gets to say, and all those hierarchical structures would collapse – a kind of cyber-utopia.

A. L.: And there was this great idea of connecting all the people as well.

S. C.: Yes, but the opposite has happened. We found ourselves in the hands of a couple of corporations, so what do we do? I think the issue becomes one of those that withdraw or try to countervail the experience of being along or being off the grid. So the biopolitical regime that we inhabit in relation to social oblivion is imperative of transparency: everything must be transparent and therefore accountable. Transparency, accountability, and therefore it seems that the counter imperative to transparency is opacity – when things become less clear. And I think what we should think about are the forms of individual behavior or collective behavior which are neither accountable nor transparent. And that might be the form that the resistance has to take in the future.

A. L.: That's an interesting point. It also leads us to another side of technologies, which is the transformation in the structure of moral experience and moral dimension of how these technologies provoke new moral questions, and the way we could admit them or not.

S. C.: The most enduring feature in a human life is moral hypocrisy. I mean we're total moral hypocrites. We pretend that we're interested in privacy, but we act as if we are not. So we make these claims about privacy and we're outraged when our privacy is bridged, but all the time we're engaging with technologies through cell phones and the rest, where privacy is given up, so we're moral hypocrites. And for me the worst thing about this situation we're in is that it's this coldness and distance I talked about, a kind of flatness that the world appears to have, everything could be a tweeter feed, everything could be like anything else – you go from a record about the latest Jay Z and Beyonce video to the video of the beheading of hostage in Syria – you know, it's as if there were this kind of flatness which induces in us a kind of moral apathy, it's not even confusion. So what we need is some idea of commitment as it seems to me, some profound idea of commitments of what it means to be actually bound to a moral project.

A. L.: If you mentioned this "moral hypocrisy" I would say it's something that is always there – if we trace back the history from Ancient Greece until now we'll see that it has always been present. What I mean is: are there actually new twists, or new terms in our morality? I'll give you an example – consider the therapeutic cloning (when people clone embryos for therapeutic needs, like when you clone embryos and use this material for cosmetics or treatment), the biggest moral question here is that these embryos got actually killed but the medicine claims that prior to day 14 an embryo could not be considered a human and therefore it's normal to use it for our needs, and the new moral agenda here is actually that we, humans, almost ready to accept this idea to use other humans – yes, it's questionable, but the embryo has a potential to be a human.

S. C.: Yes, I think it is right. We're a kind of in a human farm in that sense, we're using other humans for our needs, for our cosmetics, and

then we use the laws in the way of drawing an arbitrary line between what is a human life and what is not a human life. It's seems shocking to me. I think we're in the worst position than previous generations, and I think there's a kind of moral hypocrisy, which has always existed, as you say, and we're involved in acts of expropriation, exploitation – the use of embryos, and making cosmetics – and we know that, and yet we are still going on.

A. L.: And we're ready to accept this. Doesn't it mean that we're morally degrading as we reduce our morals to the level of our needs?

S. C.: Yes, we reduce that, we reduce our morals to whatever seems to serve the purposes of the day, and that is really alarming, and at that point we need to rethink what morality is, and you know we got the theory of morality based on commitment to infinite demand, but what was behind that is how we think and act always out of the situation where we find ourselves. And what would it take for human beings to wake up and recognize what they're doing? Our situation is similar to the situation of ordinary Germans during the third Reich, or the situation of ordinary Russians during Stalinism.

A. L.: But is it then possible "to wake up" before it's too late?

S. C.: I think it is, but the wake up call must be really loud and definite.

A. L.: Who's going do this, philosophers?

S. C.: Yes, exactly, philosophers, you and me! (laughing). I don't know, that's the question. To some extent what you can do intellectually is to try to provide maps, you can provide concepts and tools, and you could be open to situations of possibilities and then you have to hope that something else happens, which does happen – things do come together, people do come together. The history of resistance is the history of failure from one perspective.

A. L.: But success from the other?

S. C.: Well, yes. George Orwell said that if you want a vision of the future imagine a boot stamping on the human face, and that's almost true, but not completely true. The surprising thing about human beings is why it's not completely true. What is it about human beings, or human social organization, which means that it's not just the boot in the human face? There're actually examples of extraordinary things that happened, which are usually repressed, usually suppressed with violence, usually by the state. This is kind of my utopianism – I think there's still a capacity for decency, for moral decency amongst people which is surprisingly strong. And people find themselves in really bad situations when they're forced to act in ways they know are wrong. There's the view which you'll find in Lock that we're very violent creatures, we're nasty creatures, we're bad. But I don't agree with that, I think we're creatures that are basically decent and have extraordinary capacity for working with other people, for tenderness and love.

A. L.: Fine, then the last point. When we're talking about technologies we inevitably address a long discussion within the intellectual history (from Heidegger to Fukuyama) tackling this particular question.

What's interesting here is that for example Max Scheler just at the beginning of his favorite work "Man's Place in the Cosmos" wrote that "At no time in his history has man been so much a problem to himself as he is now", and he wrote it some one hundred years ago. And now this question becomes even more urgent and important. How in this regard can we talk about reconsideration of the concept of human itself?

S. C.: There're two things, I guess: on the one hand, human beings have always been a problem for themselves for as long as human beings have capacity for self-reflection and language, so it sounds more like a constant for the last four-five thousand years; but on the other hand, there're differences when we find ourselves in situations where the stability of what it means to be human is fallen apart. So the idea of a human being as a creature, created by God, or the idea of a rational individual in the Enlightenment – has become much less stable, while we find ourselves in a new situation where the limits of what is a human life are increasingly waved, and we go along with that, because we think of that as of a progress and scientific development, but the challenges that it posses to us, I think, are potentially enormous, which played out mostly in the domain what's besides fiction for us, but it can actually happen. To live alongside a society of clones is entirely possible.