



Prosthetic Perception: Turn on, Tune in, Tune Out (and then hit Replay)

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Review of Michael Chorost's *Rebuilt: How Becoming Part Computer Made Me More Human* (2005)

Michael Chorost's story is like no other today and his book is as riveting as it is timely. *Rebuilt: How Becoming Part Computer Made Me More Human* is an intimate depiction of important aspects of some of today's most pressing controversies in emerging health science technology concerned with improving the human capabilities. Told from the vantage point of a self-reflective Cochlear-implant patient who is a keenly perceptive writer, *Rebuilt* is a pivotal tale from inside a period of rapid and consequential techno-social transition. Medical interventions to replace failing body parts—whether a heart pacemaker, a pig liver, or a metal hip—are becoming increasingly routine in technologically advanced societies, and prosthetics for virtually any therapeutic need are generally accepted without objection from patients or society. Yet, the adaptive neural hardware technologies like Chorost's brain implant, or more pandemically, "software" psychopharmaceuticals and other drugs affecting cognition, tend to provoke more controversy than other medical technologies because they bring into play long-cherished assumptions about our 'humanness' as thinking, emotive, and perceptual beings. When it comes to *perceiving*, or knowing what it means to be human, we are inevitably caught in an organ tautology: its the human brain that counts.

Aside from conceptual mavericks like Stelarc or Ken Warwick, it is unlikely that anyone will soon seek (or be allowed!) non-therapeutic brain implants. It's too soon to line up for elective brain surgery, which is why it's so valuable to have a perceptive and articulate writer like Chorost shouting back to us from the epicenter of this technocultural storm. As therapeutic techniques become increasingly capable of changing and extending the human body and brain through drugs, prosthetics, and other technical means, views on such viscerally lived societal changes are nearly always divided. Add in, a dash of distain

or morality for good measure and you've got the predictable antagonism of a debate between a George Annas v. Greg Stock. The use of the past-tense in the subtitle to *Rebuilt (How Becoming Part Computer Made Me More Human)* clues the reader in advance that Chorost, for one, has weathered the looming social debates over what it is or isn't to be human in relation to radically transformative technologies.

Chorost is, through his own astute observations in an economy of signs and surgeries, an important guide to this next wave. While other stories about cyborgs abound, Chorost's narrative is the first nonfiction autobiography of a perceptual cyborg—someone whose senses are transformed by technology directly wired, or rather wirelessly transmitted, to his brain. And yet, Chorost is not just another prop in a *Wired* fantasy of techno-fetishistic, commercialized masculinity. Chorost describes in detail the fragility of his technological self—and the precarious humanity at risk. In this book, Chorost hears past the cultural static of essentialized versions of what it means to be human in a way that Donna Haraway proclaimed a theorized and fabricated hybrid mind might: "The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity"¹. Yet Chorost, because his life is not just a theoretical manifesto in syncretic understanding, describes his ambivalence, shares his losses, and recounts his pain in the way that organic humans do. In doing so, always with a bit of self-reflective humor, he cautions consumer-patients eager to embrace body modifications with human-computer technological interfaces. He deftly addresses the good, the bad, and the awkward in getting to know and use his own advanced hearing apparatus without mincing the frustrations of compromise as he strains for an approximation of 'normalcy' in hitting his head against the ceiling of current technological limitations.

What might we face individually and collectively when our eyes, ears, and sense of smell are re-engineered on the operating table? With convincing authority, Chorost assesses the pros and cons of such interventions in perceptual human faculties not only for himself, but also for society. He critically analyzes some of the impending societal consequences. For instance, he explains the nested issues for minority groups whose freedom of choice and identity may be threatened by the ability (or pressure) to "fix" their disabilities. He also assesses the situated economics of corporate-driven medicine as consumers' sensory choices become mediated by hard/software design decisions: what does it mean to 'see' 'hear' 'smell' or 'taste' through a particular company's execution of corporateratified product capabilities?

Rebuilt hits the pause button on the accelerated pace of innovation and marks an important moment in the transition of society towards human enhancement technologies. Will these lead to greater freedom in human expression and understanding? In heeding Chorost's cautionary tale as both a warning and a celebration of next steps in culture, readers will hear a timeless and visionary assessment of the human condition; a valuable gift that good writers and timely thinkers share with their contemporaries and provide as their own legacy. Twentieth-century author, Aldous Huxley (aside from crafting his over-cited dystopian novel about a brave new world)

¹ Haraway, D. 1991. A cyborg manifesto: Science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century," in *Simians, cyborgs and women: The reinvention of nature*, 149-181. New York: Routledge.

lamented the more subtle limitations of human thinking caused by truncated, limited perception. Huxley and his wife, Laura Archer-Huxley, sought and promoted ways to open the “reducing valve” of consciousness—those calcified perceptual filters that all too often allow us to select and ignore, even as we see, hear, touch, taste, and live.

Chorost’s careful testimony of early twenty-first century growing pains is invaluable for those activists, researchers, and thinkers concerned with human rights and emerging prosthetic technologies. Rebuilt is an explicit manual on human self-awareness during a time of massive technological transition and extreme vulnerability. If enhancement technologies are to become routinely hard-wired under the skin as readily as antidepressants, stimulants, and other perceptual drugs are prescribed or taken for better lives, listening to Chorost makes sense.