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Google and the World Brain

Dereck Daschke

Truman State University, ddaschke@truman.edu

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Google and the World Brain

Abstract

This is a film review of *Google and the World Brain* (2013) directed by Ben Lewis.

Keywords

Google, Brain, God

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Google and the World Brain

Directed by Ben Lewis

World Documentary

If you are reading this review on the Web, and particularly if you found it by “Googling” some set of search terms, you are participating in an unprecedented information utopia that



continues to revolutionize what knowledge is and who has access to it. The instant access to virtually all information anywhere is a boon to scholars, students, reporters, researchers, policy experts – and literally everyone else with a computer or a smart phone and an Internet connection who needs to know anything about anything. If knowledge is power, the Google search engine is one of the most powerful democratic forces in the world, and the “Google Books” project to digitize every book in existence seems very close to realizing the ancient dream of what H.G. Wells called the “World Brain,” the repository of all human knowledge in one place. This achievement, Wells wrote in futurist essays collected under that name between 1936 and 1938, would become the “greatest power on earth for

the consolidation of humanity and the establishment of an enduring Pax for all mankind.”

Or so it would seem. But as the discomfiting documentary *Google and the World Brain* reveals, Google’s quest to digitize every book in existence has run roughshod over the rights of authors and publishers enshrined in copyright law. The dramatic power of this film comes from the tension between the noble goals of Google and its nature as a corporate entity which may, in fact, be trying to take over the world. (One observer quips that Google doesn’t think of itself as a corporation, but rather an NGO that makes a lot of money.) But the inevitable result of this conflation of business plan and utopian quest is that actual people and their stake in their own work get lost. Like many an apocalyptic movement before it, the lives and rights of individuals are poised to be swept away by the inexorable forces propelling the world into a glorious, transformed future. Lest one think this description is hyperbole, the film includes a fascinating middle section where the perceived divinity of the every-expanding digital storehouse of information is stated explicitly, by supporters and critics alike. The MareNostrum supercomputer in Barcelona, used in Google Book’s Spanish branch, is housed in the decommissioned Chapel Torre Girona, the location of which, one of the computer’s engineers states, is coincidental but appropriate. Another cybertopia advocate asserts that there’s more of God in the cell phone than the tree frog,

because the cell phone represents another layer of evolution – and soon enough, the cell phone will be small enough to be inside the body, part of “who we are” in a very real sense.

The human co-creationist idea is ultimately summed up by the film’s recognition that all of us who use Google, and every author who contributes a book to Google Books (willingly or not), participate in creating an entity that is bigger than us all. For those who see this as a transformative moment in human evolution, who mirror the post-millennial hope of other scientific utopians such as Wells himself, Google is the beginning of true liberation from the limits and flaws of the body, to be replaced by an existence of pure knowledge, sometimes called “The Singularity” by “trans-human” visionaries. To others, reflecting a long pre-millennial tradition of technological skepticism and fear, Google seems to be feeding ravenously on our ideas and activities; it’s all just food for the Brain. And worse, as once they are consumed, they are no longer ours: legally, they belong to the corporation. In many ways, the Google search algorithm is an ever more efficient mechanism to strip the most human things about people – their ideas, their desires, their creativity – from actual human beings, repackaging them as products to be consumed for profit.

While the film clearly advocates against allowing Google or any other corporation – Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, Facebook, etc. – to continue, unabated,

to encroach on personal rights and privacy, it does implicitly acknowledge that the wave of information unleashed by the Internet and its billions of users worldwide is both unstoppable and, if managed with appropriate protections for individuals, something that could become Wells' "greatest power on earth" for peace. To this end, libraries around the world are now seeking to achieve Google's ends, but with the ancient legacy of the library to connect not just ideas but people at the forefront. Still, even the library directors will acknowledge that they would not be pushing in that direction if Google had not pursued the utopian dream first and considered its legal limits afterwards.

— Dereck Daschke