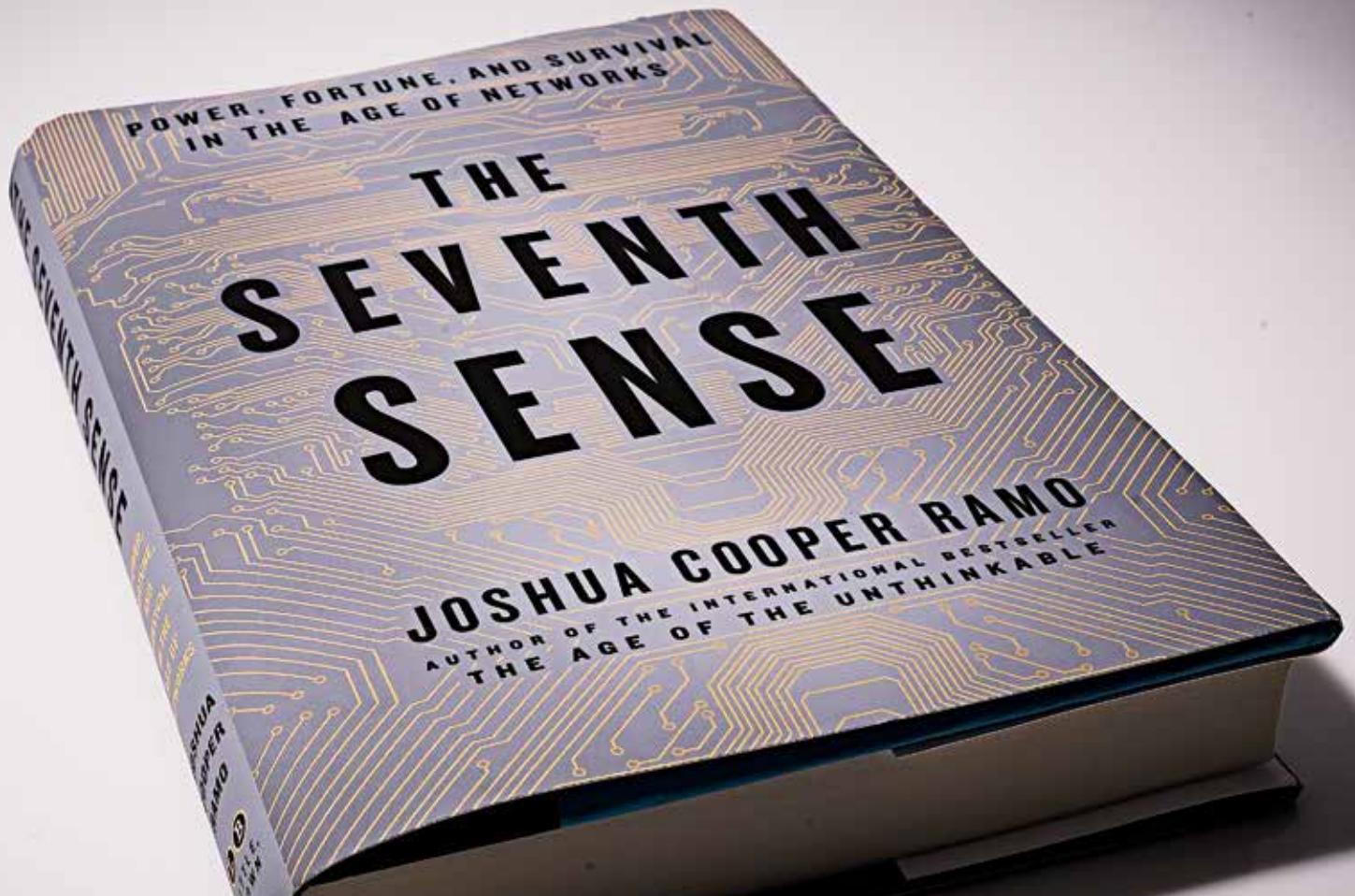


# New Think



FUTURE PERFECT

## CULTURE IN THE CONNECTED AGE

Breakthroughs in digital technology are poised to transform all human activity. How can we adapt to the radical changes to come? By developing an appreciation for the totally new, the disorientingly unfamiliar. Here, **JOSHUA COOPER RAMO**, author of *The Seventh Sense* (published in May by Little, Brown), argues that culture is the best place to start.

**M**an's habits," the British naturalist J. B. S. Haldane once wrote, "change more rapidly than his instincts." The observation appeared in an essay he authored about the strange and enduring lives of insects. Haldane was impressed with the bugs. He admired the way that their instincts—food!

sweets! danger!—led to an automatic adjustment of their habits. No thinking needed. How well this prepared them for a life where changes occurred at a scale far larger than they could see or predict. The poor humans, he implied, wasted so much time thinking before changing.

You have to wonder what Haldane, nearly a century after writing that essay, would have made of our modern lives. Our habits have

pray, and study as they liked—so our constant connection to one another, to new technologies, and to artificially intelligent systems will demand a fresh set of ideas. The shift of power during the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution crippled nearly every institution in Europe. The kings, the popes, the alchemists—they were all undone. Look around now: What institution is more respected and trusted than it was a decade ago? Government? Academia?

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changed so much in recent years. We live divided between screen and real life. We read books with one finger on the Google button. We await cars that will drive themselves, machines that will think for us—and who knows what else. We are what we are connected to, and we can be sure that our habits, a decade hence, will be unrecognizable. But our instincts—will they keep up? Have they so far? And what might this mean for our politics, our economics, our culture? Certain figures all around us do seem to have mastered the tools of this new age. They understand how connected life can breed new fortunes, new political power, even new culture. But are these instincts that the rest of us can learn? The answer, I believe, is yes.

A little more than 100 years ago, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche contemplated a similar problem. The madness of the Industrial Revolution was then ripping apart old, slower human habits. Change was so fast and massive and disruptive that sight, smell, touch, taste, and hearing would not be enough to produce real understanding. Humans needed a sixth sense, he felt: a feeling for history. Only by comprehending what had come before would there be any hope of sensing and managing what might come next.

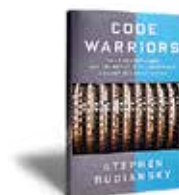
We're at a comparable moment, in a way. Who among us doesn't feel our old senses overloaded? So much information, so fast. Just as the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution remade society over hundreds of years by liberating people—freeing them to think, vote,

Finance? If Nietzsche's age demanded a feeling for history, ours demands a sense of how connection changes power and what to do about it—a kind of seventh sense.

This sense is already apparent in the successes of our age. Great fortunes, for instance, reward those who master networks of finance and information, who appreciate that connection changes an object not least by changing its value. To see an unused bedroom or car seat and think Airbnb or Uber does reflect a new kind of sensibility. As does the ability to understand how a global web of connection on Twitter or YouTube can be a force for political attack—an instinct that lit both the optimism of the Arab Spring and the horror show of groups like ISIS, alive as they are to the notion that a viral video can be more powerful than a traditional army.

If we're trying to educate ourselves in this new instinct, then culture is honestly not a bad place to start. Artists have always sensed change early. Consider Picasso, prefiguring World War I camouflage with his cubism. Or Gustav Klimt, risking his comfortable life painting clubby portraits to make the violently beautiful art we know him for today. He was training his rich Viennese audience to see what he saw—the advent of modernism—even if it nauseated them at first. Tolstoy understood that great art comes from conflict. (Does any book title express that more clearly than *War and Peace*?) And our age is full of it. If the great struggle of the last cen-

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By Charles Duhigg

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tury was between individual liberty and central planning, the one that will mark our era is between liberty and connection.

**W**hat don't we see in this connected age? How does it control us? These are the questions that have long animated the art of American photographer Trevor Paglen. Early in his career, he fixated on closed government air bases, and his long-lens photos of contractors boarding airplanes have a shimmering and unreal quality. It's not just that the images are dissociated by the haze of air in the miles between camera and subject. It's that you and I are dissociated from these people. They look like high school basketball coaches, accountants, insurance adjusters. But here they are climbing off some private air shuttle on a secret base and you have to wonder: Who are they, exactly? Where do they go and what do they do?

Paglen is obsessed with the way in which secret networks of power, ones that hum and tickle around us all the time, occasionally become visible. He once made a series of images of the places where suboceanic Internet cables snake up to the surface, where the virtual world hits the real one. He has also photographed satellites and space junk orbiting the earth. With these photos he wanted to make a point: You and I might think we're free now. But, in fact, we're enmeshed by black boxes and forces we barely understand.

The flip side of this connection, of course, is wonder—medical miracles, educational breakthroughs, powerful new ways of thinking—and even beauty. And that must be part of our training in the seventh sense, too. Listen for a while to the collided music of producer-DJs such as Skrillex or Moodymann, whose songs merge digital and human in ways that may seem perplexing at first, but come over time to figure as a kind of soundtrack of our

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age, where we can't decide where the bits end and the flesh begins.

It's not just the sounds that are changing. It's the whole act of making music. Think of Kanye West's monumental album-event, *The Life of Pablo*, which was less a record than a moving river of song and sound ideas running in parallel with his stream-of-consciousness social-media feeds. In the weeks after its surprise release last winter the album was almost organic in the way it was changing and adjusting as Kanye released new versions, tweaked old ones, and then turned loose an army of

remixers. Songs evolved from day to day, altered by connection to the audience and other artists in near real time.

Historians often ask, What art or ideas or writing really captured the nature of that age? Some of the most powerful work of our era will be created in media that is new, bred from a connected, technological age. To strap on even a cheap virtual-reality headset like Google Cardboard and wander through a VR film such as *Sent* is to feel what it must have been like to see a talkie for the first time 90 years ago. Or try this: Install the gaming app Ingress on your phone. It's a sort of global scavenger hunt that plays you as much as you play it. It has participants running around cities looking at their phones, chasing each other and finding secret landscapes. Again: Where does the real end and the virtual begin?

Paglen's photos, Kanye West's Instagram feed, a dawn run around Tokyo playing Ingress—these are cultural tickets into a new world. And they are tuning tools for a new sense of what it means to be connected. The same sensation of rushing change that you might experience in your work or in the markets or as you consider politics, appears in this new art, too. Of course you should dash to collect and experience it if you can. But this is the question to consider as you think about art or philosophy or the new companies: Who in 50 years will matter most? Those with this sensibility or those without? I suspect you know the answer already. ♦

TECHNOFILES

5 NEW  
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TOOLS

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By Seth Porges



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The portable projector can conjure a clear 60-inch image from just four inches away; perfect for impromptu screenings. \$1,400



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