



## The Diagnosis

**Author:** Allan Lightman

**Publisher:** New York: Pantheon Books, 2000

**Review Published:** May 2001

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### **REVIEW 1: Ana Viseu**

The Diagnosis, a work of fiction, is a harsh social critique of our all-embracing techno-informational world. Its author, Allan Lightman, a professor of writing and humanistic studies at MIT, sets the story in the present, intermixing fiction and reality to create a revealing portrait of the social dynamics of an Age dominated by information. By choosing the genre of fiction, Lightman puts into sharp contrast trends that a more traditional scientific work would have difficulties arguing, but that nevertheless are a constitutive part of the present. While reading The Diagnosis most readers will float between a sigh of relief -- "this will never happen" -- and the uncomfortable recognition that it already has.

Lightman's The Diagnosis is a timely book. It comes when more concerns are starting to be voiced about the promises and perils of high-tech culture. Though being of a different genre, it is similar in spirit to, for example, Paulina Borsook's *Cyberselfish: A Critical Romp Through the Terribly Libertarian Culture of High-tech* (Public Affairs, 2000) and Lawrence Lessig's *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace* (Basic Books, 1999). The originality of Lightman's contribution consists in avoiding the clichés of a Net-based novel while still being an accurate portrayal and critique of some of the ubiquitous values of our culture, such as the supremacy of information and money, the overruling importance of time, and the increasing workaholicism and subsequent definition of one's character according to one's job -- and to one's salary.

The Diagnosis can be read at several different levels. On the surface lies a linear story. Bill Chalmers, the main character, is a junior partner in a consulting firm. He has a wife, a son, a house, and a car. One day, while sitting on the subway on his way to work, he loses his memory. After regaining it, he realizes his hands are numb. He consults a doctor, who, unable to diagnose his numbness, refers him to more and more specialists. Gradually the rest of Bill Chalmer's body becomes numb.

On a second reading, however, the story becomes trickier. We begin to see a deeper level of symbolic meaning. Bill's social life barely exists: his wife is having an electronic affair; he and his son mainly communicate by email. Bill's job is to process information. Of any sort. The more megabytes processed, the bigger the salary. His doctor, Dr. Petrov, was once able to make "definite diagnoses, and these

were often quite correct. But with the vast increase in medical [and communication] technology, and with so many new considerations to take into account" (112) he no longer does. More available information does not translate into increased knowledge. Bill's psychiatrist simply recommends higher and higher doses of Prozac or Paxil to no effect.

The Diagnosis is all about everyday episodes that uncover an uncomfortable social reality. Lightman depicts situations known to everyone and highlights their incongruencies. For example, sitting in a waiting room is usually an unspoken situation. But Lightman describes a waiting room occupied by a woman who "type[s] nervously at her laptop, another scribble[s] on documents in manila folders, a man in the corner lean[s] over some massive report and mutter[s] into his cell phone " (107). In The Diagnosis everyone is obsessed with time and work, with being connected and reachable.

One of the best scenes described is a party at the home of Bill's boss. During this party the boss announces the creation of a new company: LifelImages. "As our first acquisition" he says, "we have just purchased the rights to all images of every American birth certificate, including the handwritten signature of the attending physician . . . From now on . . . there will be no more delays in obtaining government copies of birth certificates. Through LifelImages, copies can be downloaded instantly. Birth records can be corollated with whatever personal information the user wants . . . This is America. I love it" (237). The crowd exults. Finally, market driven efficiency.

It is not until the end of the novel that Lightman eases our role as readers. He does so by showing a totally paralyzed Bill, who recognizes the superficiality of it all and is willing to spell it out. "I'll tell you what's going to happen to you," Bill tells his son. "You'll get a good job, probably paying big bucks. Maybe you'll work downtown like I did, in one of those skyscrapers with a view of the ocean. Then you'll be in your late twenties and married, you'll start to have indigestion . . . But you won't realize what's happening . . . You'll be making more and more money. You'll live in a big house, you'll have nice cars and suits. You'll be promoted and taken to dinner at Locke-O'bers by the top brass. And you won't be able to stop because you won't notice, you won't realize what is happening. And even if you did realize, you won't do anything about it because you're a coward. And when you're in your forties and fifties you'll gradually lose your mind . . . Or you might get a little too far behind, and they'll fire you and have you in a coffin before you know what's happened" (351).

Of all the diseases that could have afflicted his main character, Lightman chose numbness. A numbness that creates a body immune to pain, insensitive to context, to itself, and to others. Throughout the novel, it becomes clear that Bill's numbness is in fact an expression of the numbness of his social environment and its techno-informational mediation. It is the reflection of a society with a need for a certain mental and emotional sanitation that creates focused efficient individuals and that, in strange ways, resembles the workings of a well oiled-machinery in which the last fraction of humanity has been displaced by the rationality of computer-mediated living. Lightman's objective is to expose this numbness, forcing the reader to react to it. The Diagnosis' main character dies shortly after gaining full consciousness; our best hope is to do it before.

#### **Ana Viseu:**

Ana Viseu born in Lisbon, Portugal, is a researcher currently working at the University of Toronto on her Ph.D. dissertation which focuses on the social construction of wearable computing. Her research interests include questions of privacy, psycho-social dimensions of technology, and the mutual adaptation

processes between individuals and technology. Ana is also a co-moderator of the Spanish/Portuguese email list Nettime-lat that covers the intersection of networks, culture and politics. Ana hold a Master's Degree in Interactive Communication from the Universidad Autonoma de Barcelona, Spain.

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**ONLINE SINCE:** 1996**SITE LAST UPDATED:** 12.10.2009