

Technology and the Naked Word

Appearances can be deceiving. In thinking about the impact of technology upon human beings we assume that technology operates as an *extension* of human capacities that alters the experience of time and space. An examination of the more compelling contributions to *Being Human*¹ that explicitly tackle this subject, however, reveals a pervasive, paradoxical, reading of this extension as a de facto *contraction*.

A brief text by the psychoanalyst Marcos Einis, entitled *Downtime*, which he read at the *Being Human* colloquium held in 1996, manages to evoke three ways in which we appear to *shrink* as a result of our *expansion*. The first seems to be a direct consequence of the expansion of the speed with which we travel through time and space. This is the most familiar of the *shrinkage effects*, the virtualization of the body: “The Filipino reservations clerk has already received an updated database from the Lufthansa desk in Frankfurt, by means of a modem which allows him to be operational half a world away before office hours begin.” This kind of capability leads to “general promiscuity in a complete motor inertia.” The scenario is a familiar one. It is a 20th century commonplace, the stuff of 1950’s science fiction movies where disembodied brains run amok and technologically advanced aliens tend to have tiny bodies and huge heads. It is the subject of an article in *Being Human*: Margaret Morse’s *What do Cyborgs Eat? Oral Logic in an Information Society*.

Less familiar, on a popular level at least, though ubiquitous in Western thought, are the limiting effects of mediation. To this Einis repeatedly alludes. Through what he calls the “new mediation artifacts...things are stripped of their reality” and “objects...have become props of their presence.” It is difficult not to see the metaphysics of presence, identified by Jacques Derrida, at work here. After all, Derrida’s examination of the Romantic preoccupation with authenticity focused on Rousseau’s put down of writing as somehow farther away from the truth than speech. And what is writing if not the earliest manifestation of high technology? We do speak of truth as something from which it is possible to

¹ *Being Human: The Technological Extensions of the Body* Jacques Houis, Paola Mieli, Mark Stafford, editors. Marsilio, NY 1999

be “closer to” or “farther away from.” Under the circumstances it is not surprising that what we take to be each layer between *us* and *it* is experienced as an obstacle or a limit. All of which is complicated by the fact that, as Derrida has pointed out, natural language, speech, is *already* writing, a fundamental mediating trace, grounding meaning itself, and hence truth, not in presence but in absence or difference. To function, doesn’t language itself already “strip things of their reality”? As words don’t objects become “props of their presence”? At least in the dualistic subject/object universe of those who can still describe “reality” as though it were a non-problematical external attribute of objects.

The third implicit “shrinkage effect” of technology described by Einis is both the most original and the one I find most difficult to follow. It stems from what he calls “the digital.” In the concluding paragraphs of *Downtime*, he sets up a dichotomy between “the distinctive function of language,” “the contradictory, polymorphous, or variable,” “the word, in its function of equivocal mediation” on the one hand, and “binary signaling,” “a network,” “instrumental communication,” “the code,” on the other. He seems to be saying that the digital, because it involves “the linking only of identical bodies” favors the image over the word: “Henceforth, the word, in its function of equivocal mediation, is no more than a natural obstacle to be removed from the path of the code’s operational functionality and an additional source of noise in the specular reception of the object of demand.” Is this comparing apples and oranges? Without invoking Derrida, isn’t natural language itself already “digital” at the phonemic and morphological levels? And what is so unequivocal about the “the specular” anyway? I find Einis’ concluding paragraph even more confusing: “Beyond the relationship to space and time, through the nature of the artifacts and the conditions of their use, through the overproduction of signs and their dizzying circulation it is the very essence of human communication which is placed between paradoxes.” To me this sounds like a description of “equivocal mediation,” of the *non*-digital function of language. Still, Einis’ critique of the digital is suggestive. If it were re-cast in more overtly economic or socio-political terms, and the word *spectacular* substituted for *specular*, I could follow the notion of a digital commodification of language: a further shrinkage of human subjectivity due to the reifying effects of a technologically aided expansion of spectacular alienation, the evolution of the mid-century’s society of the spectacle into the current facsimile of society.

A very different version of the limiting effects of technological expansion is raised by the psychoanalyst Claude Rabant in the portion of the *Being Human* colloquium introduced by Marcos Einis’ text: The

Technological Extensions of the Senses. Both Rabant's refreshing and unexpected answer, and the more orthodox question that prompted it, are worthy of being quoted in full (note Rabant's reference to Einis):

TIMOTHY BINKLEY: "The human body is limited. We are all confined to being in one place at one time and, I think, most importantly, at one scale. We are here now. We occupy a certain size space and a certain size time. Yet, new technologies have extended and redefined this limitation. In what way does the elimination of distance, which requires time to traverse, transform our subjective experience of the body, and our way of relating to other bodies? I'd like to ask this question first of Claude Rabant."

CLAUDE RABANT: "You are throwing the ball right away into my little court, but I'm going to send it back very quickly, because, in my opinion, the body has never been something that could be kept in one place. In my opinion the body is something that, by definition, is always disseminated in time and space. Thus, it is in some sense the body's definition to be elsewhere. For me, if we have a body, it is because we are somewhere other than where we are. For example, when we dream, we travel in all sorts of ways. On the one hand, the body can't be separated from its senses. On the other, the fact of having senses means to me that we are always projected into another space. We are always projected into another body, inhabited by other bodies. The fact that we now have technical means at our disposal simply gives us, in my opinion, stronger perceptions. It gives us more refined ways of perceiving what is inside our own bodies, for instance. Listening to what Marcos Einis was saying earlier, I thought about the fact that transforming time and space was the very definition of the sign. By definition, the sign is what transforms time and space. Therefore, we now have different signs, different modes of writing. I don't even know if they are more efficient. They are different. We seem to go faster, but it isn't the same speed. We used to go very fast when we imagined ghosts, when we imagined ghosts visiting one end of the universe or another. That may have been even faster, so, to a certain extent, technology limits some speeds. Technology limits certain capacities that we had to imagine. So I think that the very definition of the sign, the very definition of writing, of the trace, is to transform, to change time and space. I think that the only thing we have to do today is to try to discover how to not be afraid of what we are driving, of the new signs and traces we produce."

Rabant's commentary stems from a radically different way of viewing the world. His definition of the body as "being elsewhere" makes sense in the context of philosophical, religious and poetic traditions to which his

interlocutor seems to have had little or no exposure. Rabant's syncretism is remarkable. His position seems at once phenomenological, deconstructionist, shamanistic and romantic if not surrealist in its willingness to endow the imagination with as much positive reality as the world of objects. The body disseminated by the senses, by dreams, projected into other bodies, inhabited by them, is the making of the poet's body, the shaman's body. Rimbaud says "I is another." André Breton, invokes an old French saying to answer the question, "Who am I?" by asking: "Why couldn't it all come down to knowing whom I 'haunt'?" Along with Mallarmé, who sought "the elocutionary disappearance of the poet" both poets succeeded in retracing the ancient, orphic, night voyage of the shaman or witch to the land of the dead. Transforming time and space, they imagined very fast ghosts

Rabant describes the difference between such imaginative processes and technological ones as "different signs, different modes of writing." In this he parallels a distinction beautifully expressed by Serge Leclaire in one of his contributions to *Being Human : The Biological Truth Criterion: a Shaky Foundation*:

"To put it simply and briefly," writes Leclaire, "I would say that the opposition between nature and culture today takes the shape of an opposition between two different types of symbolic activity.

The first type, to which scientific research and production belong, has as its top priority to discover and account for the order of things so as to deduce a practice, a utilization, an exploitation of "the riches of nature." The second type, to which social practice belongs in all of its aspects, political and especially ethical (regulation of the relationships among subjects, men and women, individuals and groups), should have as its priority to institute the determining function of the symbolic order in the ordering of the relationships among subjects. The legislator's work belongs to this second type of symbolic activity.

While there seems to be today no difficulty or obstacle to the deployment of a symbolic order that "accounts for," as witnessed by the successes of science and its production of the semblance of a universal language, we find it very difficult, in the current state of our civilization, to implement, other than through archaic forms, the work of the symbolic which "orders" human activity and relationships. Not without reason is this primordial function of the symbolic mistrusted. It is because it continues to be perceived and experienced as something partaking of a supernatural, transcendent order which in fact deprives "human nature" of its essential quality of speaking

being. Under the pretext of legitimately challenging the tenacious belief that the word can only come "from above" (from a sky, a God, a church or a State, a prophet or a master), we go so far as to challenge, in the same motion, any power to order the symbolic order."

Leclaire goes on to tout psychoanalysis as "a practice that seeks to rehabilitate the virtues of the word. Within each cure it strives to give (back to) the subject the opportunity to speak. Psychoanalysis thus challenges any belief or ideology that attributes the origin of ownership of language to some supreme being. The psychoanalyst works with speech and language as primordial constitutive elements of human nature, just as a biochemical therapist brings into play molecular interactions thanks to modern pharmaceuticals. This is how the psychoanalyst is able to testify to an experience which, in more ways than one, partakes of a chemistry of signifiers (or an alchemy of words) rather than of a "magic" of language." Substitute *poet* for *psychoanalyst*, and the statement loses none of its validity, confirming the aptness of Leclaire's use of the Rimbaudian intertext "alchemy of words."

The question of the relationship of one type of discourse (science) to another (natural language and its avatars) in the context of its effect upon the imagination is more than the expression by Claude Rabant of yet another way technological extension can be viewed as contraction. Despite Rabant's exhortation to "to try to discover how to not be afraid of what we are driving," the statement "technology limits certain capacities we had to imagine" is fraught with ominous implications. It does not simply render a nostalgia for a lost presence that may never have existed in the first place (corresponding to the first two of Einis' paradoxical effects of technology). Obnebulated by technology, the imagination resembles nothing so much as a lost or missing absence. This may seem like a paradox, but isn't the exclusion of the unreal as much of a recipe for disaster as the exclusion of reality? On a mundane level, what is a parent to think when the virtual reality of a video game system like Dreamcast supplants the real daydreams of imaginative play?

In the opening of the first *Manifesto of Surrealism*, André Breton celebrates the imagination in terms that remain timely and that closely link the imagination to childhood, to desire, and to the will to live. Contemplating the monotony of his life, the adult turns toward his childhood, which "massacred though it was by the trainers, nevertheless seems charmed...Every morning children go forth without a care. Everything is nearby. The worst material circumstances are fine. The woods are black or white, sleep will never come" But the adult cannot go back: too

many compromises and neglect have led the grownup to lose the services of a faculty without which, as Breton puts it: “[he has become] incapable of living up to an exceptional situation such as love.” According to Breton, another factor accounts for the atrophy of the imagination: the reign of reductive logic, positivism and realism. This seems no longer so obviously the case, as it may have been in 1924. There is little overtly reductive about today’s science and technology. We speak of technological *extensions*, and perhaps no more suitable a word than *surreal* exists to characterize the situation in which we find ourselves thanks to science and technology.

So what is it about technology that “limits some capacities that we had to imagine”? It seems to be the case that the new technologies usurp the imagination, foreclose it, and implicitly reduce it, by providing a kind of market for what psychoanalysts call “objects of satisfaction,” and this time the objects in question are no longer back ordered. It is as if, instead of having agile, free floating, protean wishes and desires, we suddenly were compelled, by new and extraordinary circumstances, to have only those wishes literal enough to actually be granted. This is the “genie in the bottle” scenario discussed by Salvatore Guido in his contribution to *Being Human: “Your Wish Is My Command”*: *Human Communication with Magical and Mechanical Agencies in Norbert Wiener’s Cybernetics*. The theme is related to parental concerns about video games, and probably informs Einis’ distinction between “the equivocal mediation” of the word and “the linking only of identical bodies” of the digital: exhaustive, obsessional closure on the one hand; vital room for play on the other.

If technology can usurp the imagination with its literal speed, why can’t the figurative speed of the imagination have an effect on technology? What happens when the siren song of technology is imaginatively represented? An unusual document embodies such a representation. It is the recording of a 1977 performance of a poem entitled *Aerodynamically Mental* by performance poet Marty Watt. There is also a script of the performance, written in 1976. If the essence of poetry, as Julia Kristéva claims, derives from the autonomy of the signifier, and poets, as many have held, are prophets and seers, it should come as no surprise that a poet whose work explicitly anticipates the major themes of *Being Human* by a quarter century, should be an unknown *outsider* artist, belonging to no school, movement or tendency, neither neo-beat nor pre spoken-word, certainly not academic (Watt is a high school dropout). Moreover, the ephemeral nature of his work, written to be *performed* before a live audience, and only truly realized in performance, harkens back to the roots of poetry in oral tradition. Its extraordinary quality bears witness to both the effectiveness of archaic

technology and the resiliency of the naked word. Of course, there is no oral tradition anymore to perpetuate Watt's poetry. His work spans the period 1971 (when he began to perform his poetry as an 18 year old wunderkind) to the mid 1980's (when a creative ebb dictated retreat if not permanent retirement from the stage). His work will probably fade into oblivion along with the handful of those of us who witnessed his startling performances in unlikely venues (the Mudd club, the Pyramid club, *not* the Kitchen) of wildly original, consistently experimental, always already post modern poetry that never seemed to repeat itself: written in the vernacular, plugged into the popular zeitgeist, regularly anticipating by two or three years major pop trends like punk or country and western, Watt's poetry owes much of its power, (like La Fontaine's!) to the mastery and un self-conscious exploitation of the traditional metric, rhythmic, sonic and rhetorical resources of poetry. The performance itself is much closer to stand up comedy and rock and roll than a poetry reading. You can imagine how well this was received by more conventional "serious" poets.

Aerodynamically Mental lasts twenty minutes in performance. It begins like this:

"I think I was born aerodynamically mental:

dreaming to the left and dreaming to the right,
a cerebral vehicle, a high velocity intelligence
surgically launched under the influence of chemistry
into a space more neuro than astro-
logical, less tele than micro-
scopically tracked via psychic video,
minus physical harm, ultra solo
in the realms of data and info,
pulse and heartbeat
temperature and
brainwave, Alpha
Centuri and
Andromeda,
pulsars
and
quasars
and
supernovas-
THE MIND OF A PILOT in the idea of a jet,

a hundred and eighty six thousand miles per second of
computerized hallucination....traversed in a helmet
...I think”

Aerodynamically Mental features a first person narrator accustomed to using his imagination to escape the dreary, threatening prospect of growing up in a poor inner city neighborhood. One of the more striking aspects of the poem is the recurring palimpsestic imagery of an earthbound reality which, though transformed by astronomical reverie, constantly returns to undermine the agent of its transformation:

“it used to be a boy had to be a boxer
to climb out of the ghetto;
I used to fight men as big as mountains
I was climbing out of the ghetto.
But now, the street runs through the sky,
gangs hang out on the stars.
(It’s like a Detroit penthouse!)
the ghetto is taller than space exploration
the ghetto is more everlasting than the future.”

The imagination’s inability to *actually* or *physically* escape gravity, leads to a Faustian bargain with technology. This time it isn’t the soul that’s exchanged for the power of creation, but the head itself that’s sacrificed to what can only be described as an absence or loss of consciousness:

“not even if you hit me with sex itself
was I seeing stars enough...
I needed a highly technological knockout”

But what does science have to gain from the poet, if not his soul? His *imagination*, which features that *other* speed, or, as Marty Watt puts it:

“it takes a long time to get there
but you can think you’re there a lot faster”

So a bargain is struck:

“Go ahead Doc, hook me up to always night
I never wanted to physically fight

nor to have to sometimes spiritually kneel
I just wanted to feel
like I've always felt/ flight!
put it on my mind with all your might”

The poem marks a point where the sign's or the imagination's ability to transform time and space intersects with technology's. The poetic invocation of technology is an explicit call for vertigo and ecstasy. The line of *Aerodynamically Mental* that returns several times is a variant of: “Flight! / Its on my mind with all my might.” The autodidact, time traveling poetic imagination of 1976 would seem to be engaged in a dialog with the cutting edge academic discourse of 1996. Witness the comments of philosopher Dany Robert Dufour during the Being Human colloquium on the technological extensions of the senses (notice the reference to Marcos Einis' text, which seems to function as a real touchstone in this discussion):

“Well I think that the new technologies, to the extent that they abolish distance, as Marcos noted, allow us to go faster, to exit the here and now more quickly, and more quickly summon an elsewhere and a past. It is a very interesting function indeed, which might be called “jouissance.” I don't know how to translate that into English. It means to go out of yourself, to go see if you are elsewhere; and if you are, to find yourself there. It is an interesting function because we meet the boundary of the here and now, and play with symbolic categories, which procures a lot of pleasure, the vertigo of the here and now, “jouissance” in other words. This is the point where the subject is ravished from himself, ravished in every sense of the word, enraptured. Rapture involves going outside of yourself, leaving the here and now. We enjoy leaving the here and now. It really is the only enjoyable thing in life, I think. Why? Because we meet, we cross the boundaries of the prison of the present, the prison of the here and now. We play with something that is related to vertigo, and vertigo, as you know, can be very pleasant or totally disagreeable. When is it and isn't it pleasant? I'll end with this. It seems to me that it is more or less pleasant when the category of the here and now, the symbolic function in other words, is more or less well established. When the symbolic function is basically established, if the new technologies allow us to more quickly bring the elsewhere and the past into the here and now, or allow us through telepresence, to leave or go elsewhere, to leave one's self to go elsewhere, then, in such a case, the new technologies promise an increase in “jouissance.” But, if the symbolic function is not sufficiently established, if the ability to summon the

elsewhere and the past to the here and now, if the capacity for representation, does not function, then there is every reason to fear that the new technologies will lead, and only lead, to new suffering. There is reason to fear that the subject will now become completely lost, without a here and now, completely dispersed and disseminated, in multiple places. In this case, instead of procuring new enjoyment, the new technologies risk procuring great suffering. I would call this a risk of psychotisation of society.”

Dufour is not alone in his alarm. At a recent *Après-Coup* workshop, the eminent psychoanalyst Charles Melman, asked about the impact of technology, worried about the effects of its ability to deliver uninterrupted ecstasy.

The poem teaches an ambiguous lesson about technology. Is it warning us about technology’s expropriation of the imagination? Is the poem itself coopting technology as a convenient rhetorical device? Could it be that the poem is always already more vertiginous than its thematic vehicle because the speed of meaning will always mean more to us than literal speed? In the bargain with technology imagined by Marty Watt, does poetry, as poetry is wont to do, win for losing? Is this what Claude Rabant is driving at, in a text *not* included in *Being Human*, entitled *The Disappearing Myth*?

“The icon will always have to do with the disappearance, the conjuring of a body, the talisman of the unseen. And the emergence of a diaphanous surface - glaze of the voice, urgency of the paper. The precious obliteration transmitted by handshake. One can demonstrate, on paper, that metaphor elaborates upon matter, upon raw nonsense. Raw? Not really, since the demonstration already has a voice, a sub-gaze, a sonorous gaze, dark night traced in the ink of delirium. Vertigo before the vestige. Before any cataclysm. What is the icon if not the image that subverts, at the moment of its emergence, its return to nothing? And what of the vertigo of ascension that sweeps us up then? We are birds breathtaken by a disappearance of the trace in the trace, of the shadow in the shadow. And this vertigo has a name: sonority. The take-off of sound, the flight of the letter. We climb, sucked in by sonority, on the hot air of the tongue, in the rarefied atmosphere of the poem. Above the breathable, when the air buzzes with nothingness, we catch sight of the law; and when we come down, if we are not mad or struck dumb, traces and etchings can hark back to us, demonstrate in us scenes being acted out, differed bodies.”

Let’s let the “take-off of sound,” “the flight of the letter” have the last word, about technology, about itself, by playing the recording of the end of

the live performance of *Aerodynamically Mental*:

THIS PART IS ON TAPE:

“I could see it! It was right above me!
But I must have been seeing things: I thought I could fly!
I could just sense it! The plane was going to crash!

And I...I held on tight
but with all their might!
And I...I felt the fear
but with all their fright- FLIGHT!

it was on my mind
but with all their might.

THAT’S WHEN

I think I was born aerodynamically mental
dreaming to the left and dreaming to the right, a cerebral vehicle
a high velocity intelligence surgically launched under the influ-
ence of chemistry into a space more neuro than astro-logical
less tele than micro-scopically tracked via psychic
video minus physical harm ultra solo in the realms
of data and info
pulse and heartbeat
temperature and brainwave
alpha centuri and andromeda
pulsars and quasars and supernovas
THE MIND OF A PILOT

in the idea of a jet

a hundred and eighty six thousand miles per second

of computerized hallucination...

traversed in a helmet,

I think...

I THINK

ZODIAKER TRACKER! this is LASERBEAMER DREAMER!

ZODIAKER TRACKER! this is LASERBEAMER DREAMER!

I'd say goodbye but it's always goodnight...

so goodnight

ZODIAKER TRACKER! this is LASERBEAMER DREAMER!

goodnight.

LOBOTOMY PROTECTION! this is ASTRAL PROJECTION!

LOBOTOMY PROTECTION! this is ASTRAL PROJECTION!

I'd say goodbye but it's always goodnight...

so goodnight

LOBOTOMY PROTECTION! this is ASTRAL PROJECTION!

goodnight.

DOCTOR SATELLITE! this is SKULL WHITE KNIGHT!

DOCTOR SATELLITE! this is SKULL WHITE KNIGHT!

I'd say goodbye but it's always goodnight...

so goodnight

DOCTOR SATELLITE! this is SKULL WHITE KNIGHT!

goodnight.

CYBERNETIC GUILLOTINE! this is HALO HEADACHE!

CYBERNETIC GUILLOTINE! this is HALO HEADACHE!

I'd say goodbye but it's always goodnight...

so goodnight

CYBERNETIC GUILLOTINE! this is HALO HEADACHE!

goodnight.

GIVING HEAD! this is a PURELY PHYSICAL RELATIONSHIP!

GIVING HEAD! this is a PURELY PHYSICAL RELATIONSHIP!

I'd say goodbye but it's always goodnight...

so goodnight

GIVING HEAD! this is a PURELY PHYSICAL RELATIONSHIP!

GOODNIGHT!

Jacques Houis. Read at The Lacanian School of Psychoanalysis. San Francisco, CA 2000