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I Am Not A Machine, I Am A Human Being

Technology As Mediation

Mia X. Kursions

Spring 2006

with self-established provocation from Jerry Mander*

...it struck me that there was a film between me and all of that. I could "see" the spectacular views. I knew they were spectacular. But the experience stopped at my eyes. I couldn't let it inside me. I felt nothing. Something had gone wrong with me. I remember childhood moments when the mere sight of the sky or grass or trees would send waves of physical pleasure through me. Yet now... I felt dead. I had the impulse to repeat a phrase that was popular among friends of mine, "Nature is boring." What was terrifying even then was that I knew the problem was me, not nature. It was that nature had become irrelevant to me, absent from my life. Through mere lack of exposure and practice, I'd lost the ability to feel it, tune into it, or care about it. Life moved too fast for that now...

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I am reasonably unsure where **I** (in the purely egoist sense) *end* and **everything else** *begins*. It is somewhat vague and amorphous, and, well, subjective. I don't mean to sound like a fucking hippie here, but as I search for an authentic and unmediated life free of (or at least minimizing) alienated circumstances (from myself, others, and the world around us), the edges and essences of who I am (and who I am not) must be examined. One thing I will say with a fair amount of measurable conviction, is that ***I am not a machine...*** I will not confine what I am intimately connected with to those people with whom I have a formal relationship, nor exclusively humans, nor those animals with vertebrae, nor that which we typically consider "alive"— as some have suggested, "stones can speak", and therefore they may also listen, act, and emote. I am thrilled to explore these possibilities and peculiarities. But, when it comes to "technology"¹, or the deadness of space it controls (physical, psychological, and institutional), I have no delusions (nor futuristic orgasmic revelations) of connection to it, nor its supposed benign neutrality (nor naturalness). I will utilize the technological infrastructure and some of its segments where and when I feel that I, or a collaborative effort, can have a momentary benefit for an immediate or a long-term process within, or despite, technology's overall and inevitable dominance and degradation (i.e. using a computer to put out a publication critiquing and strategizing against civilization). Ultimately, it is impossible to reject the idea that technology is an

¹ "Technology" is used in quotes, because it is not a simple word with a simple definition, despite those who wish to fix it for everyone based on their own biased understanding of history. Even in the common usage of the term there is much incongruence. While this essay may shed light on the author's particular usage, the meaning still seems somewhat amorphous and contextual. In this context, it is generally used to describe the complex system of tools and techniques that separate ourselves from direct experience, and the ideological and institutional logic which perpetuates and maintains these systems. It is an ideology of technique, systematic treatment, and progressive industrial science.

departure from this technologic nightmare that is worsening with each micro-second. While simply “going back” is not a possibility, the virus has been released and the techno-logic is everywhere, it is still encouraging that for most of our time on this planet, humans lived in direct connection with our world, without the mediating factors of technology and instrumental thinking. Perhaps our most significant lessons are here. Despite the bleak outlook, our future is still unwritten, and while I still maintain an ounce of strength and free will, while I am still of flesh and blood and can still discover and connect to my passions and dreams, *I am sure that I am not a Machine, I am a human being.*

*All italicized quotes above are from “Argument One: The Mediation of Experience,” contained in Jerry Mander’s *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (William Morrow and Company, Inc. 1977). While the book is dated, and contains some liberal notions of democratic process, Mander addresses perhaps the most pervasive, popular, and damaging form of technology of his time, television, which could easily be viewed as the predecessor of a much more destructive and alienating aspect of the technological system, the Internet. The first section of his book, “Argument One”, is the most impressive, as it deals very little with television per se, and addresses the much larger question of technology’s inevitable qualities of mediation.

unhealthy conglomeration or system of tools not designed for my support or health, controlled and motivated by an inorganic and anthropocentric mindset of control, efficiency, and order. It is an incredibly powerful network of domination projected by the concept of progress and separation. Technology has determined the circumstances of our world more than any other single factor (capitalism, racism, government, theology, etc.). It literally creates the physical, social, and psychological playing field in which all forms of domination function. It makes the rules, and perpetually re-writes them based on its own self-referential logic. Technology is the religion of our time, and as it has a staggeringly comprehensive control of our minds, bodies, and spirit, *it must be destroyed*² if we are to live unmediated and unrestrained lives.

Technology’s devastating influence is vast, but for the sake of brevity and focus, I choose *not* to dwell on the ecological devastation caused by the production, development, functioning, and perpetuation of technologic society, nor the toxicity it creates (that which is killing all of us on the cellular and genetic level). The impact in this realm is well documented and understood, and the wide-spread comprehension of these factors, while extremely relevant (soberingly so), has not altered the trajectory of the technologic nightmare in the least. In fact, those who dwell exclusively in the realm of “environmental impact”, seem at best to argue only for a more “sustainable”, “greener”, and “compassionate” technology – a solar powered police state which never questions basic assumptions of civilized relations. This only strengthens the technological society by adapting its infrastructure (or mere facade) to popular trends and tendencies, extending its existence. And, although

² It is understood that “technology” cannot be merely destroyed in the physical sense, like you can destroy a car or television. To “destroy technology” is to analyze, understand, critique, abandon, and attack all of the institutional, cultural, and personal manifestations of the technological system. It is no easy feat.

the production aspects in a technologically-driven society, as well as the workers manipulated and coerced into its functioning, is another valuable subject to explore, the topic is huge, and one, I might add, that has been addressed with much more potency and immediacy than I could offer.

The questions I prefer to ask have more to do with technology's impact and effect on the personal and the social in reference to alienation, technological dependence and addiction, spiritual and emotional unhealth, shifts in perception of time and space, automation, technology's ever-strengthening control, and the trajectory towards cybernetic neo-lives. Recognizing the contradictions we face, and possible directions ahead, are also of immense importance to our particular situation as civilized humans at the beginning of the 21st Century, longing for a completely different, non-technocratic world.

As humans have moved into totally artificial environments, our direct contact with and knowledge of the planet has been snapped. Disconnected, like astronauts floating in space, we cannot know up from down or truth from fiction. Conditions are appropriate for the implantation of arbitrary realities.

Alienation is the method or state of being separated from something (or everything) we were once (or intrinsically) connected to. Personal and social alienation is inherent in the technological process. This disconnect from life is the primary source of our condition of domestication, without which it would be much harder (even impossible) to manipulate and control us. This has always been the principle mode of control. Separate people from their land and recontextualize them through methods, processes, and techniques they are unfamiliar with; insulate them from who they are. It is precisely because we are floating through the world without connections to the actual substance of life, that we can be tied

can be a painful course, and also contains the potential for a slippery slope, with technological dependence or fetishization becoming negative possibilities. On a theoretical and critical level, there is nothing about technology that is beneficial to the human experience. But on a practical level, it seems somewhat necessary to have one foot in this world, although with extreme cynicism and caution, and certainly not exclusively, at the expense of authentic unmediated experience and practice. We must also be prepared to ask ourselves what it means, what are the consequences, of living this contradiction? And, how it can ultimately be destroyed?

When people fully accept the idea that all reality exists solely in their own minds, and that nothing outside their minds is definitely, concretely real, each person then has unlimited personal power to create and define reality. It is now up for grabs. There is no cause. There is no effect. Relationships do not exist...In this denial of everyday worldly reality, all realities become totally arbitrary, creating the perfect precondition for the imposition of any new "ground of reality" within the void. Though it may be nonsensical or fantastic, any reality is acceptable...Reality becomes arbitrary only within the confines of a mental framework. People who live in direct contact with the planet itself are not concerned with such questions.

Given our current reality, how can we begin to live differently? What could a less mediated, less technologically-dependent world look like for us here and now? Can we regain direct contact with our world? Does it just mean escape and isolation? How do we avoid post-modern complacency? Can there be a transition? These are all vital questions to ask ourselves, as we embark on a critique of, resistance to, and

direction. Through cybernetic research, along with biotechnology, the push to a colossal leap in evolution is proposed, and most are along for the ride, convinced that either this is the logical next step, that it is unavoidable, or that it is already too late. We are already witnessing the preliminary phases and most are quite open about this process. Is this civilization's last hope and endpoint? What are the consequences of this? Why do people accept this scenario?

In one generation, out of hundreds of thousands in human evolution, America had become the first culture to have [almost completely] substituted secondary, mediated versions of experience for direct experience of the world. Interpretations and representations of the world were being accepted as experience, and the difference between the two was obscure to most of us.

For those of us searching for a de-technified life, the contradiction of being both within technological society, and outside of it, is nearly unavoidable. Beyond running to the woods in a survivalist mode (which still has the dual problem of bringing our domesticated mind into that situation and that, in a shrinking world, escape is becoming less and less possible), in a technologically ubiquitous world, we must reconcile this situation in order to maneuver and seek its destruction. Just as a bankrobber may need to change clothes and hair, cover tattoos, wear make-up, and better understand the functioning and security of the financial institution they are targeting, so may we need to become more observant of the technological system, become proficient in some of its operations, and temporarily "fit in". Since every aspect of our lives is so ingrained with technological processes and apparatus, it is crucial for us to be critical of those processes, yet decide which we are willing to become skilled in, to utilize them for temporary goals. This

to and driven by external agendas and artificial pushes and pulls. Technology is the primary source of this alienation, in every sector of our lives. In an ever-expanding process, the world has been constructed to limit our connections outside the technological paradigm. What aspects of our life are not directly linked to the technological process? Are there any forms of "connection" between people that are not mediated through technological means?

On the personal level, our lives become alienated through clocks, pharmaceuticals, microwaves, processed food, television, white noise, concrete, machinery, computers, electric lighting, air conditioning...On the social level, we are alienated from each other through telephones, email, pop culture, ipods, highways, housing developments, voting booths, spectacles...At this point in civilization's trajectory, it is difficult for most to even comprehend an unmediated (and non-technological) existence; with those who can still imagine such a reality labeled as wingnuts and extremists. But within the logic of this technological nightmare, those of us who are nevertheless able to conceive of another set of relationships are truly mad, and the only response, according to its paradigm, must be extreme. But within another context, that of an uncivilized reality, we are sane and ordinary. We are humans *being*.

What we see, hear, touch, taste, smell, feel, and understand about the world has been processed for us. Our experiences of the world can no longer be called direct, or primary. They are secondary, mediated experiences...We are surrounded by a reconstructed world that is difficult to grasp how astonishingly different it is from the world of only one hundred years ago, and bears virtually no resemblance to the world in which humans beings lived for four million years before that...At the moment when the natural

environment was altered beyond the point that it could be personally observed, the definitions of knowledge itself began to change. No longer based on direct experience, knowledge began to depend upon scientific, technological, industrial proof...Now they tell us what nature is, what we are, how we relate to the cosmos, what we need for survival and happiness, and what are the appropriate ways to organize our existence...As we continue to separate ourselves from direct experience of the planet, the hierarchy of technoscience advances...The question of natural balance is now subordinated. Evolution is defined less in terms of planetary process than technological process.

Forcing technological dependence and addiction is the modus operandi of the techno-driven society we inhabit. Dependence is the state of being influenced or determined by, reliant and conditional upon, something other than oneself. Addiction is to give up or over to an external source. Within the technological society, we give up ourselves. We trade our lives for a detached reality, for what we are told will be better days. Safety and comfort. New and improved. The first one's free. With each neoteric step taking us further. Up, up, and away. Until we can't live without all the previous steps. We can't imagine a world without them. We are hooked. Habituated with progress, we become codependent with technology. We no longer trust our intuition or instincts. Our personal observations become suspect, not only to the logic of the system, but even to ourselves, unless they are corroborated by scientific or technological institutions. But, what compels us to want a more technified life? What personal emptiness drives this? What social pressures push this? Is there a physical dependency? And, perhaps most important, is recovery possible?

technology?" or to examine its positive or negative attributes. It is ingrained in all of us on every aspect of our life, from womb to tomb. And there are even those who wish to submit to this deity even after death. We bow, often unknowingly, but certainly with a disfigured anticipation, to this techno-theocratic altar. Every creation, every solution, every emotion, every social organization is processed through a technological principle, which will always feedback upon itself. So we need not be persuaded to "keep the faith", since it is all that is available to us. Control is omnipresent, so brute force is rarely necessary. To most, resistance *appears* futile. Can we even recognize how deep the rabbit hole goes? And if we can, is our perception enough to break out of it? Is it possible to live a non-technological life within this world?

Noting that reality and its definitions have now entered the realm of game and are up for grabs, they become better at the game than anyone else, exploiting it, reshaping disordered, uprooted minds and tilling a new bed of mental soil from which monsters will inevitably grow.

The trajectory towards cybernetic neo-lives is not solely the desire for self-preservation and expansion by those controlling technological society, but also of its minions, believing they can be part of the super-god and intelligence of technology. Cybernetics moves towards an all-pervasive control over reality (both informational and physical), as it fully over-rides (yet mimics artificially) natural neuro-processes. It becomes the basis for a hybrid of biological, mechanical, and virtual systems. As we move toward an all-enveloping crisis on the environmental level, and as resources to run the technological system begin to dwindle (or at least become less efficient and profitable), the shift towards a world less restricted by material elements (and still plagued by human limitations) becomes the prospective

forms of labor division. The standardization and mechanization of the world becomes the norm, while organic and human-scale communities based on face-to-face and direct relationships disappear. We become cogs, or specialists, in a larger machine. Parts must submit to the logic of the whole. Our lives become a string of tasks for our accomplishment. We lose perspective on anything outside of these short-term and system-defined goals. We begin to lose our ability to even conceive of approaching the world outside of this method, and the ability to be self-reliant or independent from the system. Can we even begin to imagine what we might be losing in the automated process?

Anything connected to natural (“savage”) awareness must be ridiculed and eliminated, and all experience must be contained within controlled artificial environments. In a large society, technology is a good standardizer, and confinement works best if technology has been enshrined...As technology has evolved, step by step, it has placed boundaries between human beings and their connections with larger, nonhuman realities. As life acquired ever more technological wrapping, human experience and understanding were confined and altered...until people’s minds and living patterns are so disconnected that there is no way of knowing reality from fantasy. At such a point, there is no choice but to accept leadership, however arbitrary...Autocracy needn’t come in the form of a person at all, or even as an articulated ideology or conscious conspiracy. The autocracy can exist in the technology itself. The technology can produce its own subordinated society.

Technology’s control over us has reached the status of super-god. It is no longer enough to ask the question “should we have

The growing incidences of mental illness these days may be explained in part by the fact that the world we call real and which we ask people to live within and understand is itself open to question. The environment we live in is no longer connected to the planetary process which brought us all into being. It is solely the product of human mental process...We are left with no frame of reference untouched by human interpretation.

Predominating spiritual and emotional unhealth is one clear indication that the current set-up is failing humans. Spiritually and emotionally strong and vigorous beings that can form deep independent and collective connections with the world are discouraged by a mechanistic, utilitarian, and materialist-driven world. We get our food from sanitized supermarkets, our water from bottles or piped in from chlorinating treatment centers, our emotional support from specialists with degrees on their walls and Internet chatrooms, and our sexual gratification from porn sites or online dating (or not at all). Our emotions are either sporadically jerked from all directions, or dulled to languid nothingness, while spirituality is perversely funneled into ideological and dogmatic institutions instead of real lived experience. The robustness and richness of life has been lost to the monotony of cold routine and ritual. In a our schizophrenic state, we must choose between a world to which we have no authentic connection, one which appears to us to be arbitrarily constructed, or a world outside of these processes, isolated from the technological society. But with our domesticated logic, which has not been allowed to develop in an organic and connected way, this is painfully difficult, often causing emotional swings ranging from ungrounded elation to deep depression. Confusion, delusion, apathy, isolation, and masochism occur on both sides of this dilemma. We are left painfully asking ourselves, (if we are able to break from

our frenzy or wake from our stupor), “what is missing”? What social factors push this? What are the implications? Is there hope outside of self-help philosophies and New-Age pseudopanaceas?

It is obvious that plants are alive in more or less the way humans and other animals are. Our failure to see plants as living creatures, and appreciate ourselves as some kind of sped-up plant, is the result of our limited human perception, a sign of the boundaries of our senses or the degree to which we have allowed them to atrophy...We have become too speedy to perceive the slower rhythms of other life forms... Pretechnological peoples do not have to go through a slowing-down process. Surrounded by nature, with everything alive everywhere around them, they develop an automatic intimacy with the natural world...No sense maintains itself if not used. If a sense remains unused, it atrophies.

Alterations in our perception of time and space shift as technological society expands. Since time is merely an abstract division of our lives into “usable” portions, the context it is measured from determines its characteristics. Domestication’s timing is one of linearity, moving away from the earth’s, and our own, cyclical timing. Rhythms change from multi-layered and complexly contrasting and reinforcing to mechanistic, sharp, and singular. Technological society is in a constant state of acceleration, with the momentum of all previous developments behind it. With the force of this push, it becomes harder at each moment to slow down. While pockets of rest do occur, they are mere bubbles, after which the breakneck speed of the technological infrastructure persists. We become so used to this constant acceleration that it feels customary to us. We become more comfortable with the pace and methodology of technology. We start to mimic more and more of the artificial systems

that “inhabit” our world. The computer becomes more of a system we relate to than any biological one. Our cars become our friends, and our cellphone an extension of ourselves. We begin to view them as indispensable. Communication is instantaneous across the globe, distorting all relationships, and collapsing our perception of lived space. We can chat with someone we will never meet in Brazil or we can eat sushi in Japan in a matter of hours. We not only experience space like never before, but our transit from place to place becomes unrelated exobiological points plotted on a map, rather than a lived experiential connection through the world. Our perception of these changes get blurred further and further as our relationship to time becomes more rapid. Our lives ticking away faster and faster, yet nothing seems to happen quick enough for us and there are so many places to go. We are profoundly ungrounded. How does this ever-quicken and shrinking perspective of the world affect our lives and our relationships? How does it transform and distort our internal rhythms?

It would be going too far to call our modern offices sensory-deprivation chambers, but they are most certainly sensory-reduction chambers. They may not brainwash, but the elimination of sensory stimuli definitely increases focus on the task at hand, the work to be done, the exclusion of all else.

As we move from the life-based time of the eternal present to the planned time of the perpetual future, automation and specialization replace spontaneity and shared experience. Through automation, technology supersedes authentic experience and relationships. Automation controls and limits through systematic apparatus or process, turning action from a willed and free motion to a mechanical and involuntary response. It removes all life from activity. With the expansion of mass society, instrumental reason generates more advanced