What is Technology? Critical Approaches to “Man,” Machines, and Material Culture

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Course Description

It would be a misnomer to assume that technology is something we “use.” Rather, the human appears as embedded in a matrix of the socio-techno-material. In this sense, there is something quite non-technical about technology which has an intrinsically social nature and can take the form of bodily and socializing techniques, the canalization of creative powers, becomings of all sorts, and of course the mechanical and material manipulation of ourselves and our life-worlds. We must thus speak of a biological and technical *habitus* of dependency and over-coming, one constituted by everything from creating art, to language, to ideological persuasion, to human enhancement and post-humanism, and various forms of convergence. What is the relationship between these various techniques and technologies and their respective effects (ethical, cultural, aesthetic) on the category of the human?

Social transformation and technology cannot be theorized in isolation. The technological, mediological, and digital have to be unearthed as constitutive of our shared “material culture” and milieu. Within such a milieu, which is both internal and external to actors and agents implicated within it, the “essence” of the human is not only potentially redefined, but indeed dissolved. In such a potential redefinition and dissolution, one finds a radically new ethical and political threshold that has yet to be adequately theorized. This course attempts to reveal this threshold through developing a critical heuristic which maps the topoi of the socio-eco-techno system. Drawing on mediology, ethics, and the French school of the anthropology of techniques, we explore such topoi in terms as both “deep” historical sediment and also futurology with a view to illuminating how our values are negotiated and transformed in our rapport with the technological.

Course Requirements

**Class Participation:** this is a discussion course. Much of each class session will consist of moderated discussion of the texts, following an introductory, thematic lecture. It is therefore imperative that students read and think about the assigned reading material so as to be able to participate meaningfully in class discussions: 30%.

**Mid-Term Paper:** An 8 page paper with pre-distributed questions. 30%

**Final Paper.** For the final assignment, students will write a 10-12 page research paper on a theme of their choosing developed in conversation with the professor. 40%
Provisional Syllabus

Week 1: Framing the Debate(s)

Mapping the Techno-Sphere

-Selections from Arnold Pacey, *The Culture of Technology*, (MIT, 1995)

Technology, Techné, and Freedom


Week 2: Bodies, Gesture, and Know-How

The Sociology of “Techniques”


Technology and Habitus

Week 3: Archeological Paradigms, Pre-historic and Post-Modern

Tools, Time, and Mediation


Contemporary Media Excavations

-Jussi Parikka, “Media Theory and the New Materialism,” in What is Media Archaeology?, (Polity, 2012)

Week 4: Technology and Material Culture

Technology, Objecthood, and Thingness

-Pierre Lemonnier, Selections from Mundane Objects: Materiality and Non-Verbal Communication, (Left Coast Press 2013)

Techno-Ethnographies of the Everyday

-Anna McCarthy, “From Screen to Site: Television’s Material Culture and its Place,” October, No. 98, (2001)
-Tina Peterson, “The Zapper and the Zapped: Microwave Ovens and the People that Use them,” in Material Culture and Technology in Everyday Life, ed. Phillip Vannini, (Peter Lang, 2009)

Week 5: Technology and the “Real”

Hyper-Reality and Simulation
Virtual Lives: Of Self and Avatar

- Sherry Turkle, Selections from *Alone Together*, (Basic Books, 2011)
- Roger Scruton, “Hiding Behind the Screen,” in *The New Atlantis*, Summer 2010

Week 6: Rise of the Machines

On Technological Autonomy


Friendly Robots?

- Mark Coeckelbergh “Artificial Companions: Empathy and Vulnerability Mirroring in Human-Robot Relations” ’ *Studies in Ethics, Law, and Technology* 4(3), 2010
- Amanda and Noel Sharkey, “Granny and the Robots: Ethical Issues in Robot Care for the Elderly,” (PDF to be distributed)

Week 7: Technology and Aesthetics
Art, Technology, and Social Actors


Art as Technology/Technology as Art


Mid-Term Papers Due

Week 8: Technology and Belief

Technology vs. Magic

-Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert, Selections from *A General Theory of Magic*, (Routledge, 2001)
-Richard Strivers, Selections from *Technology as Magic: The Triumph of the Unnatural*, (Continuum, 2001)

Religion, Enchantment, Technology

-David F. Noble, Selections from *The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention* (Penguin, 1999)
-S. Romi Mukherjee, “RFID Chipping in the Bible Belt and Saudi Arabia: When Religion and Technology Collide,” from UNESCO Report *Ethical and Societal Challenges of the Information Society* (2012), (PDF to be distributed)

Week 9: Technologies and Bodies

Enhancement and Cloning

**Global “Bio-Politics”**


**Week 10: Post-Human Possibilities?**

**Politics of the Singularity**

- Ray Kurzweil, Selections from *The Age of Spiritual Machines*, (Penguin, 2000)
- Katherine Hayles. Selctions from *How We Became Post-Human* (Chicago, 1999).

**What Ethics for the Trans/Non-Human?**


**Week 11: Reception, Trace, and Transmission**

**Technology and Collective Memory**

What is an Archive?


Week 12: Surveillance and War

Security and Privacy


The War Machine

- Paul Virilio, Selections from *Pure War*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, (Semiotext(e), 1997)
- Manuel de Landa, Selections from *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines*, (Zone Books, 1991)

Week 13: Information and Attention

Geographies of the Information Society

- Rafael Capurro, “Intercultural Information Ethics,” at http://www.capurro.de/iie.html

Attention Economies

- Michael H. Goldhaber, “The Real Nature of the Emerging Attention Economy,” 2012, (PDF to be distributed)
Week 14: From Society to Network and Beyond

What is a Network?


Conclusion and Wrap-up


Final Papers Due