

The Astronaut

Kris Abela

The phenomenon of contemporary technology is astonishing. It is paving the path for men to achieve extraordinary results, from vehicles that reach the speed of over 1000 km/h on land, red blood cells substitute nanotechnology called ‘respirocytes’, to weapons that can eradicate the totality of our world. As the social experience is indicating, contemporary technology is becoming an essential feature of human life. So much so that a deprivation of such circuitry would result in a physiological, emotional or psychological breakdown. This, however, comes at a price. The human condition has at its basis the world we inhabit in which man understands himself as being human on Earth. Since the relentless innovation of technology and social media, which is easily spreading and flourishing in various corners of the world, is decreasing man’s dependency upon the world, I shall argue that man is losing one essential feature of his human condition. In this paper I will follow Gilbert Germain’s monologue, *The Human Condition in the Age of Technology*, invoking the philosophy Arendt, Baudrillard and Virilio respectively.

In the aforementioned text Germain explains the human condition as an “exodus from earthly reality,” (Germain, 2010, p. 168) since, as Heidegger had argued in *Questions Concerning Technology*, technology is stretching worldly boundaries. With contemporary technology, man is not only stretching the boundaries, but by the creation of virtual-realities, man is surpassing them. Since the world, and its boundaries, is the context in which

the self both accustomed itself and understood the human condition, Germain fears that “we are ill-fitted for this new abode and that finding in it a true home would necessitate nothing less than a relinquishing of our humanity” (Germain, 2010, p. 160).

In *The Thing* Heidegger invites us to the view of biocentrism as opposed of anthropocentrism, in which both humans and the world are of each other. Therefore, to understand the human condition one has to understand the human person in the worldly conditions that Earth offers. As a result, Arendt implies that the Earth is the “very quintessence of the human condition” (Arendt, 1958, p. 2). However, Germain indicates how man feels somewhat different than his earthly conditions; man feels superior to the instinctive act of plants and animals, and consequently, man is not satisfied with his basic living conditions. Consequently, as Max Weber indicated, man has historically appealed to alleviate “this existential unease by diminishing the otherness of our worldly environs” (Germain, 2010, p. 160). According to Germain, man seeks a home out of a mere house, and the means to do this in the contemporary world implies the use of nothing but technology.

Arendt was one of the first to highlight the importance of the world in the human condition. She felt that we are advancing “loss of contact between the world of the senses and appearances and the physical world view...” (Arendt, 1954, p. 273). She clearly points out that modern technology stipulated a gap between the world we inhabit and the world we know. In the world we inhabit, Arendt maintains, “what we perceive has an existence independent of the

act of perceiving.” Thus, she proceeds to show how modern science is hostile towards “true reality.”

Arendt builds her concerns upon Heisenberg’s Uncertainty principle. Heisenberg argued that the real world, or to be more specific, the objective world, is simply an illusion. Since everything in the visible world is dependent upon the act of perceiving, and perception is not an autonomous process, the act of perception “and measuring “reality” alters the nature of the reality perceived” (Germain, 2010, p. 161). Arendt progresses by arguing that man, as the agent in the subject-object relationship, stands by himself in the process.

Therefore, according to Arendt’s vision of the human condition in the technological era, when man perceived something in the natural world, man would perceive a different facet of himself along the process. The technology that we immersed ourselves in -

makes it more unlikely every day that man will encounter anything in the world around him that is not man-made and hence is not . . . he himself in a different guise. (Arendt, 1954, p. 275)

Arendt uses the metaphor of the astronaut to explain man’s situation in this era. With Heisenberg’s theory, Arendt envisions an entity that is so alienated by the subjective implications of his perception, that he will totally alienate himself from the otherness of the world through his personal constructed reality. Arendt sees the astronaut in the contemporary man immersing himself in technology. The astronaut is bound to be alienated in a new world, just as “we are all

fast becoming denizens of a world whose objectivity is illusory” (Germain, 2010, p. 161).

Consequently, Germain assumes that technology is the active agent in the world’s constriction in terms of space and time. “...The properties of spatial and temporal extension” (Germain, 2010, p. 167) is that we as humans are ascribed and share with the world. Therefore, by the use of technology, humans want to change their house, namely the world. However, as Germain points out, this procedure of “domesticating the earth through technology is problematic” (ibid.). Although he finds no essential problem with humans producing a home from a mere house, he is quite apprehensive with the way it is done. This radical transformation of the world to accommodate human beings, Germain argues, is becoming both inappropriate and incompatible with human nature.

In doing so, Germain sought the importance in Baudrillard’s philosophy and his influence on Virilio. He writes:

Baudrillard and Virilio concur that the story of technology is the story of humanity’s decreasing dependence on the earth, and that this growing autonomy from the ‘real world’ amounts to a kind of self-alienation as well. Despite differences in both approach and tone, their analyses corroborate the view that our drifting from the earth challenges a number of key assumptions regarding what it means to be human. (Germain, 2010, p. 161)

The decreasing dependency from the world as described by Baudrillard and Virilio can be crudely assessed by the following two points:

1. Outpace the concepts of space and time with the introduction of new realities such as ‘virtual reality’ or ‘cyberspace’.
2. The introduction of the so-called ‘smart technology’ which results in the anthropomorphism of technology and the technologisation of humans.

Germain rightly recalls Baudrillard’s notion of the ‘obscene’ from *The Ecstasy of Communication*. In this latter text Baudrillard describes the media, which is a fundamental domain in technology, as an instrument of “obscenity, transparency, and ecstasy”. He argues that since the private sphere of domestic life opened up, it became transparent. All the rules, rituals, events and familial drama are exposed and exteriorized. Furthermore, scenes of the public sphere are also being replaced by images of the media. It endorses the public life and without any reconsideration replaces it with a screen that envisions everything with a click of a button. In fact he writes, “Obscenity begins precisely when there is no more spectacle, no more scene, when all becomes transparency and immediate visibility, when everything is exposed to the harsh and inexorable light of information and communication” (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 130).

In the age of ecstasy of communication, everything becomes transparent; secrets, privacy and hidden meaning are lost. With this

in mind, Baudrillard argues that the intimate and passionate person is being lost, since these private and genuine “exciting scenes” in one’s personal life are being replaced. Yet, whilst passion evaporates into nothingness, a new “fascination emerges” with the “homogeneity” of the media and communication. Here the human person is constantly bombarded with information, images, signs, spectacles, events and finally, ecstasies. The human person is left helpless, and becomes “a pure screen, a switching centre for all the networks of influence” (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 133).

Moreover, Baudrillard notices that it is not as simple as it looks. When I perceive something in reality there is a kind of “distance” between myself and the object perceived that the human body could not in any manner bridge. This “distance” is lost with technology. Accordingly, Baudrillard states, the difference between reality and virtual reality relies specifically upon this so-called “distance.” The former world adopts this form of “charm” which specifically proposes itself by the fact that the ‘perceiver’ and the ‘perceived’ are in all times separated but conjoined with the phenomenon of perception. In other words, objects in reality are never fully transparent. On the other hand, objects in virtual realities are fully transparent; there is nothing more to them. As Germain points out, if it so happens and something in the virtual world has a peculiar nature, it is because it was instructed so. Objects in virtual realities are metaphorically similar to pornography: they “reveal too much” and in turn appear to be “hyper-real”. Following Baudrillard, Germain holds that, “like pornography this surfeit of visibility captures and fascinates the eye” (Germain, 2010, p. 164).

Before proceeding, we should notice Virilio's sympathy towards Baudrillard's claims on "distance." They both recall Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological claims that the environment humans and objects share is one of mutual progression. The perceiver and the perceived share the same space and time, where the perceiver has a limited capability to traverse the area between them.

Considering Virilio's account of technology, Germain starts with his notion of "distance technologies." By this, Virilio wishes to assert that technology works in a way or another contrary to our earthly spatio-temporal existence. For Virilio, human perception is part and parcel of earthly perception i.e. the way we perceive is determined by the abiding concepts of space and time limited to our world. This conclusion was brought out after considering the various accounts astronauts gave about their experience on the Moon – most importantly the manner they spoke about their existence as "an altogether different reality" due to the different nature of the light.

Looking amongst the astronauts' accounts, Virilio saw Buzz Aldrin's observation compelling. Aldrin expressed that the lunar light was "weird" when compared to earthly light. This ascribed weirdness happens due to the fact that the Moon has no atmosphere, and therefore the light that hits the Moon is not refracted.

Not only was this especially noticeable when moving something from shadow into the sun's light on the moon — which Aldrin likened to entering "another dimension", but the distinctively different quality of

the light there also affected the astronauts' capacity for judging gradients and distances on the moon's surface. (Oliver, 2011)

Therefore, according to Virilio, human vision is earthly vision, in the sense that vision is always bound to the context it is working in. In other words, vision needs time to adapt to other conditions, just like the body needs time to adapt from one climate to another. Recalling Aldrin's account, "Germain suggests that the sudden change from shadow to disconcerting light without the mitigating effect of penumbras (the way it happens on earth) may be described as the experience of a "binary" or "digital" reality" (Oliver, 2011). As to Virilio, lunar reality is "a three-dimensional analogue of cyberspace." When humans use technology, they are like the astronauts on the surface of the moon; both objects on the Moon and in cyberspace are exhibited with unrefracted light.

Without delving into the ethical dimension, I wish to stress the point that people are decreasing their dependency upon the world. As this happens, new forms of realities are being created all of which have different properties than that of the world. Therefore, with technology and new virtual-realities, one is surpassing the boundaries our world itself imposes. However, and without committing myself as Germain did by proposing that such would result in "a relinquishing of our humanity," the fact still remains that humans, with the help of technology, are creating a home which is un-earthly. As a result, the human being is losing one essential property against which one could understand himself as being human. We are becoming astronauts on Earth.

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