

Technology: Alienation and Homecoming (2012)

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Technology: Alienation and Homecoming
Robert D. Romanynshyn, Ph.D.

Phenomenology and Depth Psychology

My talk this evening invites a pause to look back, re-turn to, re-cover, re-collect and re-member something of the origins of our contemporary technological way of knowing the world and being in it in order to explore the ways in which those origins unconsciously continue to inform, shape and influence us in multiple ways.

In this regard, I am interested in the shadow side of technology and the ways in which its permeation lingers as a symptom and is lived out as a shared, collective, cultural dream. It was the approach I took in my book *Technology as Symptom and Dream* (1989/2002). This approach has its philosophical foundations in existential-phenomenology, especially the work of the philosophers like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger, Hans Georg-Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur among others and the psychologists J.H. van den Berg, Erwin Strauss, and Medard Boss among others, and draws upon the insights of depth psychology, especially the work of C.G. Jung and James Hillman. *The Wounded Researcher* (2007) is the most recent example of this approach as applied to the question of the place and role of the researcher in the research process. Dialogue between these two traditions has been the primary format of this approach, and the following three points summarize the key themes of this dialogue.

First, this dialogue shows how phenomenology and depth psychology both arise at nearly the same time at the beginning of the twentieth century as a critical response to the world-view of the natural sciences and its technological applications. Both of these traditions take up the cultural-historical shadow of the scientific world-view. They both reveal what that world-view conceals about psychological life.

For example, phenomenology focuses on the meaning of experience that is covered over by the measurement of behavior, while depth psychology shows the symbolic and complex character of meaning. In addition, both of these traditions challenge the image of the body as an anatomical object that holds sway in psychology as a natural science. Phenomenology undercuts the dualism of objective matter and subjective mind latent in this image with its return to and descriptions of the lived body inseparable from its cultural-historical contexts. Depth psychology, on the other hand, functions as witness of this lived body in its symptomatic disguises. The hysteric at the origins of depth psychology crosses the threshold into Freud's consulting rooms as the 'repressed', forgotten, disowned, and disregarded erotically embodied feminine face of the body as an anatomical object, speaking neither the language of anatomical facts nor the language of clear and distinct ideas. On the contrary, the meanings of her lived experiences are spoken in the symbolic language of her symptoms and dreams. Finally, both of these traditions point to the need for a hermeneutics of psychological life that is responsive to the symbolic character of human action.

Second, the need that each of these traditions has for the other has become increasingly apparent over the course of the last forty years beginning perhaps with the work of Merleau-Ponty and more recently articulated in the work of Paul Ricoeur.

In the work of Merleau-Ponty there are the makings of a new ontology, described as the enfoldment of the seer and the visible that discloses 'the impossibility of further maintaining the point of view of consciousness' (Lefort 1968). This new ontology, which no longer privileges the position of consciousness divorced from flesh, is rooted in the chiasm or crossing of the sensitive flesh of the body and the sensuous flesh of the world, including, of course, the body of the other. This ontology of the flesh is an erotics of desire, a carnal aesthetics whose devotion to the flesh situates Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology alongside the forms of twisted desire that psychoanalysis explored. Indeed, in a preface he wrote to *L'Oeuvre de Freud et son importance pour le monde moderne*, written by the French psychoanalyst A. Hesnard, Merleau-Ponty said of phenomenology and psychoanalysis that 'They both tend toward the same latency' (Romanyshyn 1977). That latency is the latency of the body. The body is the place where phenomenology and psychoanalysis meet.¹

Ricoeur's book, *Freud: An Essay on Interpretation* (1970) is a eloquent expression of the conflict that an encounter with the unconscious raises for phenomenology. Written by one of the foremost philosophers of the twentieth century, it insists that the dynamic unconscious cannot be side-stepped by the philosophical tradition. This point is perhaps most clearly stated in the following:

'For someone trained in phenomenology, existential philosophy, linguistic or semiological methods, and the revival of Hegel studies, the encounter with psychoanalysis constitutes a considerable shock, for the discipline affects and questions anew not simply some particular theme within philosophical reflection but the philosophical project as a whole.' (1974).

Framed within this dialogue my approach to technology

becomes a hermeneutic reading of the cultural-historical origins of the technological world-view, which, in making a place for how those origins have become a collective cultural unconscious, also becomes a cultural-historical therapeutics.² It is an exercise in thinking as a work of anamnesis, as a work of un-forgetting. It is a way of thinking within the spirit of a post-modern sensibility as described by J-F Lyotard:

'The modern is all too easily snapped up by the future, by all the values of pro-motion, pro-gram, pro-gress dominated by a very strong emphasis on willful activism. Whereas the postmodern implies in its very movement...a capacity to listen openly to what is hidden within the happenings of today. Postmodernism is deeply reflexive, in the sense of anamnesis or reminiscence, and that itself evinces what is best in modernity'(Kearney, 1988).

Commenting on Lyotard's words, Richard Kearney (1988) adds:

'Postmodernism...assumes the task of reinvestigating the crisis and trauma at the very heart of modernity; the postmodern now being understood as a testament to the fact that the end of modernity is...a symptom as it were of its own unconscious infancy which needs to be retrieved and reworked if we are not to be condemned to an obsessional fixation upon, and compulsive repetition of, the sense of its ending. In this respect, the task of a postmodern imagination might be to envision the end of modernity as a possibility of rebeginning.'

In the following section I return to those origins for the sake of a new beginning. Three themes are present in thinking by way of return.

One theme is that the origins of the technological world continue today in terms of an unexamined ideology that valorizes a disembodied self isolated and alienated from nature. This ideology can manifest its symptomatic form in our uncritical use of computers where our embodied subjectivity is in both senses of the term terminal.

A second theme is the way in which the forgotten origins of our technological world-view have infiltrated the field of psychology. The recent efforts by the American Psychological Association to define psychological education in terms of science, technology, engineering and mathematics, the so called STEM initiative, is the clearest and most explicit example. Such a definition leaves out of the picture what makes psychological life specifically human. In this context, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment is especially necessary. As I have argued elsewhere (2011), his description of the three structures of behavior show that in the human order the symbolic structure of behavior is the capacity to turn back to, recover, take up and transform the biological and social foundations of human behavior from *causes of* to *conditions for* action. At this symbolic level of action meaning is an emergent property that transforms without transcending those conditions. Human action is neither fully embedded within and determined by biological or social forces nor totally free of them. Our freedom is a bounded freedom. Nevertheless, it is a freedom from such forces that gives us a freedom for the creation of meaning. As such, the relation among the three structures is not linear. It is dialectical. One can no longer, therefore, explain human action solely in causal and reductive terms. The anatomical body that is coincidental with the origins of our technological world-view, and which is and has been so conspicuous at the foundation of psychology as a natural science, is no longer an adequate foundation. 'There is more to seeing than meets the eyeball' as the philosopher of science Norwood Hanson has noted

(1972) The eye that winks is and is not the same eye that blinks.

The third theme in thinking by way of return is that our collective amnesia for the origins of the technological world-view, and our subsequent addiction to its ways of knowing the world and being in it is dangerous and unethical. Indeed, it might even be delusional to continue to think that our individual and collective suffering is not connected to the ecological crises that imperil the Earth. Might it not be imperative now to consider how one's depression, for example, is part of the 'sorrow' of the natural world? Embedded within an empiricist ideology this statement, of course, makes no sense. But that is the point. For it to make sense we would have to shift our way of knowing and being, and to do that requires more than an act of will. It requires that postmodern work that J-F Lyotard described as anamnesis or reminiscence.

That term reminiscence is itself reminiscent for it calls to mind how Freud used it to describe the condition of the hysteric. '*Hysterics*,' he wrote, '*suffer mainly from reminiscences* (1955). A cultural-historical memory of the body as an erotic tie to the world haunted the symptomatic guise of the hysteric. The broken bonds of desire were present in their absence in her symptoms, and in their absence alluded to their presence. In these symptoms we had the first call to remember and reconnect those broken bonds, to nourish and feed the hunger of the body's sensual appetite for the sensuous world and vice versa.

But that first call has largely gone unheeded. The work of reminiscence has largely been confined to the therapy room. Imprisoned within those confines that difficult work against the resistance to remembering, that therapeutic work against forgetting, has become more urgent. In *Technology as Symptom and Dream*(1989/2006), I have in fact argued that that hunger first expressed as hysterical symptoms

near the end of the nineteenth century has gravitated to anorexia and eating disorders in the mid twentieth century and now reveals itself in that archetypal image that appears at the end of my book: the anorexic embodying the discarded figure of the feminine abandoned on the launch pad as the astronaut, who embodies the patriarchal spirit of modern science and technology, departs an increasingly imperiled earth.

Technology: Alienation and Homecoming

The forgotten origins of our technological world-view, which have lingered as a collective and shared cultural-historical symptom and dream, made phenomenology and depth psychology possible and necessary. In this section I want to describe some of the key themes of that world-view that made those traditions perhaps even inevitable.

Technology as Symptom and Dream explores the origins of our modern scientific-technological world-view within the context of the artistic discovery of linear perspective art in the fifteenth century. Through a close reading of the key text by Leon Battista Alberti, *De Pictura*, printed in 1435, which laid out with mathematical and geometrical precision the experiment performed some ten years earlier by the Florentine painter Fillippo Brunelleschi to map on a two dimensional plane the three dimensional world, my book shows how this artistic invention of linear perspective drawing became a cultural convention, a habit of mind that marked a boundary between the Medieval world-view and our own. Linear perspective vision establishes an infinite horizon opposite a fixed viewer for whom the world is made into a grid whose parallel lines converge toward a vanishing point. Along with the distance point, this vanishing point, which Alberti called the center point but which in his day quickly became aptly known as *punto di fuga* (point of flight), became, as the art historian Samuel Edgerton (1976) has noted, an innate geometry of our eyes that has

permeated the world. When I sit at my computer terminal, for example, I launch myself as a disembodied avatar of myself into the nearly infinite expanse of digital space.

The geometric details involved in the construction of these two points, which are described in detail in the second chapter of my book, are much too complex to present in a brief article. In addition, throughout the book I draw upon the developments in art, architecture, literature, medicine, and other disciplines to illustrate these details and their implications for constructing our modern sense of self and its relationships to nature and the body, but those details too are much too lengthy to offer here. I limit my remarks, therefore, to a few key themes.

In order to map the three dimensional world on a two dimensional plane, linear perspective drawing requires the artist/viewer to imagine him/herself as situated behind a window, which in some later drawings is actually represented as a grid through which the artist/viewer looks at the world. In this context, linear perspective separates the one who looks at the world from the world that is looked at. Or, in terms I developed in my close reading of Alberti's text, linear perspective invites one to become a spectator, who, in keeping his/her eye upon the world, transforms the world into a spectacle mapped out along the lines of a grid.

Here we are at the beginning of the 'geometrization' of the world, well on the way to taking its measure and fragmenting it into analyzable parts. In addition, for a spectator who keeps his/her eye upon the world, the world as a spectacle becomes a matter of light, or we can say a light matter. Can we not wonder how these codes of spectator and spectacle have lingered in our unconscious ways of disregarding our participation in the ecological crises we face today? In this disregard, the matter of nature seems to matter less than our own needs and desires. A kind of species hegemony has its germinal seeds in this disregard.

In keeping his/her eye upon the world, the spectator on this side of the window/grid has to sever the bond between the world and the body. Indeed, this severance is another code in this process of mapping the world. The spectator on this side of the window is meant to fix his/her vision on the vanishing point, which in principle can be at an infinite distance from his/her position. The closed world of Medieval times has become the infinite universe. In principle there are no bounds or limits on our vision.

But, of course, for embodied persons that infinite vision is and can be only an ideal because it is the body that situates each of us in time and place. Embodied, we belong to nature, and indeed gravity is an expression of that natal bond. If, therefore, infinite vision is to become more than an ideal, the body which is a drag on that way of knowing the world from afar, has to be abandoned. Linear perspective vision does so for alongside the codes of spectator and spectacle the body becomes a specimen placed over there on the other side of the window. It becomes a thing whose measure can be taken, an object to be fragmented and broken into its parts, a body for the disembodied spectator eye.

Albrecht Durer's 'Artist Drawing a Nude through a Gridded Screen,' done in 1525, illustrates the body made into a specimen, the grid, and the singular eye whose vision is fixed by a device that locks it in place. What is coded here is the idea that the infinite vision of the spectator eye is a monocular vision, which freed of the living flesh is able to become a free floating eye, an eye that can roam and wander over the infinite expanse of the world. What is on the horizon here is the split between the eye as a material object and the disembodied spectator eye, waiting to become the eye of mind, the *Cogito* of Descartes, as well as the eye instrumentalized in later technological inventions like the microscope and telescope whose infinite vision can

also penetrate the far reaches of the heavens and the dark depths of nature. Little wonder, then, that the body as specimen is encoded in one of the first books of modern anatomy published in 1542 by Andreas Vesalius, or that Descartes will later explain the experience of seeing in terms of a theory of vision whose facts are demonstrated by using 'the eye of a newly dead man.'

It is also worth noting the arc of this development. In the sixteenth century this specimen body, this body comprehended now through its anatomization, is a template for the ideal body of beauty. Commenting on one of Durer's anatomical drawings, John Berger (1977) notes that this ideal is inseparable from a belief that 'the ideal nude ought to be constructed by taking the face of one body, the breasts of another, the legs of a third, the shoulders of a fourth, the hands of a fifth—and so on.' He adds that for Durer 'the result would glorify Man.' In the nineteenth century this idea of beauty will show its other corrupted face. Victor Frankenstein's creature is the body created by the mind of man and man alone in its flight from death.

The singular and monocular qualities of this way of knowing the world and being in it, shape the eye of mind in specific ways. Between the spectator eye and the vanishing point, the world recedes toward an infinite horizon that is laid out as a flat plane, a homogenous space where all points are equal. In this flat expanse the vertical depths of the world never rise above the horizon line, creating a problem for Renaissance artists regarding how one might incorporate the haloes of saints and the figures of angels within the same plane as human beings and the objects of every day life. Not only does this vision begin to erase the difference between the heavens and the Earth, between the sacred and the profane, it also lays the foundation for reducing phenomena that are qualitatively different to explanations that quantify them. For example, the fall of a keepsake from one's hands can be subsumed under Galileo's laws of motion where two

objects of different weight fall at the same speed from a tower. The qualitative difference here is erased. It is explained away like one later can explain a rainbow in terms of Newton's explanations of color in terms of the bending of rays of light through the 'prism' of the atmosphere.

This fascination with that kind of thinking that finds a quantitative identity beneath the qualitative differences that show themselves in and through their appearances also creeps into many other areas of human life. Two of those areas are politics and economics. In politics William Harvey's text in 1628 is on the surface a text in physiology, which in its declaration of the heart as a pump depends upon experiments with many lower forms of life. In this context, Harvey's pumping heart is the same for all animals. But in his dedication he acknowledges his sovereign King Charles I of England. When Charles some years later is led to the scaffold to be beheaded by the forces of Oliver Cromwell he is reported to have said, 'A subject and his sovereign are clean different things' (Romanyshyn, 1982). The democratization of the heart in terms of its physiological function became in that moment a political act.

In a similar way, Newton accomplished this quantitative leveling of differences with respect to economics when in 1696 as Master of the Mint he created a new form of currency whose weight and value were as 'homogenous, stable, uniform and predictable' as the fall of things under the sway of gravity. Things now can be fixed and compared in terms of their monetary worth. The value of something becomes its cost.³

The fixed, singular, monocular vision of the spectator mind is on the way to becoming a linear, literal way of thinking that not only privileges its own fixed point of view but also identifies its perspective with the definition of what is real and true. In a world where qualitative differences no longer matter when weighed against their calculated quantitative

identities; on a plane where all things can be made equal; in a world where the vertical dimensions of life are homogenized on the horizontal plane of explanations, the highs and lows of life, the aspirations of spirit for a sense of the sacred and the yearnings of flesh for the carnal enticements and pleasures of the world retreat inside. In a world emptied of levels and differences, of qualities and colors, a new space is opened up within. It is the space of psychological life now as an interior domain of experience cut off from an inanimate world. It is the space of vertical psychological depth separate from a horizontal material world of infinite expanse.

Into this gap the symptomatic body of depth psychology and the lived body of phenomenology make their return. The stage of the world as a spectacle for the eye and the eye alone has been set, the characters of the spectator mind and the specimen body have played their part, and the drama of dis-incarnation in order to distance oneself from the world the better to predict, explain, calculate and know it, has become a tale of departure from earth. Is it a tale of technology as alienation? That would be the wrong question for many reasons not the least of which is that it fails to acknowledge the symptomatic character of this way of knowing and being in the world. Technology itself is not the issue or the problem. Our collective amnesia for its origins is the issue and the problem. In this forgetfulness, technology as a way of being in the world becomes the measure of what is true and real. Technology as a perspective becomes an ontology and its forgotten origins become the fabric of a collective unconsciousness that permeates the world. Its symptomatic character calls us back to those origins for the sake of a new beginning that takes up with more consciousness and awareness the possibility of technology as also a homecoming.

This tension between alienation and homecoming is coded in the technology book in terms of one of its closing images. It

is the NASA photo of the earth as seen from outer space during the voyage of Apollo 17. It is perhaps one of the defining images of the twentieth century, offering a moment humanity could see the precious beauty of its home and appreciate perhaps as never before the earth that in standing under us understands us, the earth as ground of our being. In the context of that image two possibilities arise:

Does this image of Earth as seen from Space evoke a sense of some ultimate alienation from earth, a kind of triumphant farewell to nature that celebrates the power of the disembodied human mind to take leave of its senses in its departure from earth? Is it a triumph of the will that celebrates our capacity to break the natal bonds of gravity that have tied us to Earth? Is it an image of our final farewell as we gather the technological power to depart the earth and perhaps in light of how we have managed to despoil it and even to wire it for destruction, a leave taking that is motivated by a felt sense of necessity?

Does it evoke a sense of wonder that celebrates for the first time some dim, even archaic remembrance of earth as home to all of us that invites return? Does it awaken another bond alongside that of gravity, a bond that tugs on the human soul, a bond of desire, of Eros, rooted in the aesthetic longing of the human heart for home? Is it an image that evokes a sense of homecoming?

Two possibilities-alienation and homecoming! But it is not a choice of one or the other. On the contrary, it is an obligation to hold the two in a continuous round dance of departure and return, of forgetting and remembering. Technology as symptom and dream awaken in the human

heart some age old wisdom that the poet T.S. Eliot (1971) speaks to in these words:

'We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.'

In the Place of Thinking: The Melting Polar Ice

In that round dance around the image of the earth as seen from space two styles of thinking are held together in an embrace. One style, thinking in place, arises in that space between phenomenology and depth psychology. It is a kind of thinking that is rooted in the flesh and which begins in the ear as a response to what addresses us. It is responsive thinking, response-able thinking, thinking that is able to be responsive because it has listened. It is thinking, which in being responsive to technology, is thinking as homecoming. The other style, thinking in exile, is that kind of thinking that in distancing itself from the lived body breaks the bonds between the sensual flesh of the body and sensuous allures of the world.

The image of the round dance underlines the necessity of holding the two together, neither splitting them in terms of either/or nor judging one to be superior to the other. Indeed, the danger lies in breaking the embrace of the dance, for then thinking in exile becomes a way of taking leaving of our senses in some final farewell to that natal bond between embodied life and nature, while thinking in place becomes a romantic longing for some Edenic world before the fall into technology. In this romantic fantasy, we forget that in the distance from home so characteristic of thinking in exile the awareness of home is already present as a seed. Or, to shift the image, thinking in exile awakens the orphan within us, and who better than the homeless orphan experiences the desire to find a way home.⁴

But we live in an age more or less dominated by that kind of thinking in exile, which imposes an obligation to become witnesses for that kind of thinking in place that the poet William Butler Yeats (1996) for example, awakens in his poem '*A Prayer for Old Age*':

'God guard me from these thoughts men think
In the mind alone;
He that sings a lasting song
Thinks in a marrow bone.'

The DVD, '*Antarctica: Inner Journeys in the Outer World*,' (Romanyshyn, 2009) is an example of thinking in place. It is a response to the ecological crisis of the melting polar ice framed within the context of technology as symptom and dream. Against the backdrop of the earth as seen from space, it presents eighty-six images set to music accompanied by voice-overs, which embraces that round dance that holds the tension between technology as alienation and homecoming.

