FCJ-005 The Erasure of Technology in Cultural Critique

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2 Isaac Asimov once suggested that it would make far more difference in our everyday lives if the automobile had not been invented than if Einstein had failed to formulate the theory of relativity (Hansen, 2003: 1). Theory and technology are very different things. Likewise, language and technology are very different things. According to US critic Mark Hansen, technology should be assessed according to its concrete experiential effects, not just its symbolic or cultural significance; it is more than just an effect of language.

3 This is a tall order, because we have little to draw upon in taking such an approach: contemporary critical theory treats technology as a trope or representation rather than a physical reality in the world. The "machine" is not just a metaphor for a particular technology, but for technology itself. And at a deeper level, this metaphor enframes technology within a semiotically constituted field. One could be forgiven for thinking that contemporary critical discourse on technology 'begins and ends with a critique of language' (Lovink, 2002: 295). In his new book Embodying Technesis, Hansen calls this perspective 'the machine reduction', or the putting into discourse of technology.

4 Hansen has a powerful argument. According to him, twentieth century discourse on technology – from Heidegger to Derrida and beyond – comprises an ever increasing ontic turn; a fixation with technology as material support for the more pressing account of subject-constitution. We have erected language as the irreducible background for understanding technologies, and in light of this, more recent critics like Donna Haraway and Sandy Stone have deftly reduced the significance of particular technologies to the impact they have on ideology and subject-constitution. Technology as a material artifact disappears in a puff of signifiers. As Hansen sees it, such critics assert the primacy of the material over the theoretical, and yet they engage in a pervasive culturalist assimilation of technology, claiming that technology doesn't exist outside of the discourse in which it is embedded.

5 It's a serious charge, and although the argument has its problems, it deserves to be elaborated. In her introduction to the book, Katherine Hayles admits that although she has her reservations about such broad claims, 'Hansen's project fulfills an important role that could not be accomplished in any other way' (Hayles, 2003: viii). It takes the argument into the high-ground of theory and 'uncovers the moves by which technology is not just embedded in language but erased by language' (Hayles, 2003: viii). In other words, it clears the ground; it allows us to ask what technology might be outside of its embeddedness in social discourse. What exactly is technology outside of our own language and thought processes? So although I will be critiquing this argument, I wish to acknowledge its contribution: Hansen has clearly articulated this question and established it as both 'important and legitimate' (Hayles, 2003: ix).

6 Hansen's own answer, unfortunately, is to abandon the systemic-semiotic approach in its entirety. I will be arguing that this is to nullify our project in advance, especially in relation to new media: the technology is literally built on symbolic logic and a cybernetic methodology. Insofar as it trades exclusively (and again, literally) in images and symbols, transient puffs of phosphor invested with meaning, our experience of it is entirely mediated by representation. Now is not a good time to set up camp outside of discourse. In order to retain this reflexivity, to retain what Derrida calls a 'politics' in relation to the image, I will be arguing that we must articulate these technologies as they exist in a dual space: they exist at once as representations and as material opacities. This statement seems obvious, almost trivially true – yet Hansen has constructed it as a choice. We approach technology through language, or we approach it through the body, as a prelinguistic experience; it would seem we must take sides.

7 But first let us understand Hansen's argument. I will do this by exploring in detail one small (but pertinent) example of this apparent erasure of technology: Derrida's sacrifice of technological materiality in his book on machines and on forgetting, Archive Fever. This book is important not simply, or not only, because it has inspired a recent critical sojourn into technology and memory; but also because in it Derrida offers his first major statement on the impact of electronic media on our embodied lives. Hansen claims that this statement exemplifies Derrida's deeper assumption: the homology of language and technology.

Derrida, Thought and Technology

Freud's model of the human memory as outlined in his 1925 essay, A Note Upon the Mystic Writing Pad, has always been a touchstone for critical excursions into the relationship between thought and technology. But there has been a heightened interest in it of late. This is due in large part to Derrida's (re)reading of the essay in Archive Fever, where he focuses on Freud's recourse to a machine metaphor for the mind. In this book, he highlights Freud's tendency to slip from seeing the machine as an analogy for the psyche to his vindication of it as the actual structure of the psyche.

This slip is no typo, holds Derrida: it is an admission. Machines like the one Freud tropes for the human psyche can represent the psyche precisely because they embody it; technology is always already under our skin. The boundary between thought and technology retreats upon inspection:'The machine – and consequently, representation – is death and finitude within the psyche' (Freud, 1971: 14).

The tendency to problematise the dissociation between thought and technology has always been at the heart of deconstruction. But Derrida's textualisation of Freud here locates technology inside thought as a relative interiority: memory is a prosthesis of the inside. This means that it is no longer possible to distinguish technology from human memory; both are forms of archivisation, and both are forms of that most intimate technology, writing.

Herein lies Hansen's charge: in reducing 'technology [to] a form of memory, or more exactly, its enabling supplement' (2003: 146), it is erased by language. In the next section we will explore this movement in more detail.

Archive Fever: a Freudian Impression

The evolution in the Freudian oeuvre, argues Derrida, has witnessed an increasing convergence between psyche and its technological analogues. From 'the Sketches up to the Beyond, from the Mystic Pad and beyond' Freud has had problems staying within the realm of metaphor, and there seems no limit to this problematic of the impression (Derrida, 1996: 27). Everywhere it is writing machines.

This tendency, claims Derrida, becomes explicit in Freud's short essay on the mystic pad. Here Freud mobilises a seemingly innocent metaphor for the human psyche – a child's writing toy called the Wunderblock.

> This is a slab of resin or wax with a thin, transparent sheet laid over it, which is secured to the slab on the top end without being fixed to it. The sheet is itself divided into two – the "upper layer is a transparent piece of celluloid; the lower layer is made of thin translucent waxed paper. (Freud, 1971: 229, cited in Tofts, 1998)

To write on the Wunderblock, one scratches the surface of the cover-sheet with a stylus, and lifts it to erase the marks. Importantly, traces are always left on the slab of previous inscriptions, just as marks are left on the Unconscious; the wax slab is the writing space of that most radical form of forgetting, repression. When the covering sheet is lifted, these partial, hieroglyphic inscriptions remain on the slab underneath, and they influence all future inscriptions. Freud obviously intends to mobilise this as a metaphor for the psyche, but what Derrida highlights is his tendency to shift into a literal reading (Tofts, 1998: 61).

Freud begins this essay with a common description of writing as an external technology, a supplement to the human memory:

> If I distrust my memory…I am able to supplement and guarantee its working by making a note in writing. In that case the surface upon which the note is preserved is as it were a materialized portion of my mnemic apparatus, which I otherwise carry about with me invisible. (Freud, 1971: 227)

The problem with writing, however, is that it is limited in its storage capacity. The ultimate memory machine would be unlimited in that it would allow for both preservation and erasure at once – a difficulty that is overcome by the Wunderblock. What this model allows to be thought is a writing surface that preserves and erases, but erases in a special way – it maintains traces of old inscriptions. For Freud, the mystic pad is an apt and useful analogy, but it remains a metaphor; at some point it must come to an end. The originality of Derrida's reading, claims Hansen, lies precisely in his rejection of this Freudian restriction: 'For Derrida, the mind-machine analogy is not

simply one analogy among others but…the analogy that founds the psychic system as such' (Hansen, 2003: 143).

According to Hansen, this is why Derrida pursues four sentences in the essay, where Freud 'is inclined to press the comparison [with the Wunderblock] still further':

> I do not think that it is too far-fetched to compare the celluloid and waxed paper cover with the system Pcpt.-Cs. and its protective shield, the wax slab with the unconscious behind them…[t]his agrees with a notion I have long had about the method by which the perceptual apparatus of our mind functions, but which I have hitherto kept to myself. (Freud, 1971: 231)

But now it has been said, claims Derrida, by the father of psychoanalysis. Memory is the original palimpsest, and comes before speech; it is a prosthesis of the inside. Memory is now a relative interiority, and technology a relative exteriority. For Derrida, this opens a universe of problems; not least among them, where is the real, lived memory? If memory is a prosthesis, a writing machine, then these tracings on the "wax slab" augment perception before perception even appears to itself.

There is no lived memory, no originary, internal experience stored somewhere that corresponds to a certain event in our lives. Memory is entirely reconstructed by the machine of memory, by the process of writing; it retreats into a prosthetic experience, and this experience in turn retreats as we try to locate it. But the important point is this: our perception, and our perception of the past, is merely an experience of the technical substrate. It is a writing with traces, a writing of traces.

It is only by creating a prosthesis of human memory like this, Hansen claims, by fetishising the philosopheme of memory, that Derrida can 'replace the disjunction between technology as a thing-in-the-world and lived human memory with relative exteriority (the technology of writing) and relative interiority (thought as writing)' (Hansen, 2003: 126). And textual structures being what they are – always already technological – it is not much of a leap to reduce technology to thought itself, as Hansen observes of Derrida in Of Grammatology.

So where does this leave the assemblage of steel and plastic that I am typing on and into at this moment, in its material specificity? According to Hansen, it has disappeared. Technology remains a process of archivisation, of writing: it is a function within thought. For this reason, Hansen charges that Derrida's work on the relationship between thought and technology ultimately reinstates the cognisant, thinking subject as the tribunal through which we judge (and create) technology.

Technological exteriority is subsumed back into the thinking subject; it has become language. And according to Hansen, this tendency has been inherited by contemporary critical theory: 'Whether acknowledged or not, the Derridean motif of the closure of representation serves as the philosophical basis for current forms of cultural studies that privilege representation as the raw material for analysis' (Hansen, 2003: 123).

Technology Beyond Semiotics? A Critique of Hansen

But before we dismiss Derrida's work as irretrievably on the side of semiotics, we need first to understand what is at stake, what we might lose by remaining inside what Hansen calls the 'systemic-semiotic framework'.

As Hansen sees it, if we treat technology as a language and not a physical thing in the world, we lose the ability to mark out its concrete experiential effects. Technology disappears in a puff of signs; it disappears back into the thinking subject. This is an important point. What Hansen is after, as Hayles observes, is a theory for the 'process of embodied reception – of reception as embodiment – that culminates in a nonrepresentational experience of physiological sensation' (Hayles, 2003: vii); a radical project indeed, and one that Hayles sympathises with.

This is why Hansen explores Benjamin's work on Baudelaire's poetics, in which Benjamin develops the idea of material interventions or "shocks" to the human nervous system that operate below the level of the neocortex, below the level of conscious experience; the idea is to bypass language and cognition altogether. Hansen wants to think technology as something that happens in its sensory immediacy, as something that happens across the body. This is an approach which is very difficult to take without appealing to a pure outside of language, without creating a choice between material experience (even if it is in the form of prelinguistic "shocks") and consciousness.

The approach, of course, is not exclusively Hansen's: it has been happening for quite a while in the realm of queer theory, as Brigham observes (2002: 3). For over a decade, theorists such as Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz (not to mention Kate Hayles herself, in the field of science studies) have been seeking a way to theorise the impact technology has on our bodies below the level of representation – and perhaps Hansen could learn from what has been happening there. For if we go too far in the direction of non-reflexive experiential immediacy, we end up with a subject who exists outside of discourse: an embodied, engaged and sensual position to be sure, but also a non-critical one. The prelinguistic subject is mute.

30 For feminist discourse in particular, this abandonment of reflexivity is critically akin to bioligism or naturalism. It 'silences and neutralises the most powerful of theoretical weapons, the ability to use patriarchy [against] itself' (Grosz, 1995: 57). The same may be said for technology, and in particular new media technology. For although Derrida's work focusses on language, it has much to offer us in approaching a technology which, like it or not, actually does structurally operate on the level of mathematics, binary logic and iterability, and most importantly whose major currency is the seriated image. Computer science evolved out of cybernetics, systems theory and information theory – theories which undoubtedly privilege information as a 'disembodied' entity (Hayles, 1999), but theories which have nonetheless become embodied as technical artifact.

31 The archive exists, as Derrida observes only 'by virtue of a privileged topology' (Derrida, 1996: 3); it cannot function without a substrate or without a residence. For computer-based new media, this substrate is invested in a systemic episteme: the 'content' must translate itself through several layers of code, ROM and microcode as serialised information, a quantity which also has its origins in the science of cybernetics. By definition and in practice, new media (and here I mean computer-based new media) must be machine-readable. This means that the user must also follow articulated rules for interaction and retrieval, a 'behavioural logic' that the machine might understand: as anyone who has used a computer will attest, this means that things must be done in a certain order and according to a certain logic, a logic which shapes our experience in advance. On both a technical and an experiential level, new media is inextricably invested in a systemic episteme.

32 This is why I am arguing that if we wish to retain a politics in relation to the medium, then now is not a good time to discard the systemic-semiotic framework. There is work to be done – work which would be nullified in advance if it neglected the basic structure of the technology it is aimed at, and work which could not be done from the perspective of non-reflexive experiential immediacy. Much as I sympathise with Hansen's project, a theory based on prelinguistic 'shocks' will tell us nothing about what happens across a computer screen.

33 Derrida, in fact, would complicate our understanding of systemic 'reflexivity' here in relation to technology. Firstly he would say that reflexivity is not simply, or not only, a question of control and intelligibility. It is always and also about our relationship to the future. There is a dual aspect to reflexivity: it creates an intelligible future for us on the one hand by mastering the archive, the past, and on the other it 'is also mastery of a future neutralised by calculation and foresight' (Derrida, 2002: 103). It's a matter of degree. So for critical practice, this means developing an awareness of the limits and dangers of reflexivity, but also understanding the dual movement of the impulse itself. Secondly, in response to Hansen (and myself, I'm afraid to say) Derrida would complicate what is essentially an artificial choice between reflexivity and non-reflexivity. We can't just choose to be non-reflexive in our critical practice: not only is this denying ourselves access to language and to the future, but as humans we cannot but approach the world through the technologies of our own perception. So 'the imperative distinction is not between reflexivity and nonreflexivity, but rather between two different experiences of reflexivity, to the extent that both are tied to technics' (Derrida, 2002: 103).

34 Reflexivity aside, there is a more serious problem with Hansen's reading, which I have only been hinting at; for those of you who are familiar with Derrida, it will have been obvious from the very beginning. Hansen mobilises an enabling opposition between materiality and language, materiality and cognition: he brackets off a repressed materiality and poses it as a question. (Why else would he offer as an "answer" the critical pursuit of physiological shocks and precognitive sensation?) And among other theorists, he directs this question at Derrida – who, of course, complicated the opposition long ago in Of Grammatology. Hansen well and truly acknowledges this, and in fact

points out that this very obfuscation has been inherited by contemporary critical theory and used to erase embodied experience: but in all honesty it isn't wise to come at Derrida with an argument for the radical disjunction of thought and materiality. Where is this precognitive human? And if we could even find it, would it be human any longer?

35 This is an attempt to demarcate an embodied, "natural" human from its various prostheses: language, representation and technology. To demarcate the human body from what Stiegler calls its 'epiphylogenetic' memory – the memory which makes us human. This approach has numerous complications, one of which is that we are left with an essentially anthropocentric conception of technological dynamics (Stiegler, 1998: 143) that denies the role of technology in constituting this human in the first place. Surely Hansen would not want to wind up here. All human action has something to do with tekhne, is after a fashion tekhne (Stiegler, 1998: 94); we cannot but approach the world through the technologies of our own perception. Humans invent themselves within language and technology; they invent themselves within technics. Stiegler's work actually radicalises Derrida's logic of the supplement; his critique of this position would run even deeper. [1]

36 I should note at this point that the 'erasure of technology' in cultural critique actually has a much larger place than just Derrida in Hansen's book. As he sees it, the problem is endemic to twentieth century discourse on technology. Hansen surveys the work of Heidegger, Deleuze and Guattari, Lacan and even (oddly) Kittler; the argument is the same, at times repetitive. As Brigham writes:

37 > Science studies, deconstruction, psychoanalysis and (I know no appropriate label) Deleuze and Guattari all loom up, only to be beaten back, beaten down by a very similar series of strokes. The hero proves himself in trial with a serially returning repressed. (Brigham, 2002: 1)

38 When you are a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Derrida, however, is afforded a special place in Hansens' work: he is like the Grandpappy of the machine reduction.

39 But Hansen does have a point – a point that I feel needs to be made in relation to deconstruction. At first blush, technology seems to disappear into thought itself. It would seem that the rich experiential impact of technology remains abstract and difficult to grasp, that we are left with no means for articulating its impact on our embodied lives. So there are problems with Hansen's argument, particularly its appeal to a nonrepresentational, precognitive or prelinguistic state. However, there does appear to be a reduction taking place in Derrida's work, and Hansen has articulated this problem quite clearly.

40 So I am calling for a different reading: a reading which does not create a choice between text and materiality, between text and technology – but at the same time, a reading which does not depend entirely on cognition and representation, which does not dissolve materiality into thought. I want to keep the power of the systemic-semiotic approach, but to acknowledge materiality too. And I believe that the elements for this can actually be found in Derrida's work, particularly his interviews with Bernard Stiegler.

Derrida and Technological Exteriority

41 > There is no archive without a place of consignation, without a technique of repetition, and without an exteriority. No archive without an outside. (Derrida, 1996: 11)

42 First let us briefly recall the main elements of deconstruction's antilogocentric side. This recall is as much for my own benefit as for yours; it will help me in elaborating Derrida's concept of exteriority as it relates to the archive.

43 Derrida argued that speech provides the illusion of self-presence, for both thought and meaning (1974, 1978). This is a precondition for the self-cognisant subject, a subject who can control his or her own behaviour, who can control his or her own speech, who can attribute self-identical meanings to the world and to the text. It emphasises an instrumental relationship to language: language as a mediating thing, a thing that makes the world intelligible.

44 For if the world can be captured and spoken, if it can be pinned down, then language itself can be exempted from the destabilising effects of time. It can, in a sense, transcend time; it can control the flux. At the very least we would 'know what the property of "my life" is, and who could be its "master"' (Derrida, 1993: 3); the world and its workings might become transparent to us.

45

Allow me to simplify this further for my purposes. As human beings, we fear time and ephemerality, and seek to stem the flow (a concept which is a recurrent theme in Derrida's work, and also the basis of archive fever, the pack-rat illness we are all afflicted with). Given this basic desire, and

> the ephemeral status of sounds that constitute speech, logocentrism tends to neglect the physical side of language, the exteriority of language. Although the logocentric exclusion of exteriority is extremely important… Derrida pays astonishingly little attention to it… and exteriority almost disappeared as an element of antilogocentrism from subsequent forms of deconstructive practice. (Gumbrecht and Pfeiffer, 1994: 394)

Which again, doesn't mean it doesn't exist, just that "exteriority" as either a world of reference or a mediating thing (the instrumental dimension of technology) is dependent on its being opposed to the subject as a coherent figuration. As Derrida puts it, there is no archive without an outside: we can't comprehend or grasp it any other way. Stanford theorist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has in fact erected this exteriority as a central point of reference for a new field of critical inquiry – the materiality of communication, which is also the title of his book (1994). We will explore this in more depth presently.

For now, we should realise that exteriority is always and also what logocentrism seeks to bracket off from consciousness and control; it's a dual movement. So Hansen's task has already been acknowledged, albeit not thoroughly explored, by Derrida. The erasure of the physical world is one of the symptoms of logocentrism: an expression of our fear of time, ephemerality and aging, our fear of death.

So let me begin again with Derrida, and with the archive. And begin at that very simple level, the concept of our own death. For it is this question and this awareness that mark us as human, as humans that create archives and modes of capture: 'the difference… between the animal and the human is the relation to death' (Derrida, 1993: 44). It is this question and this awareness that expresses itself through language and technology – the desire to pin down and make the world intelligible.

In fact for Derrida, the primary function of technology is to increase intelligibility, to create representations. Technology, and by extension the archive itself, are machines for making representations. So technology is always and also an expression of this desire to demarcate and capture the physical world. Through technologies we produce meaning in and for the world, and we attribute these meanings as self-identical to the world. Which is, of course, an illusion. When Derrida says our experience of the world is an experience of the technical substrate, and that this substrate is death and finitude within the psyche, this is (at least in part) what he means (1996: 14). In fact, the first question we must ask of the new 'teletechnologies' as Derrida calls them, is what new forms of intelligibility they make possible (Derrida and Stiegler, 2002: 105).

So technology makes possible representation, as Hansen observes of Derrida. But at the same time, and this is something Hansen does not adequately acknowledge, it is not itself representation. As Derrida puts it in Echographies of Television: the 'machine itself is constituted outside the field of meaning that it makes possible' (Derrida and Stiegler, 2002: 108). And it is due to this constitution that the machine makes no sense in and of itself – or more precisely, we can make no sense of it. This must apply even if, for us, technology exists to augment knowledge or to increase intelligibility:

> That which bears intelligibility, that which increases intelligibility, is not intelligible – by virtue of its topological structure….hence a machine is, in essence, not intelligible. No matter what, even if it makes possible the deployment or production of meaning. (Derrida and Stiegler, 2002: 108)

This is a topological structure which not only cannot be known, but which moves according to a different rhythmics, with its own contingencies and resistances. This does not mean that technology is at base irrational or obscure, that it is an absurdity: 'it is not negative, but it is not positive either' (Derrida and Stiegler, 2002: 108). What it means, if we push upon Derrida slightly, is that technologies qua material artifacts are not themselves constituted within a systemic-semiotic field. This is a paradox, but it is not a paradox that denies the material world – just our capacity to render it transparent.

Gumbrecht reads this exteriority literally – as a material opacity. Literally, the physical side of language, the point where materiality intervenes in the process of observation. Accordingly, he defines the materialities of communication as 'the totality of phenomena contributing to the constitution of meaning without being meaning themselves' (1994: 398). This is phenomena which, Derrida would contend, technology also seeks to deny, for they interfere with representation at the same time as they enable it.

55 For us and also for Gumbrecht, this is not the same as sanitising and keeping separate an essence of technology from technology itself (what Derrida charges Heidegger with), or appealing to a pure outside of language. Exteriority cannot be demarcated from perception, cannot be captured or known, cannot be bracketed off from representation or realised as a pure presence, much as we would like it to. Nor can it be posed as a question. It is neither objectifying nor objectifiable. Yet as Stiegler suggests, it influences our experience of both the technology itself and the event it produces, by 'participating in the construction of sense' (Derrida and Stiegler, 2002: 109), by shaping it in advance.

56 For critical practice, as we shall explore in a moment, this means it is important to recognise the duality of technology. That is, to recognise that technologies exist, for us, at once as representations and as (essentially unintelligible) material opacities. This is what I am arguing here; that along with process, we must also think the stases, states, halts and structures that constitute particular technologies and consequently the events they produce. As Derrida is fond of saying, along with process, we must also think singularity (see Derrida and Stiegler, 2002: 76, 77, 39).

57 Hansen does acknowledge Gumbrecht's contribution in his book – acknowledges it as a way of introducing chance and contingency into the heart of meaning, marking an internal limit to the traditional hermeneutic project (2003: 225). But he passes over Gumbrecht's main argument: that although at first blush Derrida seems to deny the physicality of technology, this is simply not the case. Derrida is not arguing that technology qua technical artifact is a soup of signifiers: just that language can never capture or locate it as a world of reference. We might still contend that this makes it very hard to articulate the materiality of technology as theorists: it is frustratingly out of reach. But this would be to state the obvious: we can never articulate something which exists outside the field of meaning it makes possible. As I see it, this means we need to accept that our understanding of technology will always be partial – which is to say, it will always be human.

58 My contribution here has been to strengthen Gumbrecht's argument by drawing on some of Derrida's later work in Echographies and Archive Fever, and to confirm that although exteriority has disappeared from subsequent forms of deconstruction, it has always been there. I have been arguing that Derrida understands technology to have a dual nature: it makes possible representation, but it is not itself representation. And due to this very constitution, not in spite of it, technology as a material thing is not accessible to us. Yet at the same time this very constitution shapes our experience of particular technologies and the events they produce.

In another rhythm, in another style…

59 If you have read this far, you may now be asking how this perspective might contribute to our understanding of technologies as they exist in the world. What might we do with this temporal dimension, this 'material opacity' that we can neither locate nor demarcate from perception? I feel our task as media and cultural theorists, if we wish to retain the explanatory power of semiotics and systems theory, is to articulate the specificities of particular technologies as they exist in a dual space. As I explained earlier, this means recognising that technologies exist, for us, at once as representations and as (essentially unintelligible) material opacities. We cannot understand them any other way. But at the same time, we should recognise that this exteriority is precisely the point where materiality intervenes in the process of representation. This statement seems obvious, yet it has been neglected by contemporary critical theory. Hansen has highlighted the need for such a perspective, and we must acknowledge the importance of this contribution; yet ultimately he constructs a choice between physicality and representation, as though it were even possible to make such a choice.

60 Technological exteriority cannot be bracketed off and posed as a question. In particular, it cannot be bracketed off from the human being as a creature that invents itself within technics (Stiegler, 1998: 134, and for Stiegler, as for Derrida, language is a form of technics). Technology infiltrates

agency, it interferes with the way in which we formulate the question – and not just in Haraway's sense of the polymorphic, semi-permeable cyborg. This is not a metaphor for subject-constitution, or more precisely, this is not a choice. These machines have always been here, they are always there 'even when we write by hand, even during so-called live conversation' Derrida says, with a television camera pointing in his face, transmitting an image that is always already edited and reconstituted around the globe as a 'live' broadcast (Derrida and Stiegler, 2002: 38). We must at once mark this constraint and also respect the specificity of particular technologies as they produce our experience.

61 Allow me to use a personal example. Even as I am recording my reflections here on the question of technological exteriority, even as each letter falls across the page, the media itself is forcing these reflections to yield to its own constraints (to paraphrase Stiegler concerning broadcast television, Derrida and Stiegler, 2002: 103). Each letter is being translated through several layers of code, ROM and microcode, each movement carefully shaped in advance so that the machine might understand it. This experience is inextricably invested in a systemic episteme – one which has its own behavioural logic.

62 Derrida uses the example of broadcast television in Echographies – and precisely because at the moment that he is speaking this particular technology is forcing his reflections to yield to its constraints. One might criticise him for obsessing over these constraints in the interview, to the neglect of answering Stiegler's questions. [2] Yet I think he does answer them, in the process highlighting that we must mark the way in which any answer is necessarily shaped in advance. So what does Derrida say about the impact of this technology on our embodied lives?

63 With broadcast television, he says, there is this initial experience of the technology, this feeling that we are 'overcome by a total image, impossible to analyze or break into parts' (Derrida and Stiegler, 2002: 59). We are spectralised by the shot, captured or possessed in advance (117). This is due in part to our essential relation of technical incompetence to its mode of operation, 'for even if we know how it works, our knowledge is incommensurable with the immediate perception… we don't see how it works' (Derrida and Stiegler, 2002: 117), due to our lack of total mastery or reflexivity. As explained previously, there is always something that is neither objectifying nor objectifiable in our experience of technology. But it is also due to the fact that we receive this across our body, that we are caught by the 'living image of the living', by what appears to be most live: 'the timbre of our voices [in this interview], our appearance, our gaze, the movement of our hands' (Derrida and Stiegler, 2002: 38). Broadcast television creates (or more precisely, restitutes) a living present: it is mimetic, it mimics a living flux.

64 Hansen also explores the mimetic aspect of the moving image, through film as opposed to broadcast television. He does this by mobilising Benjamin's revalidation of the term Erlebnis. Erlebnis "experiences" the other – including the technological other – through mimesis, the registry of the other in the body rather than in representation. So film, as a mimetic rendering of its object, has a direct sensory appeal that undermines and precedes understanding, and in this respect it poses for Benjamin and Hansen the potential of bypassing interiority and representation (Brigham, 2002: 3). This "living flux" is experienced through the body.

65 But at the same time, and this is something Derrida feels it is important we should mark, this living present is not at all live, this total image is in fact nothing of the sort. There may be a certain 'sensual' immediacy in its reception, but it only appears this way: images can be cut, fragment of a second by fragment of a second…. There is also, if not an alphabet, then at least a discrete seriality of the image or images (Derrida and Stiegler, 2002: 59).

66 This blissfully embodied experience has been created for us; it is in fact a restitution of what is dead. This interview, Derrida points out, is a very 'singular, unrepeatable moment, which you [Stiegler] and I will remember as a contingent, breathing moment, which took place only once' (38). Yet it will be reproduced as live, mimicking this sensual moment, this unfolding now, always already serialised, reconstituted, cut and translated, to be reinscribed infinitely in other frames or contexts. We should not lose awareness of this future. For if there is selectivity, there is also forgetting. Derrida marks this 'restitution as a living present of what is dead' as a specificity of broadcast television (39).

67 So Derrida in fact calls for more reflexivity in relation to our experience of television. And in particular, for an awareness of the selective nature of this all-embracing "mimetic" experience – in

other words, a politics of the archive, of memory. He would not agree that we should focus on experiential immediacy: we should mark its impact, but this is not the end of our task as theorists. As I have been arguing in relation to computer-based new media, now is not a good time to set up camp outside of discourse.

68 With respect to broadcast television, 'we must learn, precisely, how to discriminate, compose, edit' (Derrida and Stiegler, 2002: 59), and if not then we must at least develop an awareness that this living present is in fact reconstituted. What has been lost or forgotten in this experience, what has been written out? Without this understanding, we not only lose our critical positioning (as queer theory has discovered), but we lose our relationship to the future. People should know that in the creation of this event there was a politics of memory, a particular politics, and that this is in fact a politics (Derrida and Stiegler, 2002: 63). I put this question to Hansen – do we really want to lose this politics in relation to the image? This is the price of abandoning the systemic-semiotic approach.

69 Derrida approaches the materiality of technology through the concept of the archive. Regardless of the way in which one relates to a particular media, its materiality – its specificity – is always already at work by virtue of a privileged topology, not simply structuring the memories it contains, but literally creating them. He argues that we need to develop an awareness of this process, to at once recognise and articulate the politics behind particular technologies, the politics of the archive. At another time and in a different rhythm, I would like to address the specificities of new media technology through the concept of the archive.

70 But I will leave you now with Derrida's call to think the archive. We are given this imperative to think technology in its dual aspect, both as an embodied experience and as a politics 'concretely, urgently, every day – both as a threat and as a chance' (Derrida and Stiegler, 2002: 65).

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Notes

[1] Derrida thinks the relation between humans and technics in terms of an 'originary supplementarity'. Stiegler's thinking may be seen as a radicalisation of this concept. Whereas Derrida is concerned to articulate the tension in terms of a "logic", here elaborated as the logic of the archive, Stiegler is concerned to articulate this logic in terms of its historical differentiations in different technical systems. The logic will only appear in its differentiation; the 'interiority is nothing outside of its exteriorisation' (Stiegler,1998: 152). Stiegler, too, would be useful to any approach to a materiality of technics.

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[2] Richard Beardsworth, for one, believes Derrida 'consistently resists' answering one of Stiegler's questions (1998: 3).

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