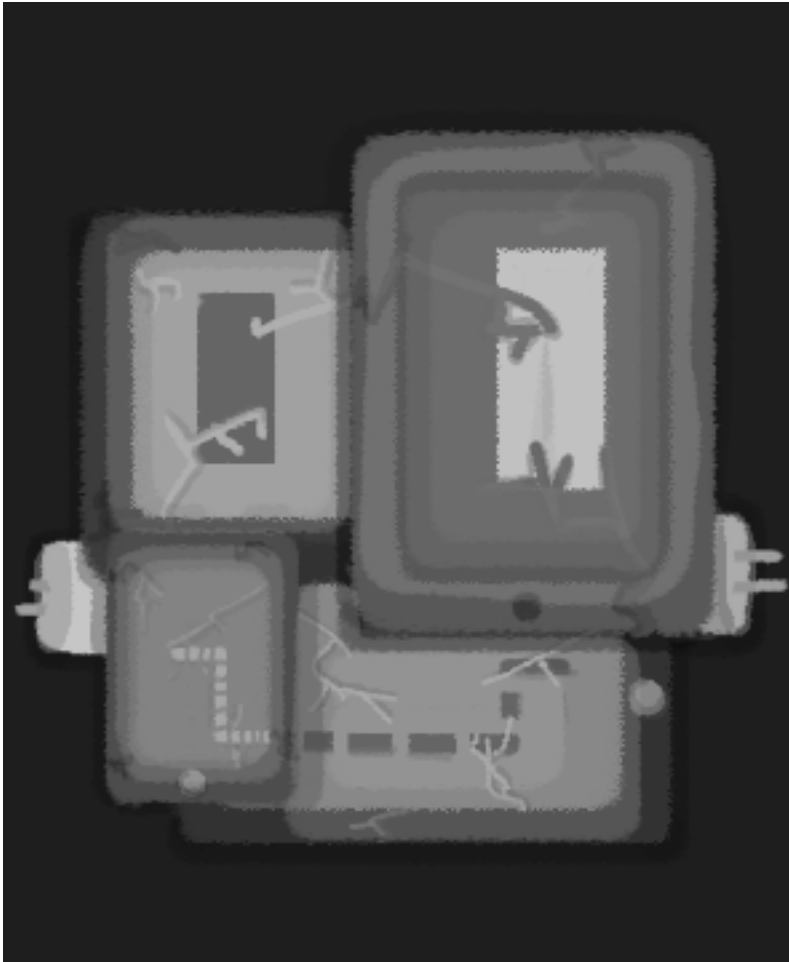


THE RENDING OF THE VEIL: Tarrying with the Technological Sublime



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ABSTRACT

The potentially philosophically problematic aspects of modern technology have been the subject of much discourse in recent times. The new kinds of incorporeal online spaces that are available to engage with have untold consequences on the formation of subjectivity. When phenomenological arguments about the nature of being are considered, the way that we display ourselves online becomes in need of exploration. This paper hypothesizes an exploration of what new relations toward the world have arisen through our relation to the sublime in technology. To this end, we must examine how deeply the feeling of the sublime in technology has affected subjectivity and intelligence.

DOI: 10.33043/GzMc57G3



I. INTRODUCTION

What, then, could a horizon for technology look like? In a recent article, Slavoj Žižek wrote that “if something resembling ‘post-humanity’ emerges as a collective fact, our worldview will lose all three of its defining, overlapping subjects: humanity, nature, and divinity.”¹ The ability to apprehend a true concept of a post-human future is, of course, completely impossible—what is however (not) encountered here is (a feeling of) the sublime (of technology).² We can characterize the sublime as an experience with misrepresentation. It is the feeling produced by encountering the limits of reason, more specifically a failure of reason. Is it not precisely this encounter with the sublime, however, that brings out in its excess a cover—which we may call fantasy—to deal with failure? Then, the entire presence of fear that could be present in this interaction becomes obscured due to our inability to perceive the existence of the sublime. Instead, we come to deal only with the possibility of its existence. Then, the character of fear—insofar as a proximity to technology does produce fear—must be located elsewhere. It is instead in the desire for, and subsequent production of a fantasy of, a pre-technological age that is the true problematic. The project, then, is to highlight that the location of the problematic of technology lies in the rejection of it rather than in its embrace. Using a Kantian mapping of transcendental imagination and the sublime, as well as Sherry Turkle’s theory of evocative objects, we shall approach an understanding of the new relations toward the world that have arisen through our relation to the sublime in technology.

II. DOWN THE RABBIT (W)HOLE: KANT WITH THE MARIONETTE

First, let us go about using a Kantian construction of cognition to establish a framework for a relationship between subject and technology. Fundamentally, the subject, as a finite being, can only apprehend its surroundings through its faculty of intuition initially. Then, the faculty of imagination acts as a sort of mediator between these sensuous intuitions and understanding—here, imagination is

that which conjoins the manifold of sense experience.³ The subject, because it appears within time, space, and causality, is incapable of completely grasping the world as a totality, so we can remark that the way in which the subject experiences the world is fragmented. In fact, the very concept of totality can only become available to the subject through the imaginary joining of components. In this way, our very basic immersion in the world is grounded in a failure to perceive things-in-themselves (*ding an sich*). The object of my experience is mine in the way that I apprehend it and fashion it into concept. The point here is that one must conceive of the subject in relation to technology as a being which already contains within itself a fundamental failure, but it is this very failing that allows the subject to become what it is. Then, the world in which the subject dwells is a phenomenal one, an immersion in the world that happens through concepts, meaning we can have no relationship toward things-in-themselves. The object is always mine: “As phenomenal entities, we are caught in the web of causal connections, whilst our intelligence (that fact that, as moral subjects, we are free, self-originating agents) indicates the noumenal dimension.”⁴ I aim to apply this understanding of intelligence throughout this project. In the context of technology, insofar as a piece of technology can be categorized as an object, it is always something which is already mine.

However, whilst this conception of the subject certainly applies to the subject of technology, an artificial intelligence, which is a technology of the subject, could not possess this type of immersion in the world—it is totally unable to participate in the phenomenal world. In fact, Kant seems to pre-empt something like an artificial intelligence. In his critique of practical reason, he gives an example of how man dwelling in the noumenal, or the world of things-in-themselves, would act: “The moral worth of actions, on which alone the worth of the person and even of the world depends in the eyes of supreme wisdom, would not exist at all. The conduct of man, so long as his nature remained as it now is, would be changed into mere mechanism, where, as in a puppet show, everything would gesticulate well but no life would be found in the figure.”⁵ From this passage, we can infer that Kant places the intelligence of man in his ability to treat objects as phenomena and to act morally, which, as I stated earlier, relies on a failure at first. Since Artificial Intelligence is programmed, it does not contain the failure within the subject that gives way to this intelligence, meaning that it

1 Slavoj Žižek, “The Post-Human Desert,” *Project Syndicate*, April 7, 2023, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/ai-post-human-future-by-slavoj-zizek-2023-04>.

2 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (A & D 2018), 97–124.

3 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 202–45.

4 Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (Verso, 2009), 24.

5 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (MacMillan, 1956), 152–53.



would be cut off from any sort of phenomenal engagement with the world. The AI model Chat GPT, when asked about its own compatibility with this definition, answered, “I lack consciousness, self-awareness, understanding, and personal experiences. I don’t possess intentions, emotions, or a moral compass. I operate based on patterns learned from diverse data during training.”⁶ This answer coincides well with Kant’s “puppet show.” Žižek draws a parallel here with something like non-alcoholic beer or decaffeinated coffee because the exact essence of the thing—intelligence in this case—is subtracted: “I know very well that I am not talking to a real person, but it feels as though I am—and without any of the accompanying risks!”⁷

Overall, the significance of these observations is to point out the deadlock present between the subject and its technological object: Artificial Intelligence acts more like a sort of mirror for us, answering only when spoken to. Following Joan Copjec in *Read My Desire*, we can conceive of the mirror as a screen, a place where I create a secondary identification with the image upon seeing an image of myself, but AI seems to create an inversion of this: a screen that functions as a mirror.⁸ As an object, AI seems to be able to appropriate the gaze in the Lacanian sense, not as the act of looking but as the object of looking. Copjec says, “The gaze of the other is not confirming; it will not validate you,” meaning that the validation I gain from the gaze of the other is an association I must myself make.⁹ AI as a responsive object contains the potential for the subject to associate the same validation that it requires from a human other, without the “humanity.” For a further investigation into the problematic nature of technology, we must keep this deadlock in mind.

III. FRANKENSTEIN’S OTHER: HEGEL AS A USER OF TINDER

Following our conception of the transcendental imagination as a mediator, a change of emphasis will be useful in highlighting the failure present within the intelligence of the subject. This can be achieved by shifting from its passive Kantian conception to the Hegelian “night of the world.” For Hegel, imagination is a violent thing which

6 ChatGPT, response to “Do you dwell in the phenomenal or noumenal of the world?” December 7, 2023, OpenAI, <https://chat.openai.com/chat>.

7 Žižek, “The Post-Human Desert.”

8 Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Verso, 2015), 30.

9 Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 36.

functions by ripping things out of their context and stitching them back up: “Imagination enables us to tear the texture of reality apart, to treat as effectively existing something that is merely a component of a living whole.”¹⁰ It is this gap, opened up by violent imposition of transcendental imagination, that opens up the possibility of understanding. The point here is that there is a kind of pre-ontological, elementary violence within the subject, a wound that allows for a subsequent construction of something like an identity. Is this not the same way that we have constructed something like social media? Social media is a new kind of application of the symbolic in that there is an elementary violence in the way we mutilate ourselves and our image to create a kind of Frankenstein of an online self. The relation toward the technological object gives us a framework to access the online space, which we have fashioned in our image. If we are to take Hegel as a user of a dating app—“here a bloody head suddenly shoots up and there another white shape, only to disappear as suddenly”—the way that people appear to us online contains a radical subjectivity because we can only see what the other wants us to see—or more precisely, we only show what we think the other wants to see.¹¹ The inherent “wound” within the subject which must be covered is what Hegel calls “the night of the world.” Through this, social media then seems to come naturally to us since we are used to mutilating ourselves. This is the way in which technology has catalyzed a drive into abstraction: A deeper focus on introspection has come about through the short circuiting of desire. Turkle draws a parallel here between Freud’s conception of “time out” during reality testing and the “time out” from reality that is offered to us through the online space, “the psychosocial moratorium,” which allows us to experiment with our identities.¹²

However, this is not to say that the online space is in any way a kind of freedom or a positive place that allows us to come to a more complete understanding of ourselves. The Hegelian move here is to point out the fact that the excess drawn out by the identity building indulgence of the online space is exactly just that: pure excess, which often resembles a nightmarish realm where anything is permitted. The film *Blue Velvet* by David Lynch is a great example of this.¹³ The scene with Frank and Dorothy in her apartment depicts a kind of roleplay between the two that regresses into a primal oedipal encounter, with

10 Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 33.

11 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, “Jenaer Realphilosophie,” in *Frühe Politische Systeme: System der Sittlichkeit* (Ullstein, 1974), 204, qtd. in Donald Phillip Verene, *Hegels Recollection* (SUNY Press, 1985), 7–8.

12 Turkle qtd. in André Nusselder, *Interface Fantasy: A Lacanian Cyborg Ontology* (MIT Press, 2009), 11.

13 *Blue Velvet*, directed by David Lynch (1986; MGM Home Entertainment, 2002), DVD.



Frank screaming “Mommy” over and over into the crotch of Dorothy. Žižek provides a useful analysis of this scene:

Dorothy’s apartment is one of those hellish places . . . a place where all moral or social inhibitions seem to be suspended, where everything is possible, the lowest masochistic sects of obscenity, the deepest level of our desires that we are not even ready to admit to ourselves, we are confronted with here.¹⁴

This scene is reminiscent of many online spaces. The gap between object and representation is widened in any digital representation, and this gap is covered by fantasy, allowing online spaces like chatrooms to embody a pure fantasy. Fantasy in the way Lacan intends is a means to sustain desire, which is exactly what structures the online space. In other words, the online space essentially exists as a window for desire, for “desire is the essence of reality.”¹⁵ The idea of the technological device as the object which frames the online space is a useful metaphor for this idea of the screen as the mirror. When functioning as this kind of mirror, we are given an insight into the nature of our desire, and we are blindly offered a short-circuiting to anything we may desire, which reveals the self-replicating hidden law of desire that we submit to when entering this space. The Kantian point here is that, in fact, this not a type of freedom but quite the opposite. It is falling into a pure excessive indulgence that is more akin to enslavement. In reality, true freedom comes about only through discipline as a means to deliver us from animalistic instinctual action.¹⁶

Now, whilst a grim picture may have been painted of the modern technological age, the point to be aware of is that the danger of technology finds its root in our already problematic immersion in reality. The objects we create are always-already projections of desire, and the technological object functions very well at giving us near unlimited access to desire. We cast our aims over the object and appropriate them as such. Through this, the problems that come about through the technological object are still mine. What opens up here is the opportunity for a different type of relation to the object. Especially against the background of an ever-advancing technological society, what better time is there to reevaluate what it is that makes an object special?

14 *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema*, directed by Sophie Fiennes, written and scripted by Slavoj Žižek (P Guide Ltd., 2006), documentary, DVD.

15 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XIV: The Logic of Phantasy, 1966-1967*, trans. Cormac Gallagher (Karnac 2002), 6.

16 Immanuel Kant, *On Education*, trans. Annette Churton (Dover, 2003), 3-5.

IV. TURKLE’S EVOCATIVE OBJECT

Richard Wagner, in his final work, *Parsifal*, uses the poetic phrase “*Die Wunde schließt der Speer nur der sie schlug*,” which means “the wound may only be healed by the spear that smote it.”¹⁷ Žižek’s use gives this phrase a Hegelian twist, saying that sometimes oppression is the only thing that can open up the possibility for freedom. In other words, an embrace of the very cause of the problem becomes the solution. In a broader sense, the application of this idea to Hegel’s philosophy would be that it is, in fact, the wound created by the failure of the transcendental imagination—the night of the world—that allows for our subsequent ability to create ourselves. Žižek highlights how Martin Heidegger displays that the horizon of modern technology has already embedded within itself its own rejections: “The ecological critique of the technological exploitation of nature ultimately lead to a more ‘environmentally sound’ technology.”¹⁸ Therefore, insofar as modern technology is problematic, the solution must not be thought of as a rejection. In fact, the most dangerous aspect of something which defines an epoch is always its rejection since this is the ideological move that harbors the kernel of fascism: the desire to go back to a time that does not exist. It is easy to indulge ourselves in this ideological trap because technology now allows us the chance to retroactively redeem our past selves by shifting the blame on to the modern age. Of course, the paradox here is that it is impossible to go back in time. In fact, an attempt to return to the past would inherently be creating something new. Turkle shows how this phenomenon is being incited more than ever. Her concept of the “nostalgia of the young” shows us a new happening where young people seem to harbor a nostalgia for a time which they did not experience.¹⁹ What we really seek in this feeling is, again, a chance to retroactively redeem ourselves, seek shelter in the past, and hide away from the world in front of us.

Looking forward at a world in which we can coexist with technology, I use Turkle’s concept of the evocative object as a means of addressing the problematic of technology, not by rejecting it but rather through an embrace of it. The influence of capitalism over technology is seen most clearly through importance placed on the production of capital rather than functionality and efficiency. In this way capitalism restricts creativity, with a common instance being a useless convenience—for example, voice activated lights, when a

17 Richard Wagner, *Parsifal*, 3.2.271, 1882.

18 Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 14.

19 Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (Basic Books, 2012), 265-78.



switch is already convenient. This dependence on gimmickry exposes the actual goal of capitalist technology, which is to create capital rather than to better the world. However, this is not to say that the goal of technology should be to better the world. Instead, we should remember the fundamental failures within the subject. The nature of existence in this way is always a struggle, always a reinventing. We should not be seduced by idealism. Rather, our understanding of what technology could be ought to be considered alongside the understanding that the emergence of identity is a process which is never finished. Then, the chance for a different relation toward the technological object comes in our ability to embrace an object which does not have any rational advantages. This is how Lacan conceives of love. It is a fundamentally irrational thing. It is not simply a satisfaction of needs but a dependence on a person which completely contradicts reason: “I cannot live without you.”²⁰ Turkle states that “Objects bring Philosophy down to earth.”²¹ Her work *Evocative Objects* chronicles the relation of people to objects which have had a definitive role in their life and how they can disclose history and memory. It posits that the object is always mine, and I can infer onto it a higher meaning and make it something more than it is.²² If our lover were to ask us, “why do you love me?” of course, there could be no satisfactory answer, for to reduce love to something rational would cause it to lose its essence. To this, Lacan says, “The only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one’s desire,” meaning that grounding desire would cause it to lose its essence that makes it desire.²³ What this means for the problematic of technology is that while of course many modern crises—climate change, AI, poverty—are certainly incited by and supported through modern technologies, we have also been given the unique opportunity to reclaim a relation to that object. What we realize through our reduction to consumers and data is precisely that we cannot be reduced to our data. There is a radical subjectivity that exists in the abyss of transcendental imagination: the night of the world.

V. CONCLUDING

Then, what has been established throughout is that the root of our fear of technology, insofar as it does create fear, is something which

20 Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959–1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (Routledge, 1992), 171–190.

21 Sherry Turkle, *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* (MIT Press, 2011), 308.

22 Turkle, *Evocative Objects*, 8.

23 Lacan, *Psychoanalysis*, 319.

is not unique to technology. The elementary, pre-ontological wound that lies at the heart of the subject means that our immersion in the world is always grounded in a failure. However, it is because of this failure, this lacking, that we can then create ourselves. One extreme future that technology could produce is a post-human one, where the creation of an artificial intelligence far surpasses the limits of man. The conception of this is impossible to apprehend, for we cannot view history in its entirety. In this sense, the idea of intelligence that can invoke a feeling of the sublime. It is a failing in our imagination, which is something that we can only know because of intelligence’s absence. I invoke here the work of Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, and the hellscapes which exist without symbolic signification.²⁴ This is the kind of realm that a post-human future could mean. On the other extreme, a technologically-driven capitalism seeks the opposite. It desires a reduction of the subject to standing-order that can be instrumentalized in the creation of capital. Both of these images are potential representations of a technologically-driven future. However, the background of these traumatic possibilities allow the modern subject of technology to keep in mind the inner workings of intelligence and the incorruptible essence of subjectivity. Heidegger did well in his use of Hölderlin: “Full of merit, yet poetically man dwells on this earth.”²⁵

24 Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, 1503–15, oil on oak panels, 81 in. x 152 in., Madrid, Museo del Prado.

25 Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2013), 211.





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