Cybject

"And whatever harm those do who slander the world, the harm done by the good is the most harmful harm." – Zarathustra

Some Notes on Heidegger's Question Concerning Technology (Enframing, Standing Reserve and Virtual Technologies)

Martin Heidegger was concerned about the status of the human amidst modern technology. Tied to the changing status of the human is his assertion (and a major theme of Cybject) that modern technology displaces the "**wordliness**" of the world and puts a **human-world** in its place.

Heidegger uses the term "enframing" to explain the way humans, as users of modern technology, have come to relate to (and literally "frame") the world. To demonstrate the characteristics of this modern technological "enframing" of the world he contrasts a **windmill** with a modern **hydroelectric power plant**. In describing how the windmill differs from the type of "revealing" that characterizes modern technology, he explains that the "old windmill's…sails do indeed turn in the wind; [but are] … left entirely to the wind's blowing. …the windmill does not unlock energy from the air currents in order to store it".

In describing how the **windmill** differs from the type of revealing that characterizes modern technology, Heidegger explains: "But [do the the properties of contemporary technologies] not hold true for the old windmill as well? No. Its sails do indeed turn in the wind; they are left entirely to the wind's blowing. But the **windmill** does not unlock energy from the air currents in order to store it." With the windmill, the wind turns the turbines, the wind-energy instantaneously powers the turbines. At no point is the wind's energy manipulated or stored up as a different kind of energy. The **windmill** only transfers motion, it "reveals" wind energy, but does not commandeer nature's energy or store it for future use (Mitcham).

Likewise, in The Question Concerning Technology Heidegger comments that:

> The **hydroelectric plant** is set into the current of the Rhine. It sets the Rhine to supplying its hydraulic pressure, which then sets the turbines turning. This turning sets those machines in motion whose thrust sets going the electric current for which the long-distance power station and its network of cables are set up to dispatch electricity. In the context of the interlocking processes pertaining to the orderly disposition of electrical energy, even the Rhine itself appears as
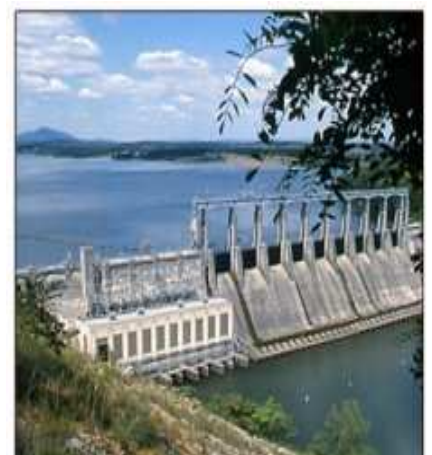
something at our command. The **hydroelectric plant** is not built into the Rhine River as was the **old wooden bridge** that joined bank with bank for hundreds of years. Rather the river is dammed up into the power plant. What the river is now, namely, a water power supplier, derives from out of the essence of the power station.

The **old wooden bridge**, in his argument, preserves the Rhine's intrinsic value: the river retains its own value, we simply cross over it. "The bridge", Heidegger writes "lets the stream run its course." The power station, on the other hand, transforms the Rhine into a very different object and its value becomes a human value. Even from the vantage of an observer: staring out at the **bridge** one sees the river running beneath it, its flow unobstructed, unimpaired by the **bridge** that stands across it. The **bridge** does not direct the flow of the water. On the other hand, an observer of a hydroelectric power station built into the Rhine witnesses a different sort of river, one whose flow is obstructed, impaired, and directed by the power station.

In contrast to a **windmill** or a **wooden bridge** that joins one bank of the Rhine with the other, a **hydroelectric plant** is set in the current of the river. The river itself, when impacted by the hydroelectric plant, appears under the command of human beings. The **hydroelectric plant** challenges the energies of the Rhine, stores them in a non-sensuous abstract form whose value is discernible by, and exclusively for, the will of human beings. This, in turn, gives humans a different view of the Rhine. This "challenging-forth", rather than "bringing-forth", substantiates Heidegger's claim that the world has been turned into "standing-reserve" as a result of modern technology. The challenging, according to Heidegger, "…happens in that the energy concealed in nature is unlocked, what is unlocked is transformed, what is transformed is stored up, what is stored up is, in turn, distributed, and what is distributed is *switched about everanew*. **Unlocking, transforming, storing, distributing, and switching about are ways of revealing** . *But the revealing never simply comes to an end.*"

If we consider the way we function with our technologies and our economy, Heidegger's words will certainly strike a chord. In describing "the most advanced state of this [global information] economy", Manuel Castells writes that "the products of the new information technology industries are information processing devices or information processing itself'". Steven Shaviro, drawing on Castells, David Harvey and others writes of the re-organization of capital that has occurred over the last forty years: "Production is subordinated to circulation, instead of the reverse. Money, the universal equivalent, has become increasingly virtual (unmoored by any referent) over the past half century, and everything is decentered or unmoored in its wake". Virtual technologies thrive in this Heideggerian environment of 'switching-about'.

The virtual world of Second Life, where users – creating their online personae – have no anchoring point, no 'gold-standard' to refer their identities back to, is paradigmatic of this sensibility of being 'switched about ever anew'. While in Second Life, I often ask users whether they feel there is a typical Second Life resident body. Much of the time I am told that the fact that there is no typical Second Life body is one of the reasons the user was drawn to the virtual world in the first place. While many users do in fact have bodies that resemble their own they do not feel a sense of authenticity and normalcy. Their avatar-bodies are always potentially – or virtually – a canvas for something other. The notion of an anchoring, or 'normal', SL body is not

one that most users I have encountered value or find intelligible. In fact, all the objects in Second Life, constructed of geometric prims , have no inherent value (and processes) of their own apart from the value that human users bestow upon them.

One of the strangest aspects of Second Life for me personally is the trees. In real life I often go for walks. One of the reasons I walk is to see the trees. I resent walking where there are no trees. But the reason is not one you would expect to hear: *Despite the fact that their positions are carefully chosen, trees in large metropolitan cities are one of the last of the things that remind us – on a day to day basis – that there are aspects of the world outside of our control*. A tree's branches, which grow unpredictably each season, are, if you look with the right eyes, grotesque impositions against the coldly calculated and computer modeled condominiums that seem to be being pulled right out of the ground by construction cranes. You might even be humbled by a tree's wily branches if you pay attention. You might spend hours dwelling on why a tree's branches grew in the manner that they did and come to no conclusions. Now, in Second Life, even the trees are coded. One knows that their branches grow within certain parameters, parameters coded at a lab, likely run by libertarians in California. There is, from a Heideggerian point of view, nowhere to dwell in Second Life – even if we wanted to. We are truly faced with, although I will not go as far as to say that we are *in* (due to the question of the embodiment of the user), the realm of standing-reserve.

Here is – if we were to move to the Black Forest and tend to a windmill for the rest of our lives and wholly side with him, truly a vision of Heidegger's nightmare world, where even the very idea of thinking, let alone the possibility of revealing as techne, is impossible. We know in advance the 'material cause' of all things, for all things are code, and so the ontology of all things lies in human defined mathematics and geometry. As Ian Thompson explains: "Within our current technological constellation of intelligibility, [o]nly what is calculable in advance counts as being. This technological understanding of being produces a calculative thinking which quantifies all qualitative relations, reducing all entities to bivalent, programmable information, digitized data, which increasingly enters into what Baudrillard calls a state of pure circulation…" There is nothing to bring-forth, only things to challenge-forth. There is nothing poetic, no poesis, only the violence of standing-reserve.

Any number of Second Life prims that initially were sculpted as a cabin in the Black Forest can be later re-sculpted as a towering sky-scraper. And how does one do this? How does one 'reveal' in this manner? By "switching about": that is, transforming the virtual Black Forest cabin without the ability to think of its thinghood or its individuality, by storing the prims that constituted it in our inventory, by distributing them in some new configuration as a virtual sky-scraper. In fact, one knows in advance that a certain portion of land in Second Life can only hold a certain number of prims. One thinks wholly in code. All things are transferable, eternally potential, offering the maximum possible use, in this Heideggarian dystopia.
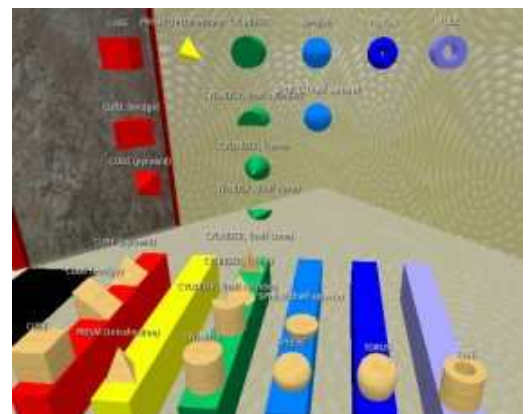
Thompson continues: "As this historical transformation of beings into resources becomes more pervasive, it increasingly eludes our critical gaze; indeed, we come to treat even ourselves in the terms underlying our technological refashioning of the world: no longer as conscious subjects in an objective world but merely as resources to be optimized, ordered, and enhanced with

maximal efficiency (whether cosmetically, psychopharmacologically, genetically, or even cybernetically)". If 'all things' are transferable, offering the maximum possible use, so are the avatar-bodies who call Second Life their home.

If modern technology has, "changed our taste or sense of the world", it has also changed our taste or sense of the body, what it means to be a 'self' and so what it means to be a 'subject'. Mark Wrathall explains:

When someone disposed to the world in the Christian way encounters human beings, she will see them as children of God, and judge them as good or bad to the degree that they submit themselves to God's will. In the Middle Ages, the main categories of understanding humans were 'saints' and 'sinners'. When someone disposed to the world in a technological way encounters human beings, she sees human resources. The good human is the one most flexibly able to deal with shifts in the marketplace, pluralities of cultures, changes in normal terms, etc. In their adaptability, human beings in the technological age share a 'style of being' with everything else, because everything is now valued in terms of its flexibility and efficiency.

Wrathall's point concerns the way the human orients itself in relation to modern technology, whose essence is the enframing where the world appears as standing-reserve. He draws a distinction between the way human beings were encountered in the Middle Ages from the way they are encountered in the contemporary technological world. In the Middle Ages, everything had a place in a divine hierarchy. In the contemporary technological world things lose their place and become valued for their flexibility and malleability.

~ by dccohen on March 11, 2010.

Posted in Notes on Heidegger's Question Concerning Technology
Tags: Continental Philosophy, Cybject, Heidegger, philosophy, Philosophy of Technology, Second Life, Virtual Worlds

2 Responses to "Some Notes on Heidegger's Question Concerning Technology (Enframing, Standing Reserve and Virtual Technologies)"

1. [...] The virtual world of Second Life, where users – creating their online personae – have no anchori… [...]

   Some Notes on Heidegger's Question Concerning Technology … | Portal site of Second Life and metaverse"MetaLog-meta log" said this on March 12, 2010 at 6:22 am | Reply

2. [...] Technology externalizes short, long, or very long term trends. A given tool or technique is our current material or organizational expression of those trends. It is only intelligible against the horizon of its specific, historically contingent, horizon; but it is not explicable simply in relation to that horizon… It has a long historical backstory. The virtual technologies we use today are intelligible only against the demands of our historical predicament. They would have been unintelligible against the religious-social-cultural horizon of the Middle Ages. But,

as Heidegger points out, the Gestell exists alongside long term historical changes that the Subject and the Object (World) have undergone. Virtual technologies are our current expression of these changes that the Subject and Object (World)… [...]

What's Behind our Technologies? « Cybject said this on January 23, 2011 at 6:37 pm | Reply