

HELPING HANDS

DRAFT: this first version is an overview of the ideas I intend to set out in the essay. It is far from being a finished text, both on the front of quantity and quality. Most parts need more elaboration.

As technology advances, it reverses the characteristics of every situation again and again. The age of automation is going to be the age of 'do it yourself'.

(Marshall McLuhan, 1968)

I guess the most plausible thing to think would be: McLuhan was right. Automation, computerized in particular, has enabled (or forced) us to be less dependent on other individuals to get certain things done, such as banking, mailing, shopping,... We all have our personal assistants in our pockets and on our desks, but should we settle with the belief that the act of giving a set of instructions to a system that finishes the rest of the job is really increasing our level of independence? Are we really 'doing things ourselves'? In this essay, I will try to formulate a critique on the general assumption that modern technology is the helping hand of man, while in fact I think the tables are turning, or at least the conditions have changed. Did we reach or cross a certain threshold or tipping point in the development and use of our technologies? In my attempt to clarify this, I will mainly draw on the ideas of Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian philosopher whose work is viewed as one of the cornerstones of media theory, and the writings of Lieven De Caeter, particularly his view on capsularity and the importance of technology in this process. The relationship and distinction between man and tool, where the latter is supposed to be subordinate to and at the service of the first, is maybe not as clear-cut as generally presumed. As a conclusion to this research, and departing from my personal practice, I will elaborate on the idea that there is still value in the use of 'obsolete' media today for reasons I will clarify later in the text.

In the spirit of McLuhan's theories, one could say that every extension of man – his general idea of what a medium is – results at the same time in an amputation or restriction of some kind. The automobile would be the classic example: the car allows us to travel, just as our feet and legs do, only faster and with less physical effort. The amputations resulting from this would include loss of muscle strength, weakening of walking skills, et cetera. As the medium evolves, it takes over the abilities from the organ, sense or function it originally meant to intensify, making us completely dependent on the extension itself. This is nothing new, in fact, it is as old as the existence of man. From the invention of stone tools to cut, pound

or dig to the space satellites we use to navigate, communicate, observe,... technology has always been an interplay between amplification and diminution.

All media enhance speed in some sort of way: traveling, communication, information, commerce, etc. The speed of movement and the increase of flows of information induced by the rise of technological media, particularly the last decades, makes that the human species, not exactly the toughest of beings, has to build in protections. Lieven De Cauter, a Belgian philosopher, art historian, writer and activist who teaches Cultural Philosophy in Leuven, Brussels, and Rotterdam, considers most, if not all, media – and therefore our extensions – as capsules or as technologies that have capsular counterparts [REF1 - De Cauter]. They could be defined as artificial occlusions that protect us from an outer environment. A clear example would be a house that protects us from the outside, or even more obvious, a space capsule that makes it possible to survive and travel in a vacuum. Again, this concept of 'shells' is as old as our existence or the existence of culture. We are surrounded and enclosed by our extensions, anytime and anywhere. According to De Cauter, culture as a whole could be considered the capsule of man [REF2 - De Cauter]. This aligns with McLuhan's theory that all media or technologies, languages as much as weaponry, create new environments or habitats, which become the milieu for new species or technologies [REF3 - McLuhan].

Next to building physical capsules as extensions of the body, there's also the equivalent of the mind: virtual capsules. Much of our recent technology could be described in terms of virtual capsules, but again, and I seem to be caught in a feedback loop here, this is an ancient concept. When watched, any type of screen for instance creates a closed-off mental environment, a virtual space, that is detached from the actual space one is physically occupying at that moment. Although it is the content shown on the screen and one's personal relation to it that determines the level of detachment, it is the screen that makes it possible to create the split between the virtual and the real. Film screens, television sets or computer monitors are the obvious examples that come to mind, but books, billboards or even ordinary windows could be regarded as screens that have the ability to create a temporary self-contained mental space, a rupture between the actual and the imagined. Information technology, our world is immersed by it, relies on and cultivates this constant creation of virtual spaces.

So if this process of equipping and encapsulating ourselves with all kinds of extensions is historically inherent to the evolution of man, what's the point of questioning the ethics of technology today? Why should we think critical about this process since it is has always been part of what we are? I think the answer to that question is to be found in the paradoxical disabling or numbing effect each extension produces, and accordingly, the impact of the speed and multitude with which we develop new and renewed media on this 'paralysing' effect. To cope with the implications and effects of media, we have to protect ourselves against the shocks or stimuli they entail. McLuhan refers to this as the 'Narcissus narcosis':

[...] All media, from the phonetic alphabet to the computer, are extensions of man that cause deep and lasting changes in him and transform his environment. Such an extension is an intensification, an amplification of an organ, sense or function, and whenever it takes place, the central nervous system appears to institute a self-protective numbing of the affected area, insulating and anesthetizing it from conscious awareness of what's happening to it. It's a process rather like that which occurs to the body under shock or stress conditions, or to the mind in line with the Freudian concept of repression. I call this peculiar form of self-hypnosis Narcissus narcosis.

[REF 4 - Playboy article with McLuhan]

While a plane enables us to travel at high speeds, we transfer the 'hostility' of the outer environment – being the air here – onto the tool itself. We experience mobility in a highly immobile state. We literally go fast sitting down. De Cauter speaks of 'sedentary nomadism' [REF4 - De Cauter]. In this respect, capsules can be seen as environments of simulation and exclusion. They create an artificial climate which reduces the communication with the 'outside' to a bare minimum, if not completely eliminating it, but at the same time mimic conditions that are part of this outer environment. A typical example would be the television. It represents public sphere while abolishing it at the same time, on a physical as well as a mental level. It is external space simulated within [REF5 - De Cauter]. (---> needs to be worked out more)

It is perhaps in this 'exclusionary' effect of media that we have reached or crossed a certain threshold. To put it very simple: my impression is that we are starting to 'lose touch' with the capsules we build. While the concept of 'extensions' implies the presence of a certain attachment – physical or not –, a point of reference to or a connection with the sense, organ or function it was meant to extend, amplify, improve, aid,... this link seems to fade gradually with the excessive growth of media. Extensions are extended by new extensions, capsules nested within capsules. It is as if we are at the centre of a matryoshka doll to which layers are continuously being added. The more layers, the bigger the distance between the smallest and the largest piece, respectively man and his newest, capsular, technologies.

Still to cover from here:

- opaqueness of technology (refer to previous essay)
- generic aspect (the share of capitalism)
- Use of 'old' media:
 - not for nostalgic reasons,
 - attempt to reestablish and experience the connection with the tools we use (e.g. plotting - writing, drawing, using pencils, markers, ...)
 - leaving space for experiment (as a reaction to generic outcomes)
 - technology as the extension of man instead of the other way around: man as an extension of digital technology: flipping switches from 1 to 0.

Bibliography

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