Chapter 1:
Desire Machines

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Introduction

The mythology of communication technology as the mechanism capable of ultimately transcending all that is humanly unattainable has lingered around since dawn the of Western civilization. In the Book of Imaginary Media, Eric Kluitenberg (2006) illuminates the myth that machines are able to magically relieve the trappings of interpersonal connections, promising to cross the divide of living to the dead, to transcend the confines of time, to abolish physical/emotion distance and even to reach the divine. Inevitably, failure to fulfill these unachievable promises, both contemporary and historic, imagined and realized media become *compensatory machines*, of which embody and become the sites where irrational desires are projected (Kluitenberg, 2006, p.8). Moreover, the end result of the embodied compensation machine is ultimately produced by the mechanism of desire. In Anti-Oedipus : Capitalism and Schizophrenia (1972), Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's notion of desiring-production states that desire is a productive force producing reality, in itself "a machine, and the object of desire is another machine connected to it" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972, p.28), simultaneously "the set of passive syntheses that engineers partial objects, flows and bodies, and that function as units of production" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972, p.28). Before the Desire Machine flows into the realm of the instrument, desire as production is primacy. In an attempt to understand the set of relationships between human endeavors and its technological development, the Desire Machine as the productive impetus underlying compensation machines will be reflected specifically through its aspiration to connect to other dimensions.

The magical power of technology

The notion that technology is a compensation machine because it makes up for the inherent flaws and deficiencies of human communication, is speculated by Kluitenberg (2006). But what exactly are these machines compensating for? The very existence of the myth that technology holds the power to actualize our insatiable desire is precisely because we dream of higher knowledge, progress, amplification of human virtue just as much as dampening out weakness in order to perfect ourselves and our societies. In the muddy waters between the world of desire and the illusion of technology, perhaps out of desperation, the self-fulfilling prophecy of magic is born and imbued onto what we create. This magic, in itself a device permeating to communication technologies trick us into believing its ability to transform human relationships by connecting us to other worlds, transcending the confines of earthly limitations. Think of the amount of times the world thought a revolution would be triggered by new technologies. The hype of the techno-utopian dream of radicalizing and changing society has been a topic of discussion where an abundance of online and offline events are debated over. Incessantly reincarnating, it flows from history to the advents of media such as the clock, telephone, internet, to the democratizing influence of blogs and more recently heated discussions on the revolutionary potential of online social platforms like facebook and twitter (Gladwell, Oct 4, 2010; Jenkins, Oct 6, 2010).

To understand the nature of this myth, we must journey back into history and trace the beginnings of our relationship with information technology. Where did the myth come from? Could it be that desire cloaked itself as magic, producing the myth that transcendence is attainable? Let us commence with the invention of writing. In Techgnosis (1999), Davis retells Socrates's tale of Theus (Thoth), the Egyptian god of magic in Plato's Phaedrus written around the year of 370 BC. One day Theus approaches King Thamus offering him the new *techne* of writing in the hopes that the benefits of his new invention would not only augment memory and wit, but amplify the wisdom of the Egyptian people (Davis, 1999, p. 29). In considering the acceptance of this gift, King Thamus eventually declines fearing that writing would create forgetfulness due to the reliance on external letters. Thamus speculates that Theus's discovery "is an aid not to memory but to reminiscence and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth" (Plato's Phaedrus). It's not hard to see why writing has long been appraised to be one of the most magical of transformative technologies, as famously noted by Walter J. Ong in his book Orality and Literacy: "More than any single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness" (quoted in Davis, 1999, p.30). This technology keeps a dead person's words alive, untouched by the forces of nature, preserved in the realm of a mysterious timeless dimension - it's no

wonder that people described it as magic. The fact that Thamus rejects Theus's gift demonstrates his distinct recognition of not only the illusion of transcendence but also that the nature of desire lies in its unattainability. In a sense this validates the 'unimagined' latent power antecedent to technologies facade. Perhaps we can attribute Plato in telling the legend of King Thamus, as one of the first men who apprehended the epic tragedy of human inadequacy, foreseeing the compensatory role of technology. It is not an epic tragedy because humans lack skill and innovation but rather the frustration and the mentality of 'never-good-enough' that we recurringly suffer from. Prior to the catalytic influence of writing on Western thought, regardless of debasement or enhancement, it is the machine of imagination, fear and desire lurking before the actualization of technology that is perhaps the most transformative. The restructuring effect of communication media on our consciousness is incontestable, but will nevertheless inescapably fall short of our desires. It is because of the pre-programmed shortcoming that the myth prevails, and precisely the reason that technology will remain to some degree, a disillusion.

Desire Machines as both connecting and separating flows

Deleuze and Guattari's (1972) theory of desiring production rejects the traditional Platonic logic of desire as a lack, lack of an object - lack of the real object (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972, p.26), instead defines it as real, productive, producing reality. They elucidate in detail that the problem of the old paradigm lies in the fact that one must decide between production and acquisition. Traditionally forces of desire are placed on the side of acquisition, causing desire to acquire something that it lacks. On the 'production' side of this model, in referencing Kant, the notion of desire belongs to "the faculty of being" (quoted in Deleuze and Guattari, 1972, p.27), in which its representations cause reality through its objects of representations. Therefore, desire, as everything everywhere, is not only real but a machine driving other machines in which the end result is the production of reality. This will be reflected in the following case studies. Desire is a production of production, at the same time it perpetually mediates and links between continuous flows which are fragmentary and

fragmented (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972, p.6). It is in this in-between state, the third space or rather 1.5 space, that desire continuously mediates. Allow me to digress a little - in science there exist a theory called the M-theory, the M standing for magic, mystery, madness and/or membrane (BBC documentary, Parallel universes, 2010). In short, it suggests that universes are contained by membranes consisting of numerous strings, thus the only thing separating these multiverses are its membranes. Metaphorically speaking, if eroticism is the anticipation of desire, then desire *is* the membrane between flows of the familiar and flows of the ungraspable. The notion that desire is a retreating horizon is eloquently observed by Spanish philosopher George Santayana: "A fanatic is one who redoubles his effort when he has forgotten his aim" (C. Jones, Wikipedia). This quote was also upheld by Chuck Jones, one of the artists behind the Road Runner and many other Looney Tunes cartoon characters, in the making of Road Runner.

Desire's reality is therefore both a productive machine that *connects* flows, and concurrently a membrane which *separates* flows. This understanding of desire is not a contradiction, but perhaps a paradoxical symbiotic relationship between its different properties. Desire Machines have many facets and are deeply rooted in biological, psychological, technological and experiential pulses. These too are machines connected, tailing behind the Desire Machines. As Desire Machines are inherently ambiguous, irrational and cloudy, they are not always easily synchronized nor stable. The ensuing case studies reveal desire as simultaneously coupling insofar as maintaining the divide of streams of the earthly to that of the heavenly, connecting the course of living to the dead, flows of mortality to immortality and the trickle of biology to technology. In other words, the Desire Machine lusts for the matchmaking of other dimensions, parallel worlds, but in doing so also mediates the disconnection by redoubling itself.

Case study 1

The desire to connect the temporal nature of earthly actions to the heavenly divine is exemplified in the mechanical clocks of the 13th century Europe. Kluitenberg (2006, p.158) reminds us that around this time the role of the mechanical clocks shifted from regulating human affairs to signaling the seven canonical hours of the day to call for collective prayer. This transition was greatly influenced by German Catholic mystic Heinrich Suso, who was as convinced as he was devout, that by synchronizing ordinary clockwork he could implement his desire to resolve the antithesis between man and God, by tuning humanity to God's rhythm. Thus through the spiritual vision of Suso's agency, the Western world trusted that the clock was the holy mediator that unified the seemingly erratic life of ordinary earthly actions to the heavenly movements of divine clockwork.

Case study 2

The first practical telephone, believed to be invented by Alexander G. Bell's (1847-1922), was developed as a "machine with a transmitter and receiver that would send sounds telegraphically to help deaf people hear" (Black, 1997, p.18). We can surmise that as a teacher of the deaf, not to mention that both his mother and wife were also deaf, Bell's incentives were to find a way to speak to the unspeakable. Lurking in his shadow however, Thomas Watson, Bell's assistant, was the electrical hacker who actually built most of the early devices (Davis, 1999, p.81). According to Davis, Watson's practical knowledge was amalgamated with weird theories of the mysterious fluid of electricity and his own occult theories. "I was working with that occult force, electricity, and here was a possible chance to make some discoveries. I felt sure spirits could not scare an electrician and they might be of use to him in his work" (Davis, 1999, p.81). It may be interesting to draw attention to Watson's reference of electricity as that 'occult force', and the fact that he was not in doubt of the existence of spirits, but rather the usefulness of the spirits. It is disputable whether or not Watson was a loony, nonetheless the fact of the matter is as noted in Watsons' diary, his 'disembodied spirits' theory, "leaked into his researches with Bell" (Davis, 1999, p.81). To Watson, electricity was in itself a para-

normal power so we cannot say that is a metaphorical comparison as such, however what we can conclude is that Watson's belief in electricity as a magical force instrumentalised the discovery of the telephone. What's fascinating is how the metaphorical understanding of electricity as possessing spiritual energy, manifested into telephonic existence - Watsons' and Bells' Desire Machine produced the reality of their invention. The birth of the telephone, as it seems was conceived not only as a machine to defy the cruel laws of nature but a mystical medium to connect to unknown territories beyond rational life. Nonetheless despite their efforts, the insatiability of desire's trajectory always and only remains on-the-brink of…

Immortalizing Bell's and Watson's legacy, the telephone in a sense remains the ultimate animist technology. Admittedly, since the 17th century the electromagnetic imaginary has flowed into the realm of religion, medicine, technology and many 'scientific' men intertwined mystical and spiritualist imaginations with rational science. Kluitenberg holds that though the eminent Thomas Edisons' attraction to the occult and supernatural lasted through his life (Kluitenberg, 2006, p.167), it wasn't until the end of his life however, when confronted with the idea of death, that he started working on 'psychic telephones' - communication devices supposedly allowing contact with the dead. Though much of the research remains unrecoverable, this did help connect him to the likes of the international Electronic Voice Phenomena (EVP) movement. Although his psychic devices were never actualized, this clearly demonstrates how the productiveness of Edisons' desire to permeate the membrane between life and death propelled the Desire Machines of the EVP movement and a succession of modern interests (e.g. Instrumental Trans-Communication ITC, AA-EVP). Here we see the lineage of the Desire Machines' contagiousness spreading like a virus, affecting the next subject in line.

Case study 3

The desire for a hybrid symbiosis of biology and technology is illustrated by postevolutionary performance artist Stelarc, best known for attempting to extend the body's capabilities through technology since the 1960's. For

Stelarc, he perceives the body as becoming obsolete in todays' information age due to the physiological limitations and biological inadequacies (Stelarc, 1991; Virilo, 1995). According to the artist, there needs to be a radical redesigning of the body to eliminate many of its redundant systems and malfunctioning organs (Stelarc, 1991, p. 592), to 'hollow out' the body so that it can ultimately achieve immortality. In his works (e.g. Third Hand, Exoskeleton, Ear on Arm), the act of extending his physical membrane which bounds him, can be interpreted as the desire to stretch his metaphysical membrane in an attempt to redefine what it means to be human. In a sense he treats the body with a Cartesian approach. By dissociating from his body, this act allows him to objectify and transcend the somatic. In The Art of the Motor (1995), Paul Virilio goes to great lengths to criticize Stelarc of transforming the body into primary material, potentially making a lab rat out of us. Additionally condemns the *endo*colonization of biosphere in saying that his exotic desire to extend our body is merely an alibi for the technical invasion (Virilio, 1995, p.112). On the other side, rather than interpreting Stelarcs' notion of obsolescence as proclamations of the death of the body, Brian Massumi's view is that "the body's obsolescence is the condition of change. Its vitality is in obsolescence" (quoted in Fernandez, 2002, p.120). Ethical judgements aside, what more can we say about the Desire Machine of this artist? What are his motivations behind these Hybrid Human Machine Systems? Can we say that he assumes humans are perhaps intimidated or jealous of the precision, speed, and power of technology that surrounds us?

Maybe the understanding of Allucquere Rosanne Stone's notion of *cyborg envy* in virtual communities could be of use (Stone, 1991, p.450). The work, 'Third Hand' certainly upholds the desire to cross the human/machine boundary, not only to penetrate and be enveloped by it, but to physically wear it. Recalling Stone, his quest to integrate human and machine underlines his intense desire for the promise of potential reorganization, or as Stone puts it, 'refigured embodiment'. Stelarc's desire for transcendence through technology coupled with teleological concepts are instrumentalised to prove the validity of the technological restructuring of the body. His recent work, "Ear on Arm" (2003-2006), surely exemplifies

how his desire for *endo*colonization has produced it's desired reality. With the extra ear - a soft prothesis on his arm - the permanent modification of the body's architecture is complete. Working to penetrate this metaphorical and biological membrane spanning over 30 years, this visionary artist has successfully augmented his obsolete body and is working on enabling "a wireless connection to the Internet, making the ear a remote listening device for people in other places" (Stelarcs' website). In this sense, technology no longer becomes an external extension of the body but the other way around - the body becomes an instrument of the micro-miniaturization of technology. The object of Stelarcs' desire - the postevolutionary body, existed cognitively in the realm of the imaginary until the desire literally implanted it into existence. The Desire Machine pierced through itself, the membrane, the skin, the interface, only to be confronted with yet another Desire Machine. The question of 'what's next?' begs to be answered. Stelarcs' mission to overshadow physiological constraints, will probably continue to push on, regardless of potential failure. However, as far as I can see, the future obstacles that may hinder the productiveness of his Desire Machine are paradoxically the very dimensions he has been trying to overcome; namely technological possibility and the eternal struggle with mortality. At the age of 64, how many more bodily modifications can be subjected to his deteriorating body on the account of physiological tolerance? To re-phrase, can the current technology support what he desires within his life time? Nineteen years ago, on the topic of death he writes "[death] is an outmoded evolutionary strategy" (Stelarc, 1991, p.593). His technological determinism, evokes the same eeriness of 'the singularity' prophesied by Ray Kurzweil and the likes of Kevin Kelly.

Outroduction
The unstoppable Desire Machine continuously motors on into the future. What other teleological narratives of human and technological evolution shall arise? Echoing the flow of Desire Machines, this last part will not prematurely end for the sake of a formal conclusion as such, but rather proceed in following the evolution of Desire Machines in its yearning for the approach of the 'technological singularity', in itself a metaphorical

membrane where the other side is inconceivably anticipated.

      Kevin Kellys' talk at TED in 2007 is shrouded with religious liturgy prophesying the connection of all machines into the 'One Machine'. It's not hard to see the parallels of the technological totalitarianism of "There is only one machine" to the religious monotheistic chants of "There is only one God". His personal blog reveals that he is indeed, a devout Christian. Kelly predicts that in 2040 the web will exceed humanity in processing power, and this evidently has three consequences; embodiment, restructuring and co-dependency. Ring a bell to you? To me, it sounds remarkably like what Stelarcs' œuvre is all about - in fact there are many more similarities. However the crucial difference is unlike Stelarcs' work, which is predominately centered in an artistic context, not to mention objectifying only himself, Kelly's public is rather grand - much grander, namely, *everything* in the world. The cloud, The one, The semantic web, Artificial Intelligence, whatever you call it - he desires total immersion and total transparency. In the Medieval Europe Heinrich Suso constructed a world closer to God in which he desired. Similar to Suso, Kelly is attempting to connect human evolution with technological evolution by ushering us to embrace the 'cosmic force' that he calls technology. "Life means hacking the game of survival, evolution is a way to extend that game by changing the rules of the game. And what technology is really about, is better ways to evolve. That's what we call the infinite game" (Kelly, 2005). And yet again, the seduction of transcendence enraptures us...

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