

San Francisco Cinematheque presents

# Questions Concerning Technology

Kerry Laitala In Person; Gibbs Chapman, Yin-Ju Chen, James T. Hong Via Web

Sunday, May 14, 2006 — Yerba Buena Center for the Arts — 7:30 pm

The works in tonight's program examine, use, and imagine technology in provocative ways. Collectively they ask not only how do—or might—technologies affect us, but how they determine our images and imaginings of the world. From fairgrounds to the Zuse strip, from push buttons to cars, video games, reproductive and waste technologies, the works explore our cyborg nature. Created using either hand-processed film, cgi, appropriated tv, or plain old cameras, and made for the big screen or the i-pod, works include Kerry Laitala's *Orbit*, Caspar Stracke's *Zuse Strip*, Gibbs Chapman's *Push Button: A History of Idleness & Ignorance*, James T. Hong's *The Coldest War Part I*, Scott Stark's *Driven*, Pawel Wojtasik's *Dark Sun Squeeze*, and finally, Yin-Ju Chen and James T. Hong's *Suprematist Kapital*. (Irina Leimbacher)

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The West's relationship to technology is often accused as the source of its current ecological crisis. There is little doubt that something has gone horribly awry with unprecedented extinctions and devastation that correlates almost exactly with a new relationship to technology in the industrial and modern eras. Further, contemporary media technologies seem implicated in new forms of brutal imperialism. (As Paul Virilio's points out, the technologies of warfare and cinema have become disturbingly interdependent, insofar as cinema is a means to wage war on a new front and that media technologies in both war and cinema could not have developed without each other). Some keep faith in technological development to solve these crises. Another temptation is neo-luddism. However, can the human be so easily separated from technology? Is it even clear what technology is? Where do I end and where does technology begin? How does technology influence what I see? In Heidegger's 1949 paper *The Question Concerning Technology* he suggests "we shall never experience our relationship to the essence of technology so long as we merely conceive and push forward the technological, put up with it, or evade it. Everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it." (287) The exploration of technological dystopia, such as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* or Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* are nothing new to film. Yet Heidegger offers a radically broader conception of technology. "The threat to humanity does not come in the first instance from the potentially lethal machines and apparatuses of technology. The actual threat has already afflicted humanity in its essence." (309) For Heidegger, humans are inseparable from technology in that technology is what makes us human. He claims that the *revealing* of the world, being, meaning and truth all belong to the realm of technology.

Heidegger's claim is that technology cannot be reduced to a mere material apparatus or objectifiable device. He shifts the focus on technology from the noun to the verb. Here the human is always already inextricably intertwined with the world, from the gestures of the body, to cave paintings, to inhabiting the experience of a video circuit. When the technological experience is only understood as the mechanical device, it is much harder to understand how experience, thought, the world, images and imaginings are determined and born from the technological experience. Further, reducing this experience to an objectifiable device is one aspect of the same posture that reduces life to a world, separable from the human, that is a resource for our consumption.

Similarly, Derrida shows how no firm division between the psyche and technology can be maintained. In *Achieve Fever* Derrida looks at Freud's recourse to a machine trope for consciousness in his 1925 paper, *A Note Upon the Mystic Writing Pad*. Throughout Freud's text there is a slippage from using technology as a metaphor (for instance, memory as a form of writing) to claiming that the mind is structured as a machine. For Derrida, this equivocation in Freud from analog to literal is no blunder. Rather, it is an acknowledgment that technology and consciousness are inseparably enmeshed. As Belinda Barnet puts it, "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."

It is only when technology is grasped as a necessary element in the creation of all meaning that we can fully come to terms with how deeply it inherently frames, creates, interferes, and structures our world. This further allows for an understanding of how these structures in media technologies, from CNN to I-pods, are implicated and usurped into repressive visual regimes yet at the same time provide endless possibilities for resistance. This is one of the contexts that make tonight's films and videos so important and places new urgency on their formal interrogation of visual technologies. (Lee Laskin)

**Orbit** (2006) by Kerry Laitala.; 16mm, color, sound, 10 minutes, print from artist

*Orbit* can be seen as a homage to an influential cinematic technology—Kodachrome—a transparency (slide) film with a unique processing technique that is lamentably nearing extinction. Kodachrome is noted for its vivid highly saturated colors and *Orbit* exploits this property in magnificent fashion.

**Zuse Strip** (2003) by Caspar Stracke; MiniDV, color, sound, 8 minutes, dv from Video Data Bank

“This work is a correspondence between two information fragments coming from different origins and meeting by accident. Cinema is transformed into a three-dimensional landscape utilizing data based on an archaeological misinterpretation. *Zuse Strip* is named after Konrad Zuse's second model, made in a series of the first digital computers. It used discarded 35mm movie film from the German UFA as a medium to read and write eight-bit binary code data with a hole-punch system. Lev Manovich wrote poetically about this encounter, declaring Zuse's punch hole film to be the birth of Digital Cinema in which the "iconic code" (film image) is overwritten by binary code (digital data). A second reading of this film strip was inspired by the work of John Chadwick, one of the two linguists who deciphered a script from Bronze-Age Greece known as "Linear B" [...] “The impact of the hole punch is imprinted directly into the film, changing its surface. I have exaggerated these impacts using digital animations, turning these holes into craters of varying sizes and depths. The crater landscape also affects the topography of the surrounding area. A virtual camera flies over this landscape of the image, into and out of the craters. [...] *Zuse Strip* addresses our ability to preserve cultural artifacts. Obsolescence is the repressed remains of innovation, and since the information of the past is encoded in defunct systems, how will it be possible to preserve the past?” (Caspar Stracke)

**Push Button: a History of Idleness & Ignorance** (2004) by Gibbs Chapman; 16mm, color, 16 minutes

“In the modern era, the combined elements of human innovation and dementia have led us into a new relationship with our time and energy, one in which the quest for a current *immediacy* or an ease of operation has created a culture of lethargy and ignorance of new proportion. *Push Button - a history of idleness and ignorance* is a film, setting out to describe the *journey from hunter/gatherer* to sloucher/slacker and the dangling carrot of "leisure" time. Additionally, the piece is a call to action, to crush the monstrous cancer known as advertising and the salivating hyenas of consumer-dollar extraction.” (Gibbs Chapman)

**Driven** (2005) by Scott Stark; MiniDV, color, sound, 10 minutes, dv from the artist

“I see each film/video project as a 'first film' with its own cinematic language, one that the viewer learns and engages with as the piece unfolds. This language is shaped by the particular mechanics of each medium, in the same way verbal language is shaped by the mechanics of the human mouth.” (Scott Stark)

“*Driven* attempts to blur the lines between video gaming and reality, finding in both a seductive resonance.” (Scott Stark)

**The Coldest War Part 1** (2006) by James T. Hong; MiniDV, color, sound, 8 minutes, dv from the artist

“*The Coldest War Part 1* reinterprets Chinese TV news' strategy of information dissemination as a literal movement of extraterrestrial insemination and the exploitation of technologies of reproduction and mating behavior in the United States. In this case communication technology itself isn't transparent, and as a medium, distorts as much as it communicates.” (James T. Hong)

The magnificent use of post-production software filters, effects and editing arrangements allow Hong to recycle broadcast news footage into a beautiful, critical and disturbing new configuration. Out of this re-contextualization emerges the vicious echoing pattern of racially inflected/infected foreign policy waged on the broadcast media front.

**Dark Sun Squeeze** (2003) by Pawel Wojtasik; MiniDV, color, sound, 10 minutes, dv from the artist

The tectonic flow of glimmering effervescent beauty vacillate into abject horror as “Dark Sun Squeeze” explores the conspicuously hidden realm of the offscourings of modern consumption and the industrial technologies relegated to processing it. Through exquisite close-ups, vivid textures, rich diegetic sound and sublime scatologies, “Dark Sun Squeeze” produces waves of wonder and nausea that reverberate as cultural critique.

**Suprematist Kapital** (2006) by Yin-Ju Chen and James T. Hong; color, sound, 5 minutes, dv from artists

According to MMEtrics, over 2 million Americans watch video once a month on their mobile devices and this medium is on the verge of taking off. *Suprematist Kapital* along with approximately 20 other films designed for mobile devices (such as iPods and cell phones) recently took part in the Pocket Cinema program at the San Francisco International Film Festival. This film offers an insightful and critical five-minute history of Western capitalism. An audio-visual synaesthesia set to an “unst” beat, marches through the unsettling and ultimately self-destructive “rise” of modern capitalism. As an iconographic exploration, this film implicates the symbolic order in the imperialism of greed. As a maverick experimental art film in the burgeoning genre of portable visual devices, this film sets the bar high.

• *unless otherwise noted, program notes by Cinematheque intern Lee Laskin* •

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