

# Technology as Fate: Affect and Epistemology in the Study of Film

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Awareness of the modes of existence of technical objects must be brought about through philosophical thought, which must fulfil a duty through this work analogous to the one it fulfilled for the abolition of slavery and the affirmation of the value of the human person.<sup>1</sup>

– Gilbert Simondon, 1958

Cinephilia, the affect that founded film studies, has now become an object of study in itself.<sup>2</sup> If Alfred North Whitehead is correct in arguing that the last thing a new discipline acquires are its foundations, the surge of interest in the history and practices of cinephilia can be seen as part of a broader effort to secure those foundations for film studies. Studies devoted to cinephilia align themselves with a variety of efforts to reconstruct the history (or histories) of film theory (or film theories) aimed at securing a pedigree for a field in a process of consolidation.<sup>3</sup> Taking my cue from recent advances in the study of cinephilia and contributing to that broader effort of securing the foundations of film studies, I want to focus on affect and epistemology in a wider sense. I want to argue that we should broaden the focus to include media alongside film, and to include negative affects such as anxiety and phobia alongside the generally positive affect – even though it remains an eternally unfulfilled desire – of cinephilia. As Jonathan Flatley shows in his book *Affective Mapping* through a series of close readings of key works from W.E.B. Dubois, Henry James and Andrei Platonov, the peculiarly modern affect of melancholia, rather than isolating the subject in depression, can offer a way to a re-mapping the subject's relationship with the world, and a way of re-engaging with that world.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* (1958), trans. Cecile Malaspina and John Rogove (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 15.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Antoine de Baecque, *La Cinéphilie: Invention d'un regard, histoire d'une culture, 1944-1968* (Paris: Fayard, 2003); Marijke De Valck and Malte Hagener, *Cinephilia: Movies, Love and Memory* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005); Christian Keathley, *Cinephilia and History, or The Wind in the Trees* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); and Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Goodbye Cinema, Hello Cinephilia: Film Culture in Transition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Apart from Francesco Casetti's work on film theory after 1945 I am of course referring here to the Permanent Seminar on Histories of Film Theories ([www.filmtheories.org](http://www.filmtheories.org)) and to the volumes published in the book series "Film Theory in Media History," which I co-edit for Amsterdam University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping. Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

Taking a cue from Flatley I propose that we should take seriously the negative affects pertaining to media and engage in an effort of affective mapping of the anxieties about the detrimental effects of media, which serve to legitimate and even to drive a considerable amount of research in the field of media studies. Further, we should expand our horizon even further and ask whether the failure to address the question of media in other fields of the humanities such as literary criticism, where a concern with questions of media could be reasonably expected, may be read as more than just an omission, but rather as the result of a repression.

The question of technology provides a particularly useful point of entry for an attempt to map the affects that affect the way media scholars frame their objects of knowledge. In philosophical discourses, in cultural criticism and in art over the course of the last two hundred years, technology has been treated as both the greatest promise and the greatest threat to humankind, eliciting affective attitudes that range from boundless optimism to abject depression to oblivion. Rather than defending either position, French philosopher Gilbert Simondon has argued that technological objects are part and parcel of the processes of individuation without which we cannot begin to conceive of the human nature that earlier philosophers and cultural critics took it upon themselves to defend against the intrusions of technology. Based on the insight that technical objects are not somehow alien to human existence, Simondon has argued that the task of philosophy of technology is to bridge the gap between culture and technology and to provide a cultural semantics of technical objects.

In that spirit, in what follows I would like to provide a preliminary sketch of a map of affects that can plausibly be said to affect, and have affected, the way in which film and media scholars frame their objects of inquiry and choose their methodologies. In particular the affective attitudes I would like to discuss include “media euphoria,” of which cinephilia is a prominent variety alongside anthropological theories of media as “extensions of man”; “media phobia,” which includes all varieties of anxieties about media and their detrimental effects, particularly on the intellectual and emotional development of children; and “media amnesia,” which covers all forms of the conspicuous absence of a sustained interest in media and media technology where such an interest would seem to be warranted. Whereas media euphoria and media phobia stand out as particularly salient affective attitudes, media amnesia requires a heuristics of suspicion, and the discussion will include approaches that have already developed such an heuristics, in particular the work of German media theorist Friedrich Kittler.

I propose to start drawing the contours of our affective map by looking at two images.

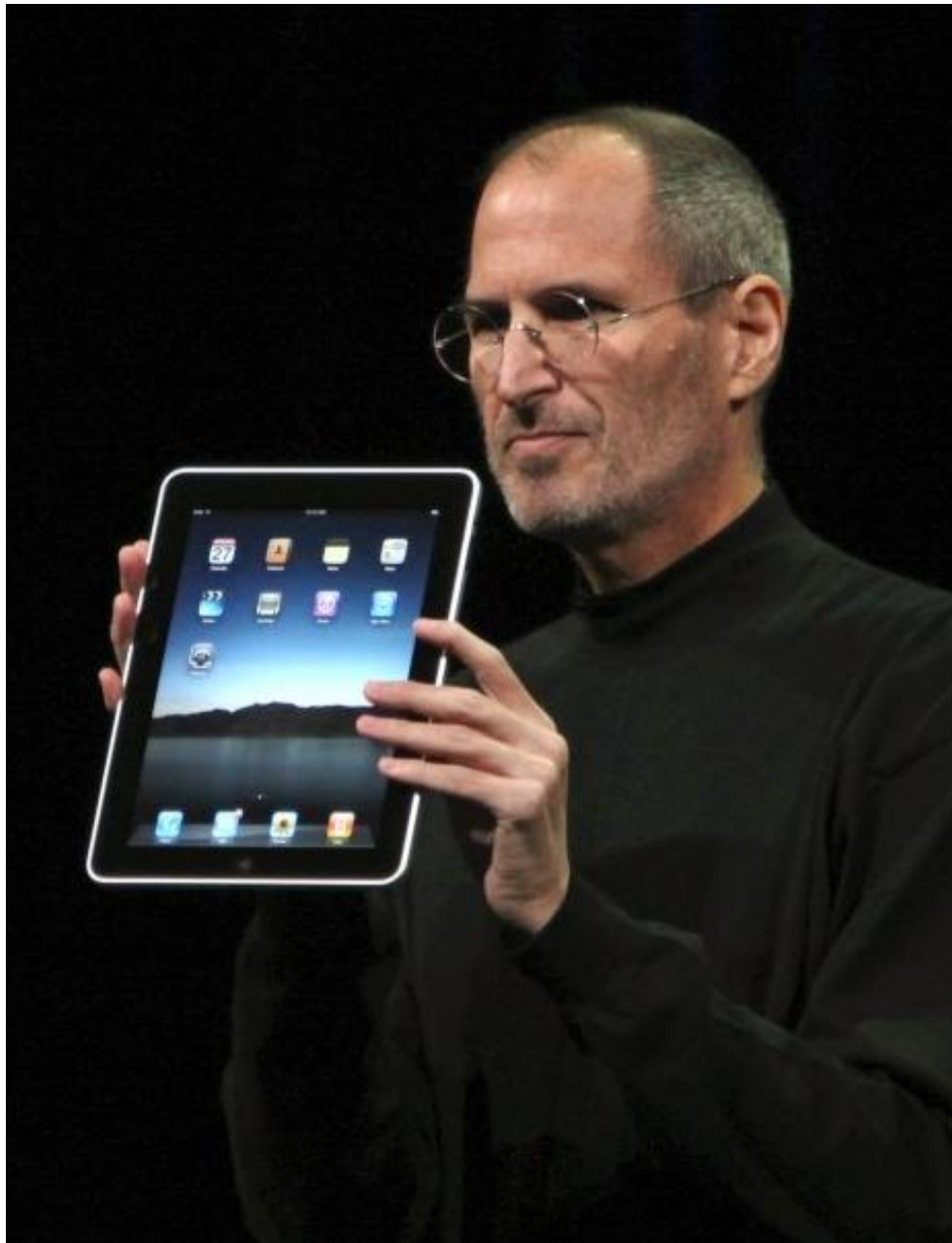


The first is a photograph, or rather a still or a screen shot, taken from one of Steve Jobs' last, and probably his most iconic, public appearances, the public presentation of the iPad on 27 January 2010. The event took place at the Yeba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, a museum and concert venue that celebrates the local and regional arts and hosts everything from rock concerts to tributes to modern composers like Elliot Carter. The Yeba Buena Center is Apple's preferred venue for product presentations. The events are staged at the Novellus Theater and broadcast live via the Internet and electronic media. For the events the Yeba Buena Center is decorated with the apple logo on a colourful background on the glass façade of the building, which is vaguely reminiscent of an Abstract Expressionist painting, but also suggestively positions the Silicon high tech company as part of the regional arts and crafts tradition for which the centre is normally a showcase.



As with all Apple presentations, the veil was lifted only at the event. In a brief speech supported by a stylish animated presentation in the background, Steve Jobs explained the concept of the iPad to a room full of press and adoring Apple acolytes. Profusely applauding Jobs' every joke, but particularly the presentation of the device itself, the iPad or tablet computer, the audience celebrated the announcement like a major event. Excitement, enthusiasm, but also gratefulness for the gift of advanced gadgetry could be sensed from the reactions of the audience.

Something instantly struck me about the presentation, and particularly about the shot or photograph below, which seemed to have been the official photograph released by the company itself to news outlets across the world (that is at least what a Google picture search suggests: this second picture is what you get, in multiple copies, if you search for "Steve Jobs iPad presentation January 2010").



What struck me about this image of Jobs and the tablet computer was the iconography: An ascetic looking man in simple garb (the now-famous and instantly iconic black sweater), holding an object that looks both like a book and a picture frame, and that shows a number of colour patches over a landscape at dawn, signifying the dawn of a new era in media technology and, by implication, in the lives of everyone witnessing the event. Images have afterlives, as Aby Warburg famously argued. Rather than through a succession of “influences” that bind one artist to another, and a succession of innovations in which one type of image replaces another in a continuous progress of the arts, the historicity of the image lies in a ghostly and symptomatic time, a time haunted by spectral memories that inform images and their uses in

more profound ways than the chain of successive influences. In Ghirlandaio's portraits, for instance, Warburg detected Etruscan and medieval survivals, placing them outside of what is supposedly their time, the time of the Renaissance as defined in the terms of Vasari.<sup>5</sup>

Along similar lines, we can detect in the image of Steve Jobs presenting the iPad the afterlife of a type of image that, at first, seems to have nothing to do with the visuals of a presentation of a high-tech gadget in San Francisco in 2010.



What haunts the image of Steve Jobs presenting the iPad is the iconography of St. Luke, the Evangelist. Both in the Orthodox and Catholic churches, i.e. in sacred paintings from Orthodox church pedestals and paintings in churches in Western Europe, St. Luke the Evangelist is usually represented with a book in his hand, whether carrying the book, presenting an open page to the viewer, or writing in a book, or he is seen in an image of the Virgin and the Child, and in many paintings there is a combination of both book and image, i.e. we see St. Luke holding a book which contains a “Madonna” painting, an image of the Virgin and the Child. One of the most famous examples combining both the book and the painting motif is the version by El Greco, born in Heraklion on Crete, later an apprentice with Titian in Venice, but most successful as a painter to the court of Philip II in Spain, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century.

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<sup>5</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, Vivian Rehberg and Boris Belay, “Artistic Survival: Panofsky vs. Warburg and the Exorcism of Impure Time,” *Common Knowledge* 9, no. 2, 273-85.



While the book motif identifies St. Luke as one of the Evangelists and the author of one of the canonical lives of Jesus in the New Testament, the image motif of the Virgin and the Child identifies him as the first Christian painter and the patron saint of artists. While St. Luke's activity as an artist is not recorded in the canonical texts, his "painting of the Virgin was mentioned in Greek texts as early as the sixth century and in the Latin West by the twelfth century."<sup>6</sup> In both the Eastern and the Western traditions, paintings of St. Luke with an image of the Virgin and the Child served not least to signal the legitimacy of painting as an art form. The importance of St. Luke as the patron saint of painters probably comes to the fore most prominently in a painting by Jan Gossaert from the seventeenth century, which shows St. Luke in the studio, kneeling over the painting and hard at work, an almost ostentatious display of the evangelist as artist.

Whether Steve Jobs or the event designers of the iPad presentation were aware that they were conjuring up the ghost of St. Luke the Evangelist is somewhat beside the point. Warburg's notion of the afterlife provides for ghostly presences of both the acknowledged and the unacknowledged kind, and considering the careful design of the Apple logo that adorned the building of the Yeba Buena Arts Center they probably knew what they were doing. Maybe it was the work of the designer of the iPad, the British-born industrial designer Jonathan Ive, recently voted the "most influential Briton residing abroad" by the Daily Mail, whose hiring by Apple in 1992 was voted the "sixth most influential event in Apple history" in a poll by *MacWorld* readers in 2009.

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<sup>6</sup> Clifton Olds, "Jan Gossaert's 'St. Luke Painting the Virgin': A Renaissance Artist's Cultural Literacy," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 24, no. 1, 89.

What matters is that the iconography of St. Luke the Evangelist seems to be perfectly suited to the occasion: the image ghosts that haunt the iPad presentation serve the purpose of the event. Steve Jobs has often been cast as the object of a cult-like admiration and even a Christ-like figure. But the iconography of the iPad presentation helps us to understand that the comparison of Jobs to Christ constitutes a category error. Rather, Jobs is indeed more like St. Luke the Evangelist, the man who brings the Gospel of salvation through Christ in the medium of writing and of pictures. Rather than the redeemer of humankind, St. Luke is a master engineer of the media technologies of salvation.

At least in iconographic terms, the iPad presentation carries more than a promise of a better life based on technological innovation, the kind of promise that we are familiar with from twentieth-century consumer product advertising. Rather, the Apple product presentation adds spirituality to the merely aspirational and speaks of salvation through knowledge or, more specifically, of salvation through a medium that provides access to knowledge. The enthusiasm that greeted Steve Jobs as he held up the iPad can be described as a particular kind of media euphoria, one grounded in what we might call “techno-eschatology,” a particular philosophy of history according to which redemption will be achieved by technological means, in this case by media technology.

### **Techno-Eschatologies: Bazin, Balázs, Apple**

Now, we all know that we are all modern and live in a secularized world from which the ghosts of spirituality have largely been banned by the forces of enlightenment. We even live in a world when the grand narratives of secularized eschatology have been reliably discredited, particularly the narrative of progress in its nineteenth-century liberal incarnation and its twentieth-century communist incarnation. Yet the ghosts of eschatology continue to haunt our secularized world, and media technologies appear to be their preferred conduit, at least judging from the various diagnostics of redemption through media that we can find in twentieth-century thought, from Siegfried Kracauer’s “redemption of physical reality” via film to the eschatological scenario developed by André Bazin in his influential essay “Ontology of the Photographic Image.”

In his essay on the “ontology of the photographic image,” Bazin proposes an analysis of the mummy complex, a human desire to transcend mortality, which first manifests itself in the techniques used in the embalming of corpses in ancient Egypt and later finds expression in a variety of pictorial representations. In the archaeology of the mummy complex as proposed by Bazin, the desire for immortality transforms itself into an insatiable and eventually destructive



desire for illusion, for images that substitute an almost-real image of the object for the object itself. According to Bazin, a turning point in this transformation is the invention of perspective in the Renaissance. Perspective allows painters to create images that mimic human perception and create close pictorial substitutes for real objects. In the process, painting is put under the yoke of realism and illusionism. The purpose of painting after the Renaissance is no longer to express spiritual truths, but to create an illusion of reality. However, the progressive degradation of painting, and through the dominance of illusionism in painting mankind comes to an end with the invention of photography, followed by the invention of film. Where Bazin expressly casts the invention of perspective as “the original sin” in the history of art, a fall from grace rather than a marker of progress, with “Nièpce and Lumière comes redemption.” Bazin’s “ontology of the photographic image” reveals itself to be a history – a history of a fall from grace followed by redemption, meaning an eschatological narrative.

But to the extent that the medium of photography has the power of redemption, the question is: redemption from what, and for whom? On the surface, the primary beneficiary of the redemption offered by photography is painting. Freed from the yoke of realism and illusionism, the art of painting is restored to its mission of expressing spiritual truths. Thus photography paves the way for all the successive “isms” of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from Impressionism to Cubism to Abstract Expressionism, which we can see as sovereign reaffirmations of painting’s liberty of expression, and of the painter’s liberty of affirming his personal style over the dictates of similitude – a liberty best personified, in Bazin’s eyes, by Picasso.

But the rewards of redemption that the photographic image has to offer accrue not only to the art of painting and the figure of the painter. By fulfilling to perfection the desire for similitude and the illusion of the presence of the object in the image, photography redeems humankind from the pathological desire for illusion. Now that there exists photography, a medium that produces images that create an overwhelming suggestion of the real presence of the object, the hunger for illusion is always already satisfied. Rather than continue to be confronted with the insufficient substitutes for the object itself offered by illusionist painting, photography allows the human being to absorb the object itself at a glance.

This is possible because with photography it becomes possible, for the first time in human history, to produce images automatically without any interference from an artist. Thus, it becomes possible to produce images that are not just likenesses of the object, but traces that partake in the very being of the object. A sign is a place holder for something absent, and an image is a likeness of something that can also be absent. The meaning of a sign is based on

cultural convention, the likeness of the image on analogy. A photograph is neither a sign nor an image in the sense that a painting is an image. Rather, it is a natural image or, to phrase it even more paradoxically, a natural sign, i.e. a sign that is not based on convention, and an image that is not based on analogy, but that is rather the object-itself-as-image. Rather than merely represented, in photography the object is really present.

In late Antiquity and in the early Middle Ages, the entire cosmos of images evolved around the image of the body of Christ. The body of Christ is the word of God become flesh, and as such it is the reproduction of an image that in itself remains invisible, namely the image of God. The image of God, which remains invisible, is the source of all other images.<sup>7</sup> In medieval theology and philosophy, the “natural image” is this invisible image of God as He is present in the human soul, not as an image, a sign for something absent, but as a structural homology. The natural image then is an image of God not made by man but by nature itself. Marking a “turning point in the history of images” according to Hans Belting, the council of Trent in 1208 codified the idea of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. While historian Carlo Ginzburg argues that, as a consequence of the codification of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the image became more abstract, Belting and Marie-José Mondzain argue the contrary. The idea of the real presence of the body of Christ in the bread and the wine of the Eucharist required a new level of imaginary engagement, which also affected and changed the status of images. Images were now required to evoke the presence of the object, and while the sacrament created real presence, the image rendered the real presence visible.<sup>8</sup> As a historical footnote to Bazin, then, one could argue that the invention of perspective merely gave shape to an expectation created, or at least further exacerbated, through the codification of real presence in the Eucharist.

In any case, “natural image” is indeed the term Bazin uses to describe photography. Photography, which eliminates the element of human subjectivity and allows nature to present itself as image, is the ultimate technology for rendering real presence visible. It is of course easy to argue that photography necessarily requires human intervention: a choice of point of view, of lenses, exposure, etc. But this objection is, in a way, too sophisticated for Bazin’s argument, which is not supposed to be an accurate description of the technique of photography, but a theory of photography as a technology of redemption: the redemption of painting from the yoke of illusionism, the redemption of the human mind from the pathological hunger for

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<sup>7</sup> Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, icone, économie: Les sources byzantines de l’imaginaire contemporain* (Paris: Seuil, 1996), 111.

<sup>8</sup> Hans Belting, *Das echte Bild: Bildfragen als Glaubensfragen* (Munich: Beck, 2006), 91.

illusion, and the redemption of the world, of the things and beings that constitute the world, from the fate of finality. To expand the theological framing of Bazin's argument, one could argue that he theorizes photography in terms of the Eucharist: the photographic image is a host, an altar bread of sorts, in which the object it supposedly designates (in the case of the altar bread the body of Christ, in the case of photography anything that is before the camera in the moment of exposure) is really present. As is well known, the status of the Eucharist, i.e. the question whether the bread and wine are merely signs for the flesh and blood of Christ, or whether the Christ is actually, really present in the host and the altar wine, is one of the main points of theological contention between the Catholic Church and Protestants. For Catholics the body of Christ has real presence in the Eucharist, for Protestants bread and wine are merely signs, to be filled with the presence of Christ in the faith of the individual believer participating in the Eucharist. Bazin's ontology of the photographic image remains firmly on the Catholic side of this divide, or rather subscribes to the semiotic theory, or rather the anti-semiotic theory, underlying the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist. At the same time, Bazin's argument constitutes something of a heresy. The theory of photography as redemption of the world through the natural image can be read as an extension of the cosmological interpretation of the Eucharist proposed by the Jesuit philosopher, palaeontologist and evolutionary biologist Teilhard de Chardin. Teilhard, one of the mid-twentieth-century's most notable and influential intellectual figures, has had a marked influence on media theorists such as Marshall McLuhan and Pierre Fugeyrollas, a collaborator of Gilbert Cohen-Séat and co-author of Cohen-Séat's last book on film and television. His influence on Bazin has been noted by several authors writing on Bazin, most notably Dudley Andrew and Ludovic Cortade. Teilhard was known for many things, among them his attempt to harmonize the theory of evolution with Catholic dogma, but also for his reinterpretation of the Eucharist. It was this cosmological interpretation of the Eucharist which caused the Society of Jesus to issue a publication ban for Teilhard in the 1940s and 1950s and brought him close to being excommunicated, not least because his cosmology is about the redemption of this world and in this world rather than the next. It is possible to see a reflection of Teilhard's cosmology of the Eucharist in McLuhan's anthropology of media, which argues that media enhance human existence in that they allow humankind to transcend at least in part its limitations. And we can certainly see an extension of Teilhard's thinking in Bazin's assessment of the redemptive powers of photography.

While Bazin formulated a first draft of his essay in 1944, the year of the liberation of Paris from Nazi occupation, the year of publication, 1945, is relevant. One way of reading Bazin's essay is to argue that his central claim is that, after the catastrophe of war, cinema will

restore our faith in the world. This is, of course, also the central claim of Deleuze in his cinema books. One approach to Deleuze's cinema books is to read them as an elaborate commentary on a passage in Bazin's posthumously published book on Jean Renoir. In that passage Bazin analyzes a scene from *Boudu sauvé des eaux* (*Boudu Saved from Drowning*, 1932) and argues that by dwelling on the way Boudu enjoys himself after escaping from marriage by jumping into the water Renoir suspends and destroys the logic of the causally motivated, coherent action of the conventional narrative film. This passage provides the nucleus of Deleuze's grand dichotomy of the movement image and the time image. Similarly, one can argue that Deleuze's philosophical project in his cinema books, which is to enlist cinema in his lifelong quest for an epistemology without the support of the Cartesian transcendental subject, is inspired by Bazin's belief in the cinema's power to restore our faith in the world. The crucial question, then, would be that of the afterlife of Bazin's redemptive cosmology in Deleuze's philosophy of cinema.

If we extend our view further in a different direction, we discover a similar theoretical conception of the redemptive powers of cinema not just in the writings of Kracauer, but also in the writings of Béla Balázs. In his preface to his 1924 book *Der sichtbare Mensch* (*The Visible Man*), Balázs celebrates the power of cinema to overcome the stranglehold that the culture of writing exerted on humanity since the invention of printing, burying the human sensibility for the visible world under reams and reams of printed text. In Balázs eschatology of civilization, print culture marks the fall from grace, and cinema, as in Bazin, is the technology of redemption. Film theory before the advent of semiotics, then, is rife with techno-eschatology, i.e. with a pattern of argument that fuses a narrative of technological innovation with scenarios of redemption (of redemption of this world and in this world rather than the next).

But how does Bazin's techno-eschatology relate to the iPad presentation? After all, Bazin talks about film, whereas the iPad is a multi-media platform, a convergence device that is many things at once, not least a picture frame and a book, or rather a reader, but certainly not a device based on the photochemical process which is at the heart of Bazin's theory.

As I have argued, what makes the images of Steve Jobs presenting the iPad so compelling is that they are haunted by the afterlife of the iconography of St. Luke the Evangelist, holding a book, or a picture of the Virgin and the Child, or a combination of both. In terms of the composition of the images that have circulate on the Internet and in other media after the presentation, Jobs presenting the iPad is an obvious reiteration of the figure of St. Luke. But the analogy goes further than the visual aspect of the image. A cosmological argument is implicit in the iPad presentation. In his presentation Jobs argued that the iPad was not simply an overgrown mobile phone and a computer, but that it was much more. In fact, an iPad of the

first generation was a bit less than a smart phone in that it contained no camera, and less than a computer in that it had no USB interface. It is not the technical properties, however, but the iPad's relationship to the world that makes the difference and constitutes its surplus value. The point of Steve Jobs emulating the posture of St. Luke the Evangelist is that he brings us a device that contains the world whole, meaning the world as image, text and sound, all in digital code, at the touch of one's finger. Presented in this set-up, the iPad evokes the metaphor of the book of nature, which constitutes a paradigm of the intelligibility of the world from the late Middle Ages onward, as Hans Blumenberg has shown in his metaphorology.<sup>9</sup> But the device that Jobs shows us is not just a book, nor does it redeem the world through the automatic production of photographic images in the sense of the techno-eschatology of photography and cinema presented by André Bazin. Jobs' device redeems the world by turning it into information, by stripping the world of its material, finite body and turning it into bits and bytes, all the while rendering the immaterial body of the world in tactile form. Where film in Bazin's view redeemed the world in the medium of the photographic image, the iPad redeems the world as tangible information.

And we do not have to look any further than the corporate logo of Apple, i.e. the apple from which a bite has already been taken, to corroborate this reading. In Christian eschatology, the bite of the apple is, of course, the bite that changes everything, that marks the fall of man from the Grace of God and sets in motion the eschatological narrative of original sin and redemption. Eating an apple from the tree of knowledge is the original sin that earns Adam and Eve an eviction notice from the Garden of Eden and that all Christians inherit, whereas the immaculate conception of Christ, who went on to die for our sins, offers the hope of redemption. Such is the promise of (the) Apple: a single bite will land you in misery, but access to all the bytes will redeem the world and, along with it, you.

### **Technocalypse: From Human Frailty to Systemic Failure**

One of the constant strains of media history seems to be that in a given cultural situation and in the face of a given technological innovation there are always two opposite ways of thinking about media, one euphoric and one phobic and driven by anxiety. As we discussed above, cinephilia can be seen as an example of the former, while the anxiety that drove early opposition to cinema would be an example of the latter, as is today's anxiety about video games and social media. In the larger scheme of things Bazin's cosmology of the moving image is

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<sup>9</sup> Hans Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979).

audacious not least because it runs counter to a long history of iconophobia, codified in a succession of prohibitions of images in all the major religions based on written scripture.<sup>10</sup> While the iconography of St. Luke as the patron saint of painters evokes a running challenge to the prohibition of images in Christianity, iconophobia may plausibly be considered to be one of the drivers of the Protestant critique of the Catholic dogma of the “real presence” of Christ in the Eucharist.

It is to be expected, then, that techno-eschatologies will be accompanied by the appearance of the reverse scenario in a given culture, a scenario that we might call “technocalypse.” Technocalypytic approaches to media focus not on the redemptive potential of media and on media technologies as vessels of salvation. In theological terms, technocalypse focuses on media as agents of damnation; in anthropological terms it frames media as agents that diminish rather than enhance humanity, as agents that turn human frailty into a structural and systemic failure.

One particularly striking example of the technocalypytic approach in the 1950s is the work of Austrian-born philosopher Günther Anders. Born in 1902 in Vienna as the son of a husband-and-wife team of psychologists, Anders studied philosophy with Ernst Cassirer, Martin Heidegger and Edmund Husserl and wrote his dissertation with Edmund Husserl in Freiburg in 1923. An attempt to complete his Habilitation at Frankfurt University was blocked by Theodor Adorno, who did not approve of Anders’ approach to the theory and sociology of music, or of his ties to Heidegger. A second cousin of Walter Benjamin and the husband of Hannah Arendt from 1929 through 1937, Anders survived the war in exile in the United States before he returned to Germany and Austria and became one of the most widely-read philosophers of the post-war era. Anders’ key work was a book entitled *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen* (“The Obsolescence of Human Beings”). To a large extent it is a book about the atomic bomb and the incommensurate threat of nuclear warfare, and a book about television and the degrading effects of the new medium on peoples’ lives and on culture. Anders’ key claim is that humankind has created technologies that are no longer commensurate with its capabilities. In the face of incommensurate technology, the primary experience is that of insufficiency: we have all become *Versager*, failures in the face of our own achievements. Rather than enhance our existence, incommensurate technologies remind us of our failure to achieve what we achieve through technology without them, diminishing who we are and who we can be. Anders describes this condition as the “Promethean discrepancy,” which exists “between the world of

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<sup>10</sup> Alain Besançon, *L’Image interdite: Une histoire intellectuelle de l’iconoclasme* (Paris: Fayard, 1994).

technology and our ability to visualize it.”<sup>11</sup> For Anders, the Promethean discrepancy creates the basic dilemma of the twenty-first century, and he calls for a “moral imagination” that reconnects production and visualization and creation and representation. It is precisely because it stands in the way of such a reconnection of production and visualization that television poses a problem and a threat for Anders. More specifically, according to Günther Anders, television turns everything that is real into phantoms and passes fiction off as reality: “Alles Wirkliche wird phantomhaft, alles Fiktive wirklich.”<sup>12</sup> For Anders, there is a “curious ambiguity” in the way that both radio and television broadcasts put the listener and viewer in a state in which the difference between lived experience and the report of a lived experience, between immediacy and mediation, vanishes. It is no longer clear whether the content of the broadcast is an object or a statement about the object, or rather the content of a broadcast is a statement and a judgment about an object passing as the object itself.

Anders uses the example of a hypothetical political campaign in which “Senator Smith” appears on television and is presented as a “pleasing personality.” Four years before the famous television debate between then Vice-president Richard Nixon and a handsome young senator from Massachusetts that arguably helped tip the scales in a close election in favour of John F. Kennedy, Anders argues that the television image passes judgment on the personality of politicians while pretending to merely show how and what they are. The television image inverts the sequence of fact and judgment and creates a perverse order in which the judgment comes before the fact, and facts only stand if they fit into the camouflaged form of judgment that is the image. Rather than an ontology of the photographic image, Anders proposes a hauntology of the electronic image. Where photography for Bazin redeems the world by transubstantiating the object into the image, television for Anders inverts the existing ontological hierarchies by transforming reality into phantasmagoric shadows and fiction into pretend reality. Or, to frame it in theological and eschatological terms: television is, quite literally, the devil, not the redeemer in the guise of media technology, but media technology as a diabolic agent that turns logic and the natural order of things on their head.

Kulturkritik of television and its deleterious effects is quite commonplace and comes in many guises and in various degrees of sophistication, from the merely cantankerous to the philosophically grounded. Rudolf Arnheim ends both his book on cinema, first published in 1930, and his book on radio, first published in 1936, on an elegiac note. Having spent two entire

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<sup>11</sup> Ernst Schraube, “‘Torturing Things until They Confess’: Günther Anders’ critique of technology,” *Science as Culture* 14, no. 1, 77.

<sup>12</sup> Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1956).

books on the task of defining, and celebrating, the aesthetic specificity of film and radio respectively, and proposing a set of criteria by which art works in either medium can be judged, Arnheim ends by predicting that the new medium of television, which was already very much on the horizon in Germany at the end of the 1920s, would destroy the art of film and the art of radio. Television, Arnheim argues, can never be an art but will replace both cinema and radio, thus condemning the two new art forms to obsolescence almost immediately after having come to maturity. Arnheim's scenario of television's articide lacks all of the eschatological fervour and cosmological overtones of the technocalypse conjured up by Anders, unless of course we consider that art, for an educated German (and for a German Jew in particular) in the 1920s, was a very serious matter.

Interestingly, Theodor W. Adorno, Anders' erstwhile nemesis at the University of Frankfurt, ascribed a significant artistic potential to television in a number of texts and interviews in the 1960s – a potential that his former student Alexander Kluge has been exploring for four decades now. Conversely Adorno refused even to consider the possibility that cinema has aesthetic properties worth discussing. Where Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, one of the protagonists of the German Enlightenment, spoke of the theatre as a “moralische Institution,” i.e. a school of moral education and “Bildung,” Adorno writes about the cinema in his *Minima Moralia* that “Jedes Mal, wenn ich ins Kino gehe, komme ich dümmer und schlechter wieder heraus” (“Every visit to the cinema leaves me, against all my vigilance, stupider and worse”<sup>13</sup>). One is tempted to ask, of course, why Adorno apparently kept on going back to the cinema if this were true, but it is clear that he considers cinema to be a medium that diminishes rather than potentially elevates the human existence. Adorno's critique, or rather condemnation, focuses primarily on the economic logic of the capitalist culture industry of Hollywood, which he had not studied in great detail (but then, nobody really had done so before Hortense Powdermaker's groundbreaking ethnographic study of the industry, which was first published in 1950). Adorno's critique was a Marxist critique in that it aimed to liberate human existence from the oppression of the capitalist order. It was a narrow Marxist critique in that it largely failed to address the question of technology. Anders has some unkind things to say about the effects of cinema, too, but not on the order of his critique of television. What takes his critique of television to another level from Arnheim's critique of television or Adorno's critique of cinema is not just that he takes a page from Marx and “goes beyond an economic analysis and

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<sup>13</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (1951), trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005 [1974]), 25.



focuses on technological structures.”<sup>14</sup> Rather, the diagnosis of the “Promethean discrepancy” implies an independent, and fateful, agency of technology, an agency that plays out behind our backs and threatens to turn the human subject into a mere afterthought of the technological development she purportedly set in motion. Technology is the fate of the human subject, according to Anders, a fate of which we have lost control and over which we must become masters again if we are to survive.

There is, by the way, a line that leads from Anders’ philosophy of television technology to the work of French philosopher Bernard Stiegler, in a much more direct way than the line of tradition that leads from the echno-eschatology of Bazin to that of Steve Jobs that I proposed to sketch above. Much of Stiegler’s more recent work evolves around the problem of “individuation,” the process of becoming individual, which Stiegler borrows from Gilbert Simondon and develops along the lines of his Derridian theory of “grammatisation.” Stiegler suggests that “individuation” is largely driven by the dominant media technologies that structure the specific cultural environments in which individuation occurs. While cinema plays a major role as an exemplary medium of “individuation” in the third volume of Stiegler’s *Technics and Time*, in his 2008 *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations* Stiegler diagnoses what he calls a “proletarianisation of knowledge” driven mostly, and ineluctably, by television. While television for Stiegler is not quite the devil, it is the driving force of immiseration, albeit an epistemological and intellectual immiseration rather than the classical economic immiseration of Marx. Nonetheless, television remains a fateful technology.

### **The Digital as *Darstellung***

Are we left, then, with the unbridgeable alternative between a somewhat overly hopeful cosmology of redemption through media technology in the Bazinian vein and the technocalyptic view of media as proposed by Günther Anders and re-iterated, in suggestively forceful terms, by Bernard Stiegler and his followers?

Let me briefly sketch one alternative, first developed by an author who may have had some influence on Stiegler’s understanding of “individuation” as driven by media technology, but who nonetheless developed a somewhat more dynamic philosophical account of media technology: the German media theorist Friedrich Kittler. One short-hand way of summing up Kittler’s work goes like this: Kittler took Hegel and turned him from his head to his feet (as Marx had done), but then he replaced the feet with Heidegger’s *Gestell* of technology. In

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<sup>14</sup> E. Schraube, “‘Torturing Things Until They Confess’,” op. cit., 79.

Kittler's grand account of history as media history, or of history as driven by media technology, media technology takes the place of the spirit in Hegel's phenomenology of the spirit. For Kittler and his acolytes, the history of media technology, or history as the history of media technology, culminates in the emergence of the computer. If for Hegel philosophy as he understands it is *Darstellung*, i.e. the dialectical representation and summation of all the philosophy that came before him, for Kittler the digital computer is the one medium that can encompass and represent all other media. As indeed a gadget like the iPad demonstrates, a digital computer can be a book, a picture frame, a movie theatre, a telephone, a typewriter, and every other media technology that, historically speaking, came before the computer. Rather than being about "convergence," the digital revolution is about *Darstellung*, about one medium summing up and re-presenting all other media. And rather than a medium of the redemption of the world as information, the computer is the medium that redeems all other media in history in the form of a binary code.

Kittler's phenomenology of computer hardware errs neither on the side of an overly hopeful techno-eschatology nor on the side of an overly anxious technocalypse. Rather it exudes a cool sense of ineluctability. If Kittler's writings seem at times to be overly exhortative, it is because he is on a therapeutic mission: he is trying to alert his readers to the fact that the development of media technology has bypassed them, and that with their old-fashioned conceptions of consciousness, volition and agency they are no longer at the height of their times, which means at the height of the development of media technology. For a rather long time, the self-ascribed task of German *Medienwissenschaft* (media studies) in the wake of Kittler was to spread that message and alert other disciplines to their forgetfulness about technology, and to tell sociologists, literary scholars, and philosophers that behind their backs the drama of the inexorable march of technology towards digital *Darstellung* was playing out, with accelerating speed.

One question that we can ask is how compatible that scenario is with Heidegger's reading of technology. Heidegger hated television as much as Anders and cinema as much as Adorno – it was perhaps the only thing the two main antagonists of post-war German philosophy could agree on. "Wir, denen unter der Herrschaft der Technik Hören und Sehen durch Funk und Film vergehet" ("we whose hearing and seeing are perishing through radio and film under the rule of technology"<sup>15</sup>), reads a passage in Heidegger's famous technology essay, *Die Frage nach der Technik* (*The Question Concerning Technology*), first published in 1954. Other than a half-

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<sup>15</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (1954), trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 48.

sentence dismissal of broadcast media and cinema, those symptoms of a modernity Heidegger so passionately rejected, Heidegger's essay most notably constitutes an attack on the established dichotomy of nature vs. technology. One of the key claims of Heidegger's essay is that *techne* is the *Entbergung*, the unveiling of *physis*, which means that *techne* is not alien to *physis* but rather involves *physis* and devolves from it. But Heidegger also proposes a somewhat more implicit critique of Marxian notions of technology as fate, and of a philosophy of history as a process largely driven by technology. Rather than as *Schicksal*, i.e. fate, Heidegger argues, technology should be understood as a *Geschick*, as a hand that we may have been dealt, but can play, and as *Gefahr*, an unveiling of possibilities laden with risks, but also with opportunity. Anders certainly subscribes to a view of technology of fate, but to the extent that he believes that the "Promethean discrepancy" can be overcome, he appears to have confidence in technology as *Geschick*, as a danger that we can turn to our advantage.

As film and media scholars, rather than subscribing to a view of technology as fate, we might consider moving with Heidegger beyond Heidegger and consider, against Heidegger, television and film under the rubric of "Geschick" and "Gefahr." Or, to put it in the terms of affective mapping, we might consider embracing trepidation in the face of the danger of technology and turn it to our epistemological advantage.