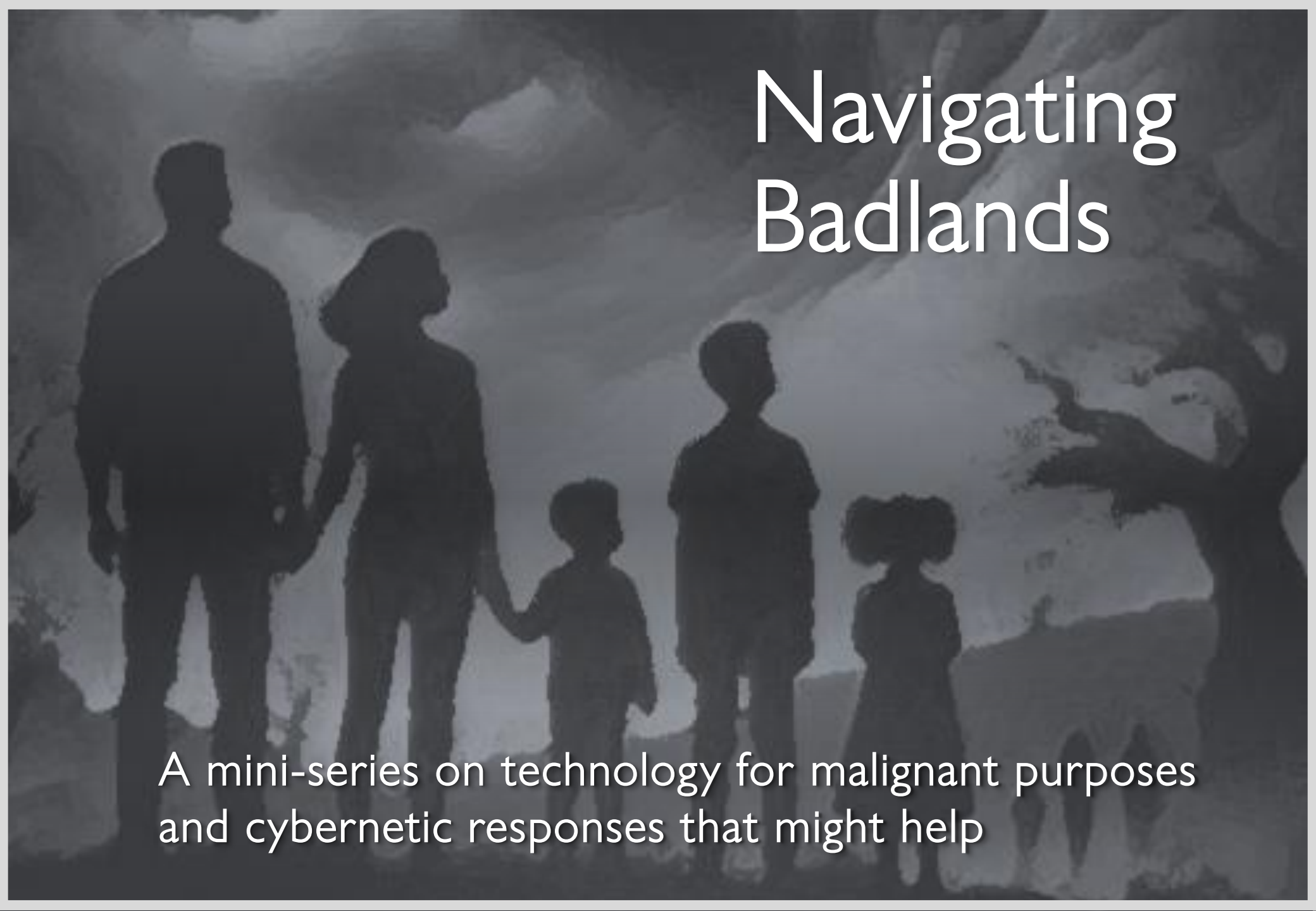


A black and white image showing the silhouettes of a family of five walking away from the viewer into a dark, stormy landscape. The family consists of a man, a woman, and three children. They are holding hands and walking towards a bright light source in the distance, possibly a sunset or sunrise, which creates a strong backlight effect. The sky is filled with dark, swirling clouds, and a large, gnarled tree is visible on the right side of the frame. The overall mood is somber and hopeful.

Navigating Badlands

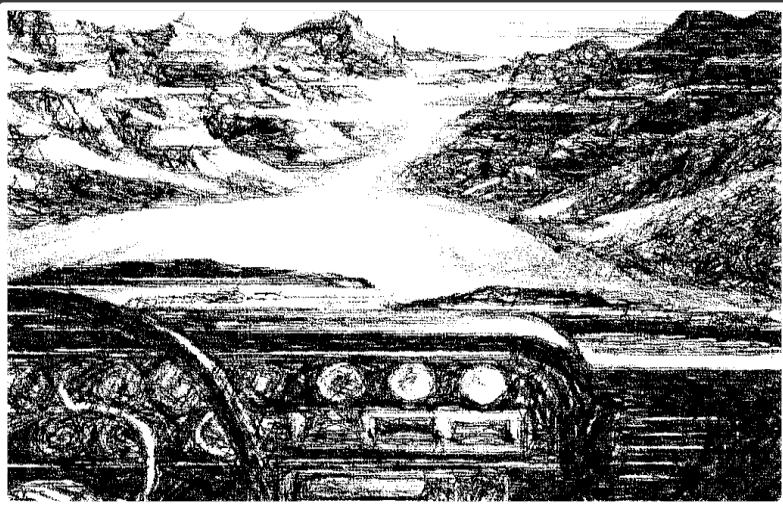
A mini-series on technology for malignant purposes
and cybernetic responses that might help

Contents

1. The Badlands
2. Cybernetics
3. Appendix:

How Are We With Technology?

(*Badlands – The 1973 Movie*).



Part One: The Badlands

The Informational Landscape

Negotiating the subjectivities: In *Nexus*, his recent bestseller, Yuval Harari exposes naivety at the heart of the Information Age. This naivety is a failure to recognise the intersubjective nature of information i.e. that it is socially-constructed, contested and then repeatedly contestable. In this, Harari joins with a significant lineage of socio-technical theorists, cyberneticians, information theorists and media scholars, all of whom had figured out that the conversion of data to information is problematic.

More data = more contest over the meaning/utility of that data.

Harari, Y. N. (2024). *Nexus: A brief history of information networks from the Stone Age to AI*. Fern

The Organisational Landscape

Starting with the straightforward: According to Ronald Coase (1937), firms exist partly to reduce transaction costs—the costs of using the market (search, negotiation, enforcement, payment).

In a digital economy, these costs are declining sharply due to:

- Real-time communication
- Artificial Intelligence
- Platform intermediation
- Cryptocurrency, blockchain and smart contracts

As a result, the rationale for organizing certain activities *within* a firm diminishes and/or we see new kinds of organization, grouping, association.

In simple terms, with lower transaction costs, the organizational environment destabilises – more people can organize things in more ways and towards more causes.

The Valley

Perhaps in Silicon Valley, the thinking was different.

The idea took root that information is good, sure, and more information is better, fine again, but with this also then came the assumption that the conversion of data into information would be unproblematic or relatively unproblematic.

"Technology is nothing. What's important is that you have faith in people, that they're basically good and smart, and if you give them tools, they'll do wonderful things with them."

Steve Jobs, 1994 interview with Rolling Stone.

"We believe a well-functioning society should have abundant, free and unbiased access to high quality information. Google therefore has a responsibility to the world."

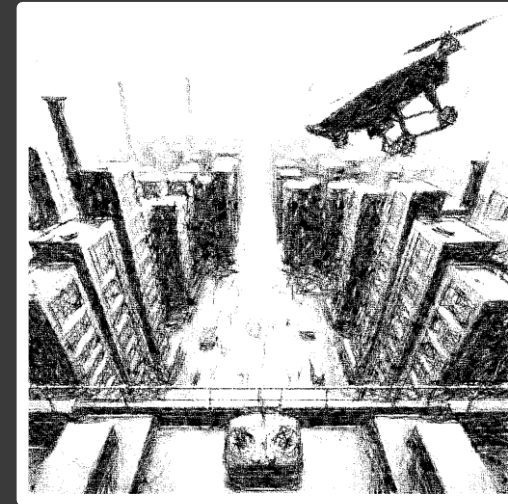
Larry Page & Sergey Brin, letter to the Google IPO, 2004.

"Facebook was not originally created to be a company. It was built to accomplish a social mission—to make the world more open and connected."

Mark Zuckerberg, founder's letter to the IPO of Facebook, 2012.

"Our mission is to give everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly without barriers."

Dick Costolo, co-founder of Twitter, S-1 filing submitted to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, 2013.



The Tribal Landscape

There was disquiet on the journey.

Confronting the electronic age, as opposed to the book age that preceded it, Marshall McLuhan proposed:

"The TV generation is postliterate and retribalized. It seeks by violence to scrub the old private image and to merge in a new tribal identity..."

For McLuhan, information structures are generative of culture and politics. It follows then that an information system convened through word of mouth (e.g. before widespread literacy) has different cultural and political outcomes to an information system based on books (and libraries). Then, the mass production of books (Gutenberg) innovates over the cultural and political outcomes of hand-scribed books.

Cue the Reformation, for example.

- Gutenberg Bible – 1455
- Martin Luther's publication of the 95 Theses - October 31, 1517.

"Printing was God's highest and extremest act of grace."

Martin Luther (1517).

McLuhan understood that the electronic age (telephone, television etc) of the 20th Century instituted a new form of tribalism, one that is public and fast (the age of the t-shirt and the allegiances declared thereon, brand identities, fashion tribes, political ties, ideological ties).

The transformation from the age of the book to the electronic age caused problems for institutions founded on the assumptions of the earlier age. Political institutions are a case in point. Surrounded by the new electronic tribes, these institutions and their associated interests created new forms of engagement that sought to engage these audiences (advertising, party political broadcasting, television cameras in the House of Commons, and eventually, shock-jocks).

The internet developed still more profoundly than television and still much more quickly. It went, quite literally, into everyone's hands and pockets.

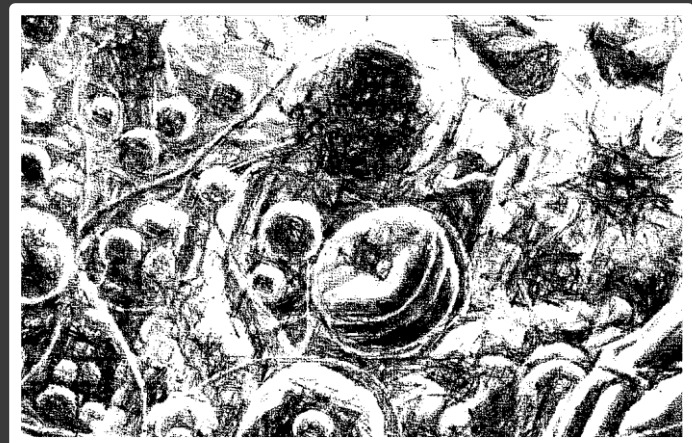
This led to a kind of frenzy as a proliferation of data led to a proliferation of debate. This naturally created an overdrive of tribal formation and disbandment, of networks formed and dissolved, of alignments created and then decomposed.

Of scepticism, opportunism and conspiracy.

Of intersubjective alliance/alienation.

See also:

- Levinson, P. (1999). Digital McLuhan: A guide to the information millennium. Routledge.
- Manovich, L. (2001). The language of new media. MIT Press.
- McLuhan, M. (1962). The Gutenberg galaxy: The making of typographic man. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
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Max Vision

A decentralized and participatory society is potentially beneficial except that its tools enable miscreants, thugs and the delusional every bit as readily as they assist the civic, kind and caring.

In an age of cheap communications:

- The low transaction costs of the digital era help with the organization of, say, a perfect wedding held between families that live across different geographies.
- The low transaction costs of the digital era help with the organization of global drugs shipments and subsequent distribution through county-lines (substitute for drugs also guns, counterfeit goods, illicit human organs, trafficked souls).

Further examples of the low cost of organizing:

"Business exploded overnight. Cesar built his own website, began vending on Shadowcrew, got an 800 number, and started accepting e-gold, an anonymous online currency favoured by carders."

Kevin Poulsen, Kingpin, the story of Max Butler, aka Max Vision.

Swiss Franc Trader: *Please, can we get a super high three-month and a super low six-month...PRETTY PLEASE?*

Primary Submitter: *41 & 51.*

Swiss Franc Trader: *If you did that, I would love you forever.*

Primary Submitter: *41 & 51, then...*

Swiss Franc Trader: *If you did that, I would come over there and make love to you, your choice.*

Primary Submitter: *41+51, it is.*

Swiss Franc Trader: *Thought so.*

Primary Submitter: *So shallow.*

Instant messages exchanged during LIBOR rate-fixing.

"Cambridge Analytica will try to pick at whatever mental weakness or vulnerability that we think you have and try to warp your perception of what's real around you."

Christopher Wylie, whistleblower/former Director, Cambridge Analytica.

TikTok videos of Andrew Tate have been viewed some 11.6 billion times.

The Guardian.

"The case has shown once again the dangers to which young users of social media are exposed, to the grief and bewilderment of unsuspecting parents."

Mrs Justice Cox during sentencing at the murder trial of 15 year-old Kayleigh Haywood, from Leicestershire, UK.

Stephen Beadman (29) was sentenced to thirty-five years for the rape and murder of Kayleigh. Luke Harlow (28) was jailed for 12 years for grooming Kayleigh on Facebook and for falsely imprisoning her at his house.

Part Two: Cybernetics

The Negentropic Force

"Entropy is a measure of disorder, or of the decay of order."

Allenna Leonard, 2004.

Beer refers to information as "negentropy"—a counterforce to entropy, which otherwise, and naturally, will disrupt and disorganize systems.

"..the measure of negative entropy, equalling the active information content of a system."

Stafford Beer, 1972.

Crucially, in this, Beer recognized that information is not merely present to be harvested. Instead, it must be actively filtered, contextualized, and made meaningful within the recursive structures of an organization of some sort.

In *The Brain of the Firm* (1972), Beer argued that viable systems must be capable of not only gathering information but of processing that information adaptively and in real time.

This necessitates designing systems that cope with complexity. With this comes the recognition that relevant information may be obscured, distorted, or overwhelming in volume.

The Cybernetic Countermeasure

There was disquiet on the road, a canon: Take Orwell (1949), Huxley (1932), Forster (1909), DeLillo (1991), Ballard (1975), Burgess (1962)... movies like *Metropolis* (1927), *Alphaville* (1965), *THX 1138* (1971), *Brazil* (1985), *The Matrix* (1999).

Acknowledging all the then-known dystopias, more or less, Beer further focused on the potential catastrophe of losing the ability to adapt. This stasis would encompass loss of the ability of liberty-seeking.

Yet, *Designing Freedom*, *Platform for Change* and *Beyond Dispute* are not dystopian. Nor are they utopian..

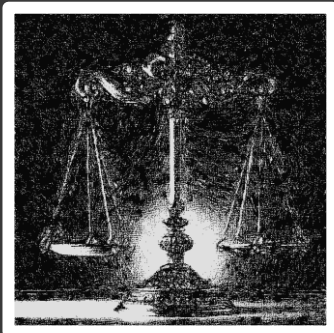


Beer's work leads instead to a rethinking of the potential of technological systems; towards the design of a constantly adaptive liberty machine. In this Beer positions cybernetic understanding as a kind of countermeasure, a pro-social, scientific countermeasure. Technology can enhance autonomy, democracy and organizational intelligence if designed with cybernetic principles. We note then that our problems did not originate with the invention of the computer, not at all, and that there is promise in the potential of new technology to support learning, management and adaptation in pursuit of an ever-evolving goal of freedom.

Designing Freedom

The problem: digitality (AI, platforms, instant comms) gives us systems that are so fast, so powerful and so decentralized that they are potentially beyond regulation, at least as far as it has hitherto been conceived. Therefore, we are seeking the most cybernetically advanced response.

We cannot entrust freedom to luck, it must be planned, a message sent with clarity by Stafford Beer (1974).



A first-cut, scratch table below:

Cybernetic Concept = Effect of Lower Transaction Costs

Feedback Loops = Faster, more granular; requires real-time control systems

System Boundaries = More fluid; organizations become open, permeable systems, dissipative systems.

Control & Governance = Decentralized; reliant on distributed protocols or platforms, control is not commensurate to organizational systems.

Structure = Shift from hierarchy to heterarchy or platforms

Adaptability = Increased need for recursive and anticipatory mechanisms

Complexity = More autonomous subsystems require advanced meta-system design

"To live effectively is to live with adequate information."

Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings* (1950, revised 1954).

Security Cybernetics

Security Cybernetics (SecCyb) (Berry, 2025) is an infinite game of adapting and deploying dynamic capabilities to effectively regulate threats within a proliferating, complex, probabilistic and ever-changing security landscape. Leveraging complexity, cybernetics, and games theory,

SecCyb draws upon these interconnected fields to provide a more nuanced understanding of the security environment and to inform more effective responses to its challenges. It is needed because:

The nature of modern threats: The security landscape is constantly evolving due to technological advancements and the actions of threat actors. This includes a proliferation of threat-types, increasing complexity, and probabilistic events that make prediction difficult.

- Limitations of traditional approaches: Traditional strategic planning in policing and security tends to be rigid and deterministic. This is ill-suited to the fluid and unpredictable nature of the modern world. Conventional approaches struggle to generate the necessary variety of responses to match the variety of threats (Ashby's Law).

- The need for adaptation and dynamism: SecCyb provides a framework for adaptive strategies that can respond effectively to the stochastic and complex nature of security challenges. It emphasises continuous adaptation and the deployment of dynamic capabilities rather than reliance on fixed plans.

- Security is best understood as an infinite game without a definitive end, that requires a continuous process of adaptation and regulation rather than a finite objective of “winning.” The better goal is to stay in the game within a guiding arrangement of democratic community.

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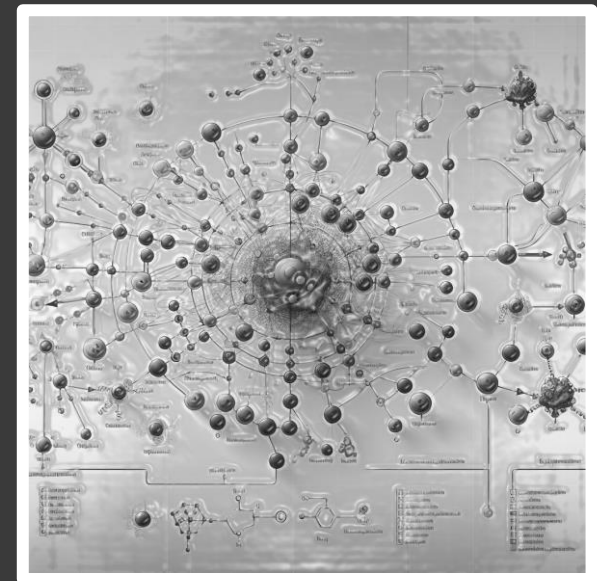
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Appendix: How Are We With Technology?

Badlands, the 1973 Movie.

'The Question Concerning Technology'

Heidegger argues that modern technology is not just a collection of tools, but a mode of revealing that reduces the world—including nature, humans, and meaning itself—to “standing-reserve” (Bestand); resources to be used, managed, or discarded.



To illustrate, in a pre-technological age, a woodsman might step out into the forest in order to chop wood, making his own decisions as to what, where and why to cut. In the technological age, the woodsman awaits instruction (e.g. from a computer device) before going out into the forest to chop. In this, he stands-by until the instructions tell him how much wood of which type is needed. Thus, in the second scenario, the wood and the woodsman are both resources.

This mindset is called enframing (Gestell). This is way of understanding the world only in terms of its utility. Heidegger warns that this instrumental rationality conceals other, more poetic or authentic modes of engagement.

All technological innovation is, in fact, merely an enframing of the potentials of the natural world e.g. the radio-set enframes the radiowave.

Badlands and the Logic of Enframing

Badlands is a 1973 debut movie by Terrence Malick who studied Philosophy at Harvard and Oxford universities. The movie is the story of a senseless killing-spree undertaken by Kit and Holly, two young Americans. Kit is played by Martin Sheen and Holly is played by Sissy Spacek.

In Badlands, Kit and Holly move through an American landscape with a sense of detachment. Kit especially exemplifies an instrumental mode of thinking. He equates people, relationships, and violence itself to superficial gestures or aesthetic moments, stripped of existential depth.

Technology is abundant: cars, guns, the telephone and telegram masts, sound recording booths, a Dictaphone, a silver platter.

In Heideggerian terms, Kit seems to see the world around him as standing-reserve. People are disposable, landscapes are backdrops, and life itself is a shallow negotiation between an aestheticized potential and an unthought desire.

"Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately at hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering."

Heidegger and the Technological Mind

This reflects Heidegger's argument that modern consciousness, shaped by technology, no longer sees things as they are, but only in terms of use or entertainment. Into this logic is situated the relationship of Kit and Holly. He is ten-years older than she is (25 against 15). He has been in the Army, she in school. It is her family that is subject to the first killing, his is absent. Hence, the narrative presents the relationship itself as one of standing-reserve through a kind of power manipulation. As the story unfolds, Holly increasingly becomes a prop for Kit, a resource.

The Natural Landscape

The film is notable for its visual beauty, through prairie, forest and sunsets. This beauty is barely noticed by Kit and Holly who engage with it only on the level of resource.



Even when they live wild in the forest, they deploy the forest towards their immediate needs. In this sequence of the film, they make of the wild something akin to the resources of the urban world they had possessed prior, rather than engaging in a return to nature. The environment itself is thereby objectified, not engaged with in some other and meaningful sense. An isolation builds within Kit and Holly throughout their journey, but this is not an existential reflection rather it is a kind of estrangement in a world without metaphysical grounding.

Language and Thought

Starting the drama as a James Dean wannabe, Kit speaks in banalities and movie clichés. Holly narrates with a dreamy detachment. This inability to speak authentically is a further Heideggerian concern: when language becomes rote or instrumental, it no longer opens a world to us. Instead, it merely functions as calculation or decoration.

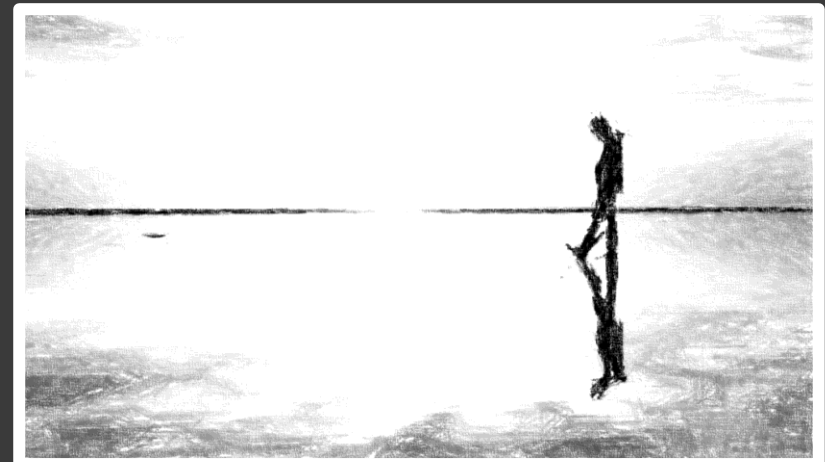
Heidegger critiques the modern, scientific conception of language as a neutral tool that is used to represent facts or to command. He sees this view as part of the larger technological enframing, where everything - including language - is reduced to functionality and control. To the modern world, Heidegger argues, language is "on call," and is used primarily to transmit information or to exert influence, rather than associate with the deeper potential of living.

The Eclipse of Thinking

Many viewers are puzzled by the end of the movie and its mood. There is a police chase. Holly is allowed to step out of the car before Kit is captured. This sequence takes place in Montana as the couple drive a stolen Cadillac. Holly then maintains her role as a witness/commentator to the fate of Kit.

Through his capture and the legal processes around it, Kit seems cheerful and to be enjoying some kind of realisation of identity. A policeman approvingly notes his likeness to James Dean, yet Kit is an object of fascination in his own right, and a media figure. The police themselves seem to participate in this, for example accepting souvenirs such as Kit's belongings. There is no sense of moral weight. Kit's crimes are not retrieved in a meaningful or tragic way. Instead, the whole killing spree is flattened into an aesthetic surface, something to look at, stylize, and store. Kit is "enframed" by all around him, including himself, and is reduced to imagery or data.

As Hannah Arendt records in *The Human Condition* (1958), modern individuals risk becoming "functionaries," losing their capacity for critical thought and ethical judgment when absorbed by systems that prize performance over responsibility. At an airfield, and with State Troopers and the National Guard in attendance, Kit shows no moral introspection, and is guided instead by the cultural scripts that he has inherited — particularly those of celebrity and outlaw. In the very final moments of the film, his admiration for the police officer's uniform, and his desire to possess an emblem of institutional authority, suggests not resistance to power but a longing to participate in its conformity. This "eclipse of thinking" is central to Arendt's telling of the risks of modern technocracy. In this light, Malick's film becomes a meditation on moral emptiness in a technological culture, where violence can be aestheticized and rendered ordinary through performance and disengagement.



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Event One: *The State of the State*

Webcast from Bush House London.

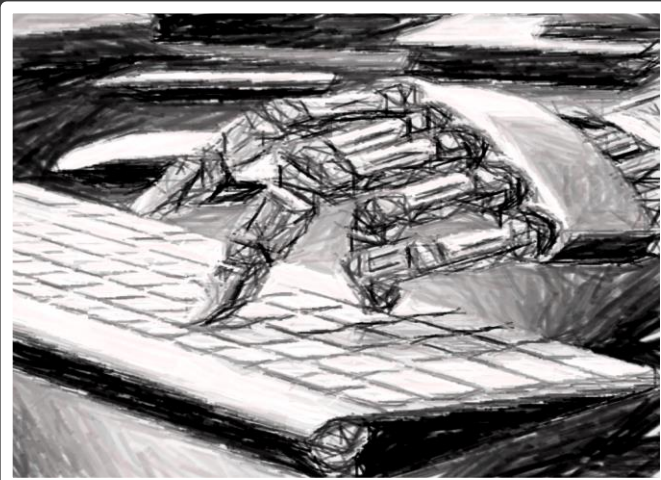
April 30th at 4pm.

Event Two: *Privacy*

(Online) *Further details to follow.*

Event Three: *Eudaimonia*

(Online) *Further details follow.*



We are hugely grateful to:

Our guest speakers who help us to record topographical details on the Badlands map.

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Atlantic Technological University for hosting and organizing a developmental workshop on Security Cybernetics.

Centre for Information Management at Loughborough University, our home base and crucible.

Everyone showing interest in this key area of systems knowledge.