

# iThink Therefore Everything Is: A Brief Phenomenology of the Spirit of New Technology

An Excerpt from the  
*["Ninety-Five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of the New Medium"](#)*

**Christopher M. Drohan**

**10.** Insofar as technology and art allow us to extend our internal desires into concrete manifestations, they not only extend our bodies and actions in space (McLuhan),<sup>i</sup> but our thoughts and desires too. Thus, art and technology are both techniques for making the imagination concrete, extending our internal realities into our external ones, such that the difference between them becomes moot.

Whereby art and technology allow us to change our phenomenological reality, we destroy the dialectic of a world always already there versus a world reflected upon. Instead, the world becomes our phenomena just as much as our phenomena become the world, in a dynamic but monistic feedback loop. Thus the 'techniques' of art, and the technologies it posits, serve to make phenomenological reality subject to whim. While the essence of technology is to convert the faculty of whim, which is to say 'imagination', into the concrete. In turn, this necessarily implies that our 'internal' and 'external' realities dissolve into a single techno-phenomenological field. Consequently, the new art and technology surpass this false dichotomy in favour of a new dialectic of reality desired versus reality made.

Pushing this shift in logic to its furthest degree, the spirit of new technology and industry reflects a fundamental desire to extend our imaginations *universally* throughout all space. The mechanical signs of this trend are obvious: goods and services shipped and rendered globally; wired and wireless communications networks that span the globe; universal systems of monetary exchange; techniques of standardized time and geography; etc. However, more recently the spirit of new technology has seen a shift from global exchanges of goods toward global exchanges of sensation.

To illustrate this principle, we turn to the iPod/iPhone, the popularity and influence of which has not only revolutionized the personal hand-held device industry, but the very space of our senses.

For example, as one listens to an iPod, the music they desire follows them everywhere. In this way, the seduction of the iPod stems from the fact that it allows us to craft everything auditory. Obviously the iPod was preceded by several other technologies that allowed us to do the same thing: the walk-man, boom-box, home stereo system, mp3 player, etc.<sup>ii</sup> Yet the iPod is unique in the amount of auditory data it allows one to store, the ease with which one can navigate and choose sounds from its visual display, and its miniature size. Through the iPod, one instantly exchanges the noise and chaos of the street for an auditory space of their own choosing. As one strolls about with their iPod turned up, these sounds seem to universally pervade in all the spaces one explores, echoing from every nook and cranny.

Shortly, we will have personal sound devices that will be surgically and cybernetically implanted in the ear such that one will still be able to hear everything going on around them,

but have it set to a soundtrack that won't compete with atmospheric noise. Instead, music will emerge alongside the shuffle of one's shoes, synchronized and sequenced with the jazz of the street, like a perpetual 'dub' or 'elevator music' that seems to emanate from the horizon.

In the past, radio and home stereo systems allowed us to transform our homes into acoustic factories, personal theatres of sound. Today, the spirit of the new technology has shifted from a desire for a 'symphony at home' to the desire for a symphony of the street, an invisible orchestra that follows us wherever we go (as if we have all become characters in our own sitcom).

Essentially though, what we are seeing in the new sound technology reflects a general trend that spans all the new technologies that directly affect our phenomenological reality, namely an increasing tendency toward the personalization of sense, the ability to cater every sensation, every phenomena towards one's desired effects/affects. One no longer senses or imagines 'from within', rather one does so by the turn of an external dial, press of a button, twist of a knob, etc.

**11.** If television was the theatre in our living-room, the iPhone is the theatre in our pocket. If the TV dinner was the restaurant in our kitchen, fast food on every corner is the restaurant following us wherever we go. If air fresheners are a bit of 'outdoor fresh' in your living-room, perfume is the field of flowers tattooed on your skin. If mastering fire keeps your living room as warm as summer in the middle of winter, warm clothing is like carrying a sunny day with you wherever you go. — Thus, as far as the five senses are concerned, modern technology has mastered them, overloaded them, shrunk them, and made them portable.

In making comfort and sensation portable, we effectively drag our living spaces out into the street with us. Bundled up in my warm winter coat, MP3 player in my ears, I do not 'step out' of my house, but take it with me. For years, science-fiction has parodied the man of the future, cruising around in a self-contained bubble with continuous food, music, etc. at their disposal (e.g. Wall-E, the Jetsons, etc.). This man has arrived, and so has his architecture.

Consider Dundas square here in Toronto, where the exterior walls of the shops have been replaced with TV screens. Suddenly the interior of the mall stretches itself out into the street, in a perpetual spectacle of products and advertisements available for purchase inside. On the one hand, the square is no different than any store with a sign in the window trying to draw you inside with enticing ads. On the other, one feels like they're in the middle of an enormous rec room, with a park bench for a couch upon which one can watch their enormous plasma TV.

In the midst of all of this, the graffiti artist is a warrior fighting their way up and down the streets against this megalithic advertising, engaged in a culture-war of information. The modern guerrilla will not fight in trenches or the jungle, but in a street-made-living-room, like a domestic squabble that has been dragged out into the light of day, and put on like a busker performance. Reminiscent of some teenager fighting for the right to adorn their bedroom with pictures of hip-hop stars and ganj — music blaring all the while — today's cultural rebels are fighting for the right to decorate our streets with art that doesn't advertise, and sounds and music that do not preach. They alone have the audacity to imagine private and public living spaces free from the spectacle of the market.

Yet, whether in our homes or on the streets, industrial society bombards us with an

endless slew of prefabricated goods, such that one may succeed in purging their home of advertisements, but cannot escape the advertising power of these goods themselves. The iPod doesn't need to have its logo on it; its design is already its icon, its architecture is already its brand.

12. It is difficult to analyze the spirit of new media from a strictly phenomenological perspective. Insofar as phenomenology is a "philosophy which puts essences back into existence", starting with a world that is "always 'already there' ", and "concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with [this] world", this "facticity" — the spirit of the new media calls into question the implicit premise that Dasein is therefore a passive agent, and that existence is therefore a matter of receiving the world "as it is".<sup>iii</sup> Instead, our new technologies reveal that the soul is anything but a *tabula rasa*, anything but a blank slate upon which the facticity of the world's phenomena carve themselves. Rather, it is a malleable surface upon which phenomena dynamically relate so as to be born in and through one another.

Insofar as we act in the world, we change phenomenological reality at the same time as we ingest it. That we can intentionally and artistically craft our surroundings means that we are existential agents, responsible for conducting our own phenomenological flows . From birth, we begin projecting our bodies and minds out into the world, changing how this field unfolds. As we grow, we assume more and more responsibility for our individual realities, striving towards greater control of our individual senses and sensations.

In turn, art and technology reflect this existential desire for phenomenological control.

However, the spirit of the new technology pushes the logic of this relation one step further. Inasmuch as we strive to manipulate sensation via art and technology, the spirit of the new technology aims toward making this relation *absolute*. In other words, the spirit of the new technology is rife with a teleology of complete phenomenological domination, the point at which imagination precedes sense. Phenomenology is hereby inverted: no longer is the world 'already there', nor do we receive its facticity; rather facticity begins with my desires, which the world must satisfy and organize itself around (i.e. we do not receive the world, the world receives us; egocentrism *par excellence*).

For example, last year Emotiv Systems in San Francisco announced that they will soon begin mass production of a brain-wave reading headset that allows one to move objects with nothing more than a thought.<sup>iv</sup> Currently the headset has been successfully used to control digital icons on a video-screen, and is being marketed primarily towards the gaming community. However, a prototype model is in the works that allows a person in an electric wheel chair to use a combination of facial expressions and thoughts to move around.

Here we have a poignant case of a technology that literally allows us to think the world anew and exercise almost complete control over a phenomenological space (albeit merely a digital one). This spirit thrives in today's video game community, a community now looking to completely immerse all the senses to point at which all other worlds are excluded. Think of modern gaming from the perspective of our physical and mental faculties: the touch pad saturates our sense of touch, and can even occupy our four limbs (e.g. the Nintendo Wii); the majority of one's field of vision is taken up by the video screen; speakers or headphones bombard our ears with sounds; while the rules and goals of the game occupy our stream of

thoughts. Additionally, many gamers also feel the compulsion to be constantly snacking while they play,<sup>v</sup> as food will allow them to inundate their senses of smell and taste, thus completing their control and mastery over all five senses and the thoughts that bind them.

With regards to thought in particular, the Emotiv headset pushes the gaming experience to an even greater degree. Whereby one can control aspects of the game with their mind, phenomenological reality changes without the intervention of the body. Whereas technology hitherto aimed at extending our physical control over the world, the spirit of the new technology demands that a mere thought or desire be enough to change phenomenological reality radically. To some extent we have always had this power (e.g. we all know how sad mood can make a grey day literally look greyer). What is different about the spirit of the new technology, though, is the extent to which the boundaries of this existential fact can be pushed.

Imagine, if you will, a future in which an off-mood can literally wreck the town, like the Twilight Zone episode "It's a Good Life", where a rural community is enslaved by a little boy with incredible psycho-kinetic powers. The people of this village know that his bad day could literally wipe them out, and so they pander to his every immature desire. In like manner, the spirit of the new technology strives for everyone to have this kind of psycho-kinetic control, which is already unfolding in the 'juvenile' world of video games. It is only a matter of time before this technology takes on three dimensions and shifts from being a toy, to a critical and powerful tool.

To some extent, there is a democratization here of the kind of power once only exercised by absolute rulers and dictators. Whereas the despot can reduce a town or country

to ashes with a word, the modern gamer can reduce an entire world with the click of a button, or soon, a mere thought.

In the imaginary and 'virtual' worlds of gaming communities, every gamer is already in possession of their own nuclear arsenals. Turn off the game, and one effectively obliterate these virtual realities. On the one hand, the more often we merge our phenomenological realities with these digital worlds, the closer we get to living pure artificiality: imagination instantly made concrete. On the other, the more one's existential realities get intertwined with the digital, the more one's very being depends on it, such that a digital simulacrum of suicide becomes as effective as the concrete act.<sup>vi</sup>

**13.** The spirit of the new technology is artistic, and over-brims with our desire to control and reshape the world according to our desires and imaginations. Not wanting to be passive spectators to the media spectacle, we're no longer satisfied with what McLuhan would call "cool" technologies, ones that do not require much "participation".<sup>vii</sup> Even our 'hottest' media (e.g. radio, print, etc.) appear cold in light of technologies like the Emotiv headset, which allows one to mold our new media forms much like a potter molds clay.

Consider television for a moment. Since its inception, the television spectacle has been forced to 'heat' itself up, yielding to viewers' demands for some means of controlling this visual power. For example, live news coverage infuses one with a sense that they are participants in the news spectacle, and that the news is part of their reality. Every time an anchor slips-up, or some idiot in the background screams out 'Hi mom!', one is reminded that news is unfolding even as it's being reported on. Similarly, every time one sees themselves or

someone they know on TV, it reminds them that the world of news intersects with their own, and that the news is but an extension of their lives.

In response, producers are constantly looking for ways of 'heating up' television programs, for the more they can induce this feeling, the more likely viewers will believe their lives are at stake in the program. For example, right on the heels of television mass-marketing was the live telethon, the chance for viewers to call-in and participate in the show directly. Television had hereby borrowed some of the heat of radio, which forced its audiences to imagine the faces and scenes behind everything they heard, thus increasing their participation in the program.

Today, television shows are over-saturated with these attempts to warm themselves up. The screen is layered with streaming text feeds of live news or viewer comments, on-line surveys, corporate and commercial symbols, animated graphics indicating viewer and audience approval, etc. Meanwhile, so called-reality television serves as a constant reminder that we are the television spectacle, and that the drama is of our own making. Regardless of how much of this is real or staged, the popularity of these methods attests to an ongoing fascination with the television spectacle, and the mass desire to harmonize our lives with it.

**14.** In the spirit of the new technology, there is a difference in kind between one who watches television on a TV set, and one who watches on-line. The former must put their life on hold and existentially submit themselves to the television spectacle. Bowing down before their plasma altar, they can do little more than sacrifice a bag of Doritos to their advertising gods.<sup>viii</sup> Contrariwise, one who watches television on-line can do so at their leisure, or do it in

conjunction to accomplishing other tasks. Increasingly, television must come to them, on their terms, and relative to their existential projects.

In the spirit of the new technology, we cater the world to our desires, and are increasingly able to choose the phenomena we ingest. In this way, the phenomenological adventure is no just a matter of returning "back to the things themselves" (Husserl), but of seizing control of the world such that that which is in-itself is manipulable. We may enter the world a blank slate, but very quickly we carve and divide it into a canvas or computer screen, a plaything of our fancy.

Video games present us with a whole other conundrum. On the one hand, one must enter the world of the game wholeheartedly, and submit to the boundaries of its virtual reality. However, within this reality one is granted limited freedom, as their avatar explores the space of the game and expresses itself therein. Although the art of video games is still in its primitive phases, there are already many signs that the virtual space of a game will soon mirror the complexity of the world outside it.<sup>x</sup> The growing gaming market attests to the millions of people that already spend hours a day inside these virtual worlds, much like their ancestors preferred to whittle away their hours inside the worlds of a book or board-game.<sup>x</sup>

- i McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994, p. 3).
- ii From this perspective, the 'old-skool' b-boy, strutting his way through Harlem with a boom-box on his shoulders was a cowboy of the new sound frontier, a pioneer of future sound-scapes.
- iii Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. (New York: Routledge, 2003, p. vii).
- iv [Http://www.emotiv.com](http://www.emotiv.com).
- v No wonder internet cafes always have food. Not only is it another money making avenue, but it is part of the whole experience desired.
- vi Consider the strange case of sixteen-year-old Brandon Crisp, a video-game addict who's parents banned him from playing. Crisp died in the process of running away from home in the hopes of connecting with some of his online peers. See: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disappearance\\_of\\_Brandon\\_Crisp](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disappearance_of_Brandon_Crisp)
- vii McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994, p. 23).
- viii Even the tivo watcher must set aside the space and time.
- ix E.g. 'second-life' players, army combat simulators, etc.
- x Likewise, video games have the potential to demand as much creative attention as any novel or board game, especially when we consider that the format will soon be available in a variety of different three-dimensional 'virtual' realities.