

Phatic Touch, or The Instance of the Gadget in the Unconscious

SCOTT KRZYCH

Abstract:

This article draws on Lacanian theory in order to analyse the role of technology in the constitution of posthuman subjects. It does so by focussing firstly on those aspects of Lacan's teachings that engage with science and technology, particularly the concept of the 'alethosphere' developed in Seminar XVII, which refers to an environment of gadgets that plug directly into human desire. The article then goes on to apply this notion of the 'alethosphere' to a key technological, cultural and also political example: the interactive, touch-screen electoral maps made popular during the 2008 American election. Through a close analysis of one use of such maps during a CNN broadcast, the author demonstrates both the essential meaninglessness of this technology, and the support it nonetheless provides to the search for meaning, in the form of a unified American national subject emerging consensually from the spectacle of the process of democracy.

Keywords: alethosphere, Freud, Lacan, posthuman, psychoanalysis, technology

The digital devices and interactive environments that constitute our increasingly virtual world help us to understand, perhaps in an entirely new way, what Jacques Lacan meant by the materiality of language. In 'The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious', Lacan proposes a temporal distinction between spoken communication and the linguistic structures on which communication relies. 'The primary reason for this', Lacan explains, 'is that language, with its structure, exists prior to each subject's entry into it at a certain moment of his mental development'.¹ A conversation, then, requires more than the participation of two interlocutors in dialogue; it is also an inter-action,

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an exchange of ideas reliant on the discursive parameters through which thought finds itself. This material support for speech achieves new significance in an era that includes email, instant messaging, text messaging, and video conferencing. The possibility of communication now quite literally emerges out of technological substructures that may soon be, if they are not already, as intimate and necessary to daily life as spoken language. From a Freudian perspective, we might qualify these changes as just the most recent attempt by civilization to transcend the limits of mortal life, 'to become a kind of prosthetic God'.² With Lacan's view of material discourse in mind, however, we might understand our prosthetic technologies not as devices unable to meet our preconceived fantasies but instead a material system that in many cases predates our inclusion within it, and thereby instigates fantasy as we attempt to make sense of ourselves *retroactively* in and through our technological gadgets.

A psychoanalytic view of the posthuman landscape requires a reiteration of the distinction between structure and subject, but in a new context. The growing indistinction between cyber-structures and subjectivity is a central concern for theorists of cyber-culture, particularly for N. Katherine Hayles in her ongoing work on posthumanism. Donna Haraway's 'cyborg' may have been an appropriate designation for individuals living in the twentieth century who experienced new capacities for self-expression and self-modification through informatics and bio-technology. However, in the twenty-first century, Hayles writes, 'the individual person—or for that matter, the individual cyborg—is no longer the appropriate unit of analysis, if indeed it ever was. At issue now (and in the past) are distributed cultural cognitions embodied both in people and their technologies'.³ As Hayles convincingly argues throughout her work, the posthuman must be understood not as the extension of the human brain into 'thinking' computers; the posthuman landscape is instead a complex system involving minds and bodies, humans and machines, in a process of embodied feedback which Hayles terms the 'cognisphere'.⁴ Lacan coined his own term for a world populated by techno-scientific gadgets: the 'alethosphere'.⁵ Like Hayles's concept, the alethosphere is constituted by the extension of thought—scientific discourse in particular—into material environments in which we have little choice but to 'plug in'. However, for Lacan, the feedback between structure and subject inevitably produces objective remainders, instances in which subjects fail to achieve ecological symbiosis. Even in 'smart' environments, there remains something

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of the unthought, or points of disjuncture in which the products of collective intelligence fail to make good on their promised satisfaction, revealing the persistent singularity of subjective desire.

There is perhaps no better candidate for thinking the unthought within the alethosphere than contemporary U.S. cable-news, with its seemingly mindless coverage of political melodrama mediated by ever more spectacular modes of digital gadgetry. My specific focus is the interactive electoral maps and other opinion-tracking devices popularized in the media's coverage of the 2008 U.S. election cycle. As a conduit between the amorphous multitude and the figure of the pundit, these visual maps represent the ideal of democracy in visual form, while the interactive screens likewise produce spatial traces to mark the act of subjective interpretation. Within these thinking-environments, the screens embody a metaphorical geography of public opinion as well as the interpretive gestures of political commentators, producing a dual embodiment of misrecognition and failure. The interactive surface makes visible the singular act of touch which expresses the misguided attempt to locate a collective Cartesian subject hidden within the masses. To date, psychoanalysis has had much to say about the function of discourse on the individual and the social, but it has dealt too little with what we might understand as the materialization of discourse in various forms of technology and technological systems. To think the posthuman in general and (what I call) prosthetic politics in particular, requires a consideration of emergent forms of the unthought within our thinking spheres — the unconscious, in other words — when digital prosthetics serve not only to organize and represent our desires but also to reproduce the very structure of desire.

Phatic Images

If democracy, for some, is an ideal form of government, then representation serves as democracy's common but problematic technique. Representative democracy, in which elected officials serve as intermediaries for the 'will of the people', results in what Hardt and Negri, after Deleuze and Guattari, term a 'disjunctive synthesis': the populace is connected indirectly to the governing institutions through a mediation that, like any mediation, maintains a minimal disconnection between the government and the governed.⁶ Even in established democracies, real power for the people remains unrealized and requires 'a radical innovation and a new science' (*M*, 247),

if democracy ever hopes to arrive and make real its ideal promises. For cyber-theorist Pierre Lévy, the innovations necessary for a direct democracy are already largely in place.⁷ Digital technologies—especially online networks—instantiate new forms of collective intelligence, in which the rational exchange between connected individuals produces a new form of globalized cognition. Applying these new media realities to a political context, Lévy tells us, promises to eradicate the molar acts of periodic elections, giving way in the near future to more molecular and speedy forms of virtual democracy in which citizens participate in collective daily governance. In other words, the voting booth may soon be replaced by the laptop or cell phone.⁸ Of course, Lévy's utopian account ultimately exchanges one technique for another. Rather than an elected official who represents the people, Lévy hopes to bypass this now unnecessary detour with a more immediate, cyber-democratic feedback loop. What remains to be seen, though, is whether the *new* in new media entails the component parts necessary for a new democracy. Can the democratic ideal and the representative technique finally achieve synthesis?

Underlying the debatable merits of a real-time-democracy is an even more fundamental question concerning causality. For the more pessimistic posthumanist thinkers, particularly Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio, the same benign instruments of human intelligence (digital and interactive media, telecommunications, etc.) cited approvingly by Lévy are instead labeled as existential threats to the ideals of liberal humanism; there can be no collective intelligence once technology becomes the primary means of discursive mediation; all that will remain are intellectual simulacra leading to universal stupefaction. From a psychoanalytic perspective, however, these seemingly opposing trends within posthumanism indicate two sides of the same coin. For Lacan, causality is itself a fantasmatic image of totality posited to explain a fundamental gap constitutive of human experience. Both for questions of posthumanism in general and for posthuman politics in particular, the psychoanalytic perspective benefits from Lacan's refusal to allow a moralizing distinction between the totalized image of the subject (the ego) and the discursive operation of subjectivity (the unconscious). Language neither prevents nor promotes the 'proper' functioning of the individual; instead, the self is itself only an idealized and imaginary figure produced as an after-effect of the subject's capture in language.

The question concerning posthuman technology, then, is not whether it promotes intelligence or stupidity. A more useful approach

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would avoid the distinction between intelligence and stupidity entirely; it would think these two terms instead as equally necessary operations of subjectivity. As Lacan says repeatedly throughout his seminars, 'the signifier represents the subject to other signifiers', even noting bluntly, on one occasion, the impossible divide between language and intelligence: 'The signifier is stupid'.⁹ To label the building blocks of language 'stupid' introduces the role of discourse in the production of a totality. As Lacan repeatedly reminded his seminar participants, the seemingly rational judgment expressed by Descartes's *cogito ergo sum* entails a paradoxical disjuncture between the activity of thinking, on the one hand, and the act of judgment on the other. Not a revelation of the self's unitary existence that comes by way of the act of thought, the *cogito*, 'I think, therefore I am', requires instead the assumption of a self-present *I* who precedes the act of thinking, thereby lending a mark of unity to the act.¹⁰ The conclusion *ergo sum*, for Lacan, does not differ in kind from the operation of thought that produced it. Or, as Lacan puts it, rather succinctly, 'This "Therefore I am" is a thought' (S XVII, 155).¹¹ Accordingly, to say that the signifier is stupid is not to say that the subject is stupid, or even that analysis can help the subject move beyond the signifier to reach a higher form of intelligence. Instead, to embrace the stupidity of the signifier means refusing the notion that something exists outside of discourse that would render discourse meaningful.

The contemporary role played by public opinion polling provides a useful example for our consideration of the relation between technique and totality, stupidity and intelligence. In a public sphere increasingly dominated by blind partisanship, the opinion poll enjoys at least the appearance of objectivity. Nevertheless, the 'margin of error' — a poll's explicit admission of inaccuracy — displays a ready reminder that we would do well to maintain our critical distance. The inability of polling data to ever reach one hundred per cent accuracy, rather than inviting our scepticism concerning the very basis of statistical research, perhaps invites us to trust it all the more for its self-conscious admission of failure. Furthermore, it justifies the need for yet another survey to supplement the ones that came before. Opinion polling, we could say, follows the inherent logic of endless testing that Avital Ronell attributes to scientific inquiry: 'Science can master the infinity of its subject matter only through the infinite pursuit of its method and can master the latter infinities only by means of technical thought and activity that are empty of meaning'.¹² The only absolute for science is the impossibility of ever reaching a point of complete closure,

precisely because its judgments never accede beyond its own material operations.

A project 'empty of meaning', however, does not prevent the impression of something meaningful just over the horizon; the determination of truth and the semblance of truth are two entirely different matters. Despite the seemingly unanswerable question underlying any opinion poll—What do the people want?—the inability to garner an accurate or complete answer does not prevent the question, in its very articulation, from presuming a democratic totality available for scientific study. That is to say, the operation of political polling, in its charting of difference, inevitably leads to the production of a figurative representation that would make these differences appear within a unifying frame.¹³ Seen in this light, the various assortment of visual maps that appear regularly in political media coverage provide one point in a logical progression where totality, or the semblance of totality, is always already at stake. With a geography composed of clearly distinguishable states coloured in red and blue, the electoral map realizes in visual form the subjective cartography that polling attempts to chart. As a viewer, I may identify with my proper place in the majority or minority, in relation to my political friend or enemy, or even to none of the above. Either way, my position within the political is established as more than just a relation to number; it is also confirmed as a position within geographical space. The increased reliance in the news media on these colorful figurations of polling data, moreover, allows for interesting points of contact between the scientific discourse of polling, the techno-scientific object necessary to display the information, and the attempts by the commentators to turn the information into a meaningful narrative. More often than not, the intersection is less than successful.

In political news coverage, network and cable news channels employ a wide array of hosts, pundits, commentators and reporters, all of whom are tasked with the job of simultaneously informing and entertaining the public. High-definition electoral maps divide the country into individual regions and states, compiling untold bits of data from both past and current elections, and thereby blend fact with spectacle. The machinic assemblages' questionable use-value appeared in one particularly striking example—there were many others—during CNN's coverage of the March 2008 Republican and Democratic primary elections in Texas. Standing before a high-definition video screen composed of real-time voting results from each county in the state, hosts Wolf Blitzer and John King attempted

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to explain the import of the colourful polling information. At the beginning of the segment, the Texas map appeared coloured in red, indicating, King explained, counties in which John McCain held a significant lead over his Republican competitors. Then, touching a finger to the upper-left portion of the screen, the map changed instantly to display ongoing results in the Democratic battle between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. King would go on to explain, as we might have already guessed from the wider variety of colours appearing across the Texas county lines, that the Democratic contestants were caught up in close battle for the state.¹⁴

The interactive technology operating the electoral screen in the case, known as ‘perceptive pixels’, allows the user to directly manipulate the image with the touch of a finger, at one moment zooming out to a broader view, and at another moment drawing free-hand in a variety of coloured lines to denote areas of significance. The relative speed of the real-time interaction, though, does not necessarily produce perceptive results. Indeed, what we might safely call the *stupidity* of the CNN segment results from how, despite the real-time accumulation of data and the expression of this data in clearly delineated visual form, Blitzer and King repeatedly advise viewers against any actual leaps of judgment. King tells us ‘not to make any conclusions based on what you’re seeing on this map’ and later reminds us, referring to the screen, ‘This means nothing’. Then, at one point, King takes a particular interest in one small county:

King: We are at 1 per cent of the vote in Texas. So *by no means make any conclusions* about what you’re seeing on this map right now. This is *very preliminary* (...) [Pointing to a single district in West Texas coloured in green] I was looking at this county earlier. The green means it’s tied, so I thought, ‘What’s going on here?’ [King touches the green box and the screen zooms in to reveal the actual vote count] (...) It’s Glasscock County and guess what? It’s one vote to one vote. [Pushing his two index fingers together on the screen so that it moves back to a wide view] So you see these things on the map as the results come in. (...) It’s *not always what it appears* looking at the screen.

In this instance, despite the clear complexity of the visual display, the point of contact between the screen and commentator seems oddly incongruous. Rather than previewing and digesting the information prior to its dissemination on television, the electoral screen allows for real-time reporting, which in turn results in the presentation of information without explanation. Accordingly, the mere fact that

the machine allows for the freedom of digital representation likewise affords a space for the very imprecision it was created to solve.

The electoral gadget in this instance appears to offer convincing evidence that technology continues to advance at an exponential rate and it appears that humans may be increasingly left behind. Paul Virilio, for instance, fears that the global expansion of televisual systems marks the potential end of history, particularly our ability to write history for ourselves. In *The Vision Machine*, Virilio laments the eventual substitution of human vision for machinic vision, and he traces a devolving path that originates with the invention of still photography, increases in severity with cinema, and reaches apocalyptic levels with contemporary telecommunications. For Virilio, vision machines entail the potential for an expansive and totalizing view of the world that far exceeds the human capacity for either sight or thought; humanity will thereby transform into a helpless child dominated by the machine's all seeing-eye. In contrast to the machine's 'automation of perception', Virilio fears the collapse of a rational and limited human ego. While the human can only see in part, and must therefore selectively interpret the field of vision, the machine, on the contrary, excludes nothing:

[The] public image has today replaced former public spaces in which social communication took place. Avenues and public venues from now on are eclipsed by the screen, by electronic displays, in a preview of the 'vision machines' just around the corner. The latter will be capable of seeing and perceiving in our place.¹⁵

Understood in this way, the electoral polling map discussed above exemplifies a screened social space where a computer appears to see and calculate public opinion without our assistance, or, at the very least, it seems our assistance only gets in the way. Blitzer and King fail to locate significant truth in the electoral screen's image, if we view the segment by Virilio's terms, because they associate too closely with the machinic logic embodied on-screen. The map provides access to previously unthinkable amounts of information, yet in this excessive vision there remains no proper place for interpretation. To say, as King does, 'This [image] means nothing' is symptomatic, then, of the vision machine's dominance and of the inability to offer historical judgments once the field of statistical information becomes infinitely expansive.

Even though the electoral map allows for direct human interaction in real-time, the intellectual relation between human and machine appears to lack or even negate the production of insight. The display

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illustrates what Virilio terms a *phatic image*, which he defines, in a typically pessimistic tone, as ‘a targeted image that forces you to look and holds your attention’ and ‘the result of an ever brighter illumination (. . .), singling out only specific areas, the context mostly disappearing into a blur’ (*IM*, 14). With our example in mind, Virilio’s notion of an image that negates context seems applicable, but his attribution of agency to the image—it ‘forces you to look’—seems more hypothetical than actual. While the knowledge gleaned from the electoral map by King may prove useless, the screen still appears to be a benign instrument in the hands of an active human agent. Nevertheless, to think of the interactive screen as a phatic image, which puts the CNN hosts in contact with the demos without prompting a meaningful exchange, opens a useful avenue for thinking the ‘mindless’ relation between human subject and technological object.

My alternative to Virilio’s position, then, draws on Lacan’s discussion of the relation between scientific discourse and human experience, particularly in his extended discussion of cybernetics in *Seminar II*.¹⁶ The benefit of Lacan’s thinking lies in his conception of technology as the material embodiment of the subject’s constitution within the symbolic. As Lacan explains, ‘The machine is the structure detached from the activity of the subject. The symbolic world is the world of the machine’.¹⁷ Taking the structural form of the unconscious, then, the technical object serves as an objective locus to reveal our status as desiring beings. The revelatory potential of technological objects, we might say, owes directly to their phatic function: when we attribute meaning to the machine in excess of its actual, repetitive, and mindless operations, our engagement demonstrates how our desire functions in excess of the machine. Whether we ascribe to the machine the potential for solving social, biological, and economic ills, or whether we lament, with Virilio, its all-encompassing dominion over human activity, the technological object manifests our own affective investments and fantasmatic priorities.

In *Seminar II*, Lacan associates machinic automation and repetition with the unconscious, in direct contrast to the excesses of the human ego. Offering the following thought experiment, Lacan asks us to suppose that there are no human beings on earth, and that a motion picture camera, operating on its own, records the image of a mountain reflected in a lake, and then develops the film of its own accord. Lacan then asks us to imagine the possible response when people eventually return and stumble across the automated image: ‘What is certain is that—as soon as they saw on the film the image of

the mountain, they would also see its reflection in the lake. They would also see the movements which took place on the mountain, and those of the image.' (47) Whereas the camera captures a totality of movement, Lacan describes human subjectivity as that which cannot avoid selection. The hypothetical viewer, rather than seeing the image in its entirety, scans the various objects represented on film, searching the image and even the apparatus for some trace of meaning. The point of Lacan's camera analogy is to demonstrate the singularity of the human subject. On the one hand, there is the single camera, with a view of the world particular to its position in space and time. Each individual human, on the other hand, is likewise singular, but inevitably misrecognizes this fundamental fact of existence, choosing instead to invest in any number of fantasmatic narratives to supplement mere existence with meaning. This divide between technology and subjectivity is nothing less than the difference between the (re)presentation of the actual contrasted with the desire to construct a (virtual) history—a historical perspective Virilio fears we have lost but which psychoanalysis tells us was always already fantasy. While the camera simply documents the natural scene on film, the human subject searches the image for the sign of something meaningful. The technical apparatus thus offers us easy access to the contrast between actual experience and fantasmatic experience, between the phatic activity of an individual unconscious and the narcissistic ego.

Returning to our topic of political polls, I argue that the interactive electoral map actually demonstrates our relation to the technological better than Lacan's hypothetical camera. The polling map represents the human to the human, maintaining a visual trace of collective opinion, as well as the markings made by the pundits attempting to supply an ego to popular id. Struggling to find meaning in the polling data, Blitzer and King transpose onto the technical image what the image and the machine that produced it necessarily lack. While Virilio might say that the pundits struggle because the machine shows too much, I would argue that it is not a question of technical excess but rather technical lack—specifically, the lack of an ego in the machine. The activity of polling, represented on screen, may continue without end because there is no ultimate answer to the questions it poses; the political commentators thus appear infantile in front of the machine, not because it sees more, but because it sees less. That is to say, the commentators fall into the very trap that Lacan ascribes to the subject's fundamental misrecognition: we believe that there is more than meets

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the eye. In addition, the interactive feature of the screen, far beyond anything existing in Lacan's time, provides us with an added level for understanding Lacan's argument, perhaps even providing us with an avenue for extending his claims further. The interactive machine retains a visual trace of the pundits as they attempt to supply the very meaning refused by the poll's visualization. Unlike Lacan's example, there is no need to imagine an egotistical excess at work because the perceptive pixels on the screen chart this excess right before our eyes. Whereas Lacan could only describe the movement of human sight as it seeks to interpret the meaning behind an image, here the interactive screen charts this very same movement. With their fingers touching the screen, producing lines of colour in their wake, the pundits attempt to reach into the machine — or so it appears — hoping to extract some semblance of truth. The screen literally tracks and retains a visual archive of their failure.

Phatic Objects

In a digital updating of the Cartesian cogito, the CNN pundits overlook their co-implication in the machinic logic. The people are thinking, or so the screen tells us, therefore 'the people' surely exist. What remains to be seen is whether psychoanalysis should locate in the virtual realities of posthumanism merely the repetition of age-old symptoms, or whether the ubiquity of techno-scientific objects poses the need for new conceptual frames. In *Seminar XX*, Lacan seemed to suggest the latter when he indicated his own view of an interactive environment not unlike those considered by posthumanists: 'Scientific discourse has engendered all sorts of instruments that we must, from our vantage point here, qualify as gadgets. You are now, infinitely more than you think, subjects of instruments that, from the microscope right down to the radiotelevision, are becoming the elements of your existence.' (82) This statement appears to introduce a minor but not insignificant qualification of subjectivity: What might it mean to think the human as both subjected to language and subjected to gadgets?

The answer, for Lacan, is to take proper account of the material impact of scientific discourse on phenomenal space. Science opens up entire worlds of knowledge separate from our lived experience. Accordingly, we may possess encyclopedic knowledge of other galaxies or of uninhabitable spaces on our own planet, yet outside the domain

of scientific discourse these realms remain entirely foreign to lived experience. However, with the development of techno-scientific gadgets, the previously hypothetical spheres of scientific knowledge achieve concrete materialization and, in the posthuman era, appear in the public and domestic spaces as a globally integrated system. The techno-sciences constitute new and strange environments, instituting an inhuman world in our very midst. Now, Lacan notes, we experience scientific discourse not in books, in laboratories, or in our imagination, but rather ‘on our hands’, resulting in an entirely new sphere of experience that Lacan terms the alethosphere:¹⁸

If you have a little microphone here, you are plugged into the alethosphere. What is really something is that if you are in a little vehicle that is transporting you toward Mars you can still plug into the alethosphere. And, even, this surprising effect of structure which meant that two or three people have gone wandering around the moon, you must think that, concerning their exploit, it was certainly not for no reason that they always stayed within the alethosphere. (S XVII, 161)

By this description, the alethosphere provides an inescapable material system necessary for thought, perception, and feeling. Just as the *cogito ergo sum* creates the *I* through the act of thinking, so too has science ‘brought into existence, in the world, things that did not in any way exist at the level of our perception’, and which may coalesce in new privileged objects to attract our desire (*objet petit a*) (158). We have already seen how electoral maps serve to represent the ideal of democratic totality, while the interactive mode of the perceptive pixels offers a new form to evidence the paradoxical reciprocity between cause and effect. Lacan’s notion of the alethosphere adds to this discussion a conceptual frame by which to consider the technological gadget as more than just a recording device that tracks the failure of desire. We might also consider how desire—which is always directed toward an impossible whole—may in fact emerge from the technological gadget itself.

The field of political polling and news coverage again serves as a useful means to consider how the gadgets of the alethosphere may in fact constitute desire. Professional pollster Frank Luntz periodically appears as a contributor to the conservative cable-channel, Fox News, where he subjects sample audiences to ‘instant response dials’ or ‘People-Meters’ that allow for the real-time tracking of subjective opinion. Sitting before television screens that may play a political speech or debate, session participants use hand-held dials to express their feelings about what they see and hear, using the dials to index

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their second-by-second reactions. Turning the dial in one direction to show approval and in the other direction to mark disapproval, the participants express their real-time feelings while their responses are calculated by a computer and are represented by continuous lines on a graph superimposed on a monitor. In the context of political news coverage, of course, Luntz's sample audiences and their technological prosthetics amount to little more than a media gimmick. The interactive gadgets and the output onto colourful charts lend the scene an aura of scientific accuracy, while the inclusion of the people promises reactions more authentic than those of partisan hacks and professional spin doctors. Nevertheless, the potentially wide range of audience reactions expressed through the people-meters remains proscribed by the very operation that brings their opinions to light. First, the continuous lines appearing on the graph do not represent each individual participant, but instead indicate the averaged responses from the audience based on their political affiliation as Democrat, Republican, or Independent. Second, Luntz completes every segment by interviewing the audience members, asking them to explain the reasons behind their responses. The people-meter gadgets may offer an increased ability to tap into the psyche of the public, but the output of information must still be rendered meaningful, thereby obfuscating a broad continuum made up of the participants' singular reactions.

I suggest that we see in this instrument a phatic function—a stupidity to ground intelligence—wherein technology serves not merely as an analogy for the excesses of human desire but instead serves as the very instigator of desire. As gadgets intended to track acts of political opinion, the active use of the instant dials introduces a new mode of interactive participation; the real-time reaction to every single syllable spoken by a politician places a scientifically motivated demand on the participant that cannot be fulfilled. By asking the audience to make sense of their input after the fact, Luntz unwittingly acknowledges that the act of input is senseless; the operations of judgment and the act of judgment are irrevocably separated. In the context of the *cogito ergo sum*, the polling gadget provides the operative means for the 'I am thinking', whereas the 'therefore I am' is the retroactive addition of (political) identity to what functions otherwise as a phatic stream of consciousness. The operation of thought and the fantasmatic image of a unified self never coalesce, but in their failed exchange constitute the subject's self-divided existence as a speaking, prosthetic being.

The instant response dials, like the CNN map, demonstrate Lacan's notion of scientific discourse materialized in technological gadgets, like little technological lures 'on the footpath at the corner of every street, behind every window', all 'designed to be the cause of your desire, insofar as it is now science that governs it' (S XVII, 162). Therefore, when smart environments seem to turn (us) stupid, we should avoid taking this so-called lack of intelligence at face value. The unthinking cognosphere may in fact reveal a phatic relation to technology, in which the claimed absence of thought (*à la* Virilio) is itself a pessimistic smoke screen used to mask the anxiety arising when gadgets—the products of our making—bring the singularity of our desires too close for comfort. Technically speaking, our phatic gadgets neither promote nor prevent intelligence: **they are not without meaning**. They are neither inside us nor outside us, but instead constitute what Lacan calls an extimate relation: 'something strange to me, although it is at the heart of me'.¹⁹

NOTES

- 1 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, translated by Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 413. Henceforth *E*.
- 2 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* [1930] in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited and translated by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), XXI, 57–145 (91–2).
- 3 N. Katherine Hayles, 'Unfinished Work: From Cyborg to Cognisphere', *Theory, Culture & Society* 23:7–8 (2006), 159–66 (160).
- 4 Before employing the term cognisphere, Hayles had earlier proposed the idea that 'every day we participate in systems whose total cognitive capacity exceeds our individual knowledge', so that our successes owe less to individual creativity or genius than to the fact that we have 'constructed smarter environments in which to work'. See N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 289.
- 5 Lacan discusses this concept, which I take up more fully later in the essay, in *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XVII. The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 150–63. Henceforth *S XVII*. I am especially grateful to the editors of this special issue, Suzanne Dow and Colin Wright, for pointing me to this critical concept in Lacan's late work.

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- 6 See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), 241 (henceforth *M*), and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (London: Athlone, 2000), 12.
- 7 Pierre Lévy, *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace*, translated by Robert Bononno (New York: Plenum Trade, 1997), 63–4.
- 8 Media scholars have already begun to track an increase in political participation via the Internet. See especially Henry Jenkins, 'Afterword: Reflections on Politics in the Age of Youtube' in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 271–94.
- 9 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge 1972–1973*, translated by Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 82. Henceforth *S XX*.
- 10 Dany Nobus offers a particularly insightful discussion of Lacan, the cogito and science in 'A Matter of Cause: Reflections on Lacan's "Science and Truth"' in *Lacan and Science*, edited by Jason Glynos and Yannis Stavrakakis (London: Karnac, 2002), 89–118.
- 11 Neil Badmington locates a similar disjuncture in the *post* of posthuman: 'If technology has truly sped "us" outside and beyond the space of humanism, why is "Man" still at "our" side? If "Man" is present at "his" own funeral, how can "he" possibly be dead?' 'Theorizing Posthumanism', *Cultural Critique* 53 (Winter 2003), 10–27 (13).
- 12 Avital Ronnell, *The Test Drive* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 8.
- 13 My thinking on this matter is heavily indebted to the work done by media theorist Meghan Sutherland on the intersection of representation, spectacle and the rhetoric of variety. See *The Flip Wilson Show* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), and 'Being on Television', *FlowTV Media Journal* 11:3 (December 2009), <http://flowtv.org/?p=4577>.
- 14 A low-quality video clip of the segment is available here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ROJ9xKavFEs>.
- 15 Paul Virilio, *The Image Machine* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 64. Henceforth *IM*.
- 16 For a useful discussion of cybernetics and *Seminar II*, see John Johnston, *The Allure of Machinic Life: Cybernetics, Artificial Life, and the New AI*, (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2008), Chapter 2.
- 17 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II. The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), 4.

- 18 Although they do not discuss the alethosphere specifically, psychoanalytic theorists Jerry Aline Flieger and André Nusselder have both offered timely books that consider the impact of networked society on Lacan's view of the subject. See Jerry Aline Flieger, *Is Oedipus Online? Siting Freud After Freud* (Cambridge Mass.: The MIT Press, 2005) and André Nusselder, *Interface Fantasy: A Lacanian Cyborg Ontology* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2009).
- 19 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book VII. The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, edited by Jacques Alain-Miller, translated by Dennis Porter (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), 71.