

## **Lecture for the ISEA 2004 (Wearable experience)**

**By Jorge Luis Marzo (Barcelona, Spain)**

The intervention proposed here is related to a host of questions arising from the verification of an epidemic, which by now is widespread: the celebration of the technological phenomenon as capitalism's maximum achievement and, conversely, the extolment of technology as the utmost social architect. Before expanding on this we need to determine, if at all possible, what technology we shall be referring to, and establish what social domain we are focussing on.

The forms of technology we shall be discussing here are those provided for public use, essentially concerning audio-vision and communication and which entail a radical transformation of their appearance (interfaces) in order to reach the great mass of potential audience (marketing), according to the modes of individualised interaction in a world where attention to detail makes all the difference and adds surplus value.

The social domain is none other than the triumphant definition of the individual in the second half of the twentieth century, invested with the power of privacy, freedom of movements and ethical dispersion. In this sense, we are not pointing out anything new but merely analysing the scope of the concept of the contemporary individual in the light of a renewed form of capitalism, legitimised by the force of individual decisions.

In this realm of work we already encounter two of the paths we wish to follow:

-Firstly, Can we establish that social, personal and micro-political relations in the West have changed as a result of the progressive introduction of personal individualised mechanisms of communication?

-Secondly, Does this only apply in the West? Is the fire of globalisation kindled by the impact of such intimate communication technology? Let's hear what the founder of Sony said in the sixties: "Radios, small enough so each individual will be able to carry them around for his new use, with power that will enable civilization to reach even those areas that have no electric power yet."

Could we also suggest that the situation of capitalist individuals, more and more removed from their social environment and potential capacity for socialisation, has given rise to the emergence of technology for individual use?

Could we say it is the isolation itself that has triggered the success of these forms of micro-technology, as a new opportunity to create communication

channels while breaking the dynamics of isolationism so clearly established in recent years?

To what degree was Durkheim right to presume that “individual forms of consciousness, in themselves, are closed off from one another and can only communicate by means of signs that convey their interior states”? Is it symptomatic that Bell and other researchers studying the telephone should have hit upon the invention thanks to their interests in the art of teaching the deaf and dumb to speak?

The use we make of technology stems from social decisions that, intrinsically, reproduce the socio-political nature that initially shaped them. It thus becomes very interesting to heed the comments defining the archaeology of the links between technology and behaviour: “Videogames do not affect children. If they did and the Pacman had affected us when we were kids we would now be wandering through dark places, eating magic pills and listening to repetitive electronic rhythms”, said Kristian Wilson, Spokesman for Nintendo Inc., in 1989.

These are the fundamental issues we shall be raising. It is not a matter of speculating on conspiratorial theories or mercantile intrigues (that we all know to proliferate), but of carefully observing processes and dynamics that must have indelibly marked the complex relations between technology increasingly given over to reason, and the desires of each individual. Of course we do ask ourselves what came first, the chicken or the egg; either modern isolated individuals in need of social connection as their work environment gradually closed in and their class struggle lost prestige while a fascinating media world opened up, or the achievements of a certain type of technology and companies that have remarkably transformed our social and relational habits.

The number of telephone calls made in Spain today has increased by 40% with regard to twelve years ago, exactly since the appearance of mobile phones. Why is this? Did people keep calls to themselves before mobiles appeared? Or do we now have more to say? And what could we spare saying? Many conversations nowadays entail a biographical account. A repeated question is, Where are you? This necessarily implies numerous and hitherto unforeseen interpretations and decisions. The biographical account seems to be confused with the need to convey experiences, particularly in the teenage sector, which is the prevailing model in current audiovisual discourse. As appears in a well-known television advertisement (has anything interesting happened to you this weekend?), what is stressed is the failure of common social experience and the success of narrative biography. Just as two people sitting in a bar share their life stories as if they were good friends.

What explains the success of the Walkman? Does technology create new necessities or is it the necessity that leads to the technology? In the fifties Akio Morita, founder of Sony, wrote: "We do not market a product that has not been developed already but develop a market for the product we make." And in 1964 Nobutoshi Kihara, creator of the first Sony video recorder, declared: "Technology does not abide by common sense. Our goal is to break down ideas people have come to accept as common sense."

Conversely, the technological discourse has had an indirect effect on the consideration of public space, understood as a place of both individual and group socialisation. Many analysts have defined contemporary public space as a scenario in which a series of actors mill around, creating communications that audiences cannot codify: private actors assuming secret rôles on their mobiles, walkmans, beepers, etc., rôles that alter the idea of a common libretto in which all can take part, a network of fluxes that favours communication between the actors at the cost of the disappearance of the work of art and its debate. "Disused public space is a reason, the most specific of reasons, for people to seek in the private sphere what they have been denied on a different level. Isolation in the midst of public visibility and emphasis placed on psychological transactions mutually complement one another", Richard Sennett said. But, is this statement still valid?

The de-socialisation of certain public spaces thanks to the introduction of technology has already been very well researched, although it would be unwise to paint a bleak picture of this situation. What is needed rather is an exercise in archaeology, an exercise that will provide us with sufficient distance to face the problem of technology from outside as well, or at least outside of the gadget of the moment.

The prophets who accuse technology of being dehumanising, both from left-wing and right-wing positions, do not acknowledge the existence of certain circumstances derived from its introduction, namely, that to a great extent the application of technology in rural areas helped to structure wider social circles; that before the advent of sound, silent film represented a wonderful opportunity for the social expression of the working classes and was subsequently adopted by the bourgeoisie, who pressed for silence in the theatres; that juke-boxes did much to favour the socialisation of a certain type of bar with a dance-floor, thus enabling people with low incomes to create their own recreation areas, away from the prohibitive dance-halls; that the installation of the cinetoscope in the Penny Arcades gave rise to new spaces of social communication; that the arcades with video games and consoles created very positive spaces of socialisation for

the future arrival of youth culture based on games and interaction, and that while funfairs homogenised patterns of behaviour and perception, they also entailed a renewed space of social liberation outside of the realm of work, just as discotheques did in more recent periods.

On the other hand, the chief advocates of technology do not acknowledge a number of significant problems caused by its impact, namely, on the scope of women's labour (secretaries, typists, telephonists, etc.); on the scope of workers' social sanctions; on the obvious militarisation of everyday life, particularly on our ability to perceive at long distance and on present communication interfaces; on the talent of marketing for generating desires that are for the most foreign to people's true needs (electrical appliances, for instance).

The discourse of contemporary marketing addresses an individual who, not having found a social narrative to identify with, voluntarily chooses isolation. This faith in the individual who is answerable to himself and is therefore legally identifiable, would lead to the introduction of hire purchase for the increased growth of communication devices in the fifties, especially radio and television, giving rise to the big bang of marketing.

This discourse is also aimed at domesticity. Capitalism brings people together in their houses, at "home, sweet home", place of shelter from the social violence generated by capitalism. The introduction of domestic technology would give rise to huge changes in the private management of spaces by individuals. Thus, electricity, gas, sewers, etc., would transform homes, as the creation of bathrooms, separate bedrooms, etc., modifying our understanding of sex, leisure and intimacy. The transformations in the American homes of the fifties included the renovation of kids' bedroom at the time of the development of the wireless; bedrooms then went on to house a musical culture stimulated by radio manufacturers and broadcasting stations. In 1882 electricity also replaced gas in street lighting. The use of electric light in large city buildings enabled their interior spaces to become even more functional and independent from the windows looking on to streets. In the long term it would be possible to do away with windows completely in buildings equipped with uniform electric light. The new technology broke the necessary link between interior and exterior illumination existing in earlier constructions.

Marketing today addresses individuals and families. Moreover, when it addresses companies it stresses values such as security and secrecy, not so much in Cold War as in domestic terms. The mobile individual is now a worker 24 hours a day, while he/she is on-line. In fact, he/she doesn't know where work begins and leisure, or privacy rather, ends.

Reliable American sociologists have studied in depth how the Internet has made a fair amount of American teenagers, difficult to place within a specific social class, feel “productive”. In some polls, seven out of ten of those under the age of eighteen regard themselves “poorly treated” because they’re not earning any money for the time they spend on the Internet. Steven Jobs cannot envisage his Apple empire without the impact of video games. “My skill with video games led me to devise something else.” Is there much difference?

Capitalism addresses families. Yet all recent European sociological reports verify the disappearance of the family. 40% of British marriages end up in divorce. What family is it addressing?

Capitalism is defined nowadays by mobility. Raymond Williams argued that domestic technology needed to be understood in terms of a long historical process that he labelled “mobile privatisation”: we have at once become more mobile more private. Means of transport, portable interfaces, the dissociation from the common symbols stemming from a past imposed by tradition, the growth of a strategic global liberalism that focuses on individuals fit for movement and punishes territories and people tending towards sedentary lifestyles.

All these issues are the background of this intervention. So, main arguments are:

- 1) Progressive privatization of modern individual has led to new definitions of public space: the privatized public space.
- 2) Social independence has led to communicational gaps which have promoted current Technologies of Communication and Information, as well as dreams of mobility associated to them.
- 3) The impact of those machines in social life is partly proportional to the effect of social life on machines. If so, can users decide about the course of some technologies?

This last question will allow us to convey all these matters. Given this background referred above, to what extent industries and designers do really know what they’re doing? Is technology merely shaped by the industry just following a sort of granted and natural functions of machines? Or are technologies being modelled day by day by users in the context of their social practices? The history of many technologies seems to go in this last direction. PC, mobile phones, the walkman, screens or videogames and many other machines did not appear as fix as we think: they happened to be because users changed somehow the functions that those gadgets were designed for. Social practices and uses, depending on the their own contexts, have always had the strength of changing the real meanings of

machines, and at the same time, have had the power of balancing the usual motivation of industries towards standards and global interfaces. Portability, wearability and mobility have to be observed in the crossroads of enormous tensions between different social practices and the main category of technology circulation: standardised interface.