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Communication, Technology and Cultural Change

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Communication, Technology and Cultural Change

Gary Krug

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Foreword

Pentimento: 'Something painted
Aimage the painter "repented," or denied
becomes visible again.'

Lives and their experiences are made visible in stories. Lives are like pictures that have been painted over, and when paint is scraped off an old picture appears. A life and the stories about it have the qualities of *pentimento*. Something new is always coming into sight, displacing what was previously certain and seen. There is no truth in the painting of a life, only multiple images of what has been, what could have been, and what now is.

Enter Gary Krug's important new book. His is a brilliant display of pentimento. He shows that there are few certain truths, only multiple tellings, no matter where we start in our histories and stories about the media and technology, something new always comes into sight. This is clearly the case with the social history of the self, the self and its embedded relationships and stories, narratives about language, culture, technology, images, writing, truth, the military-industrial complex, pornographies of the visible and apparatuses of surveillance, cyber-space, cyber-identities, the digital antinomian world. Peel back one layer of paint, one system of discourse, and something new becomes visible.

Of his project, Gary Krug, says, 'The approach taken here necessarily eschews some kinds of linear development, and some connections, particularly across chapters, will not be apparent unless the text is taken as a whole … this is not so much a university course as it is a series of conversations in a salon.'

I agree, but I prefer the visual imagery of painting and pentimento. Time after time, in each of his bold and innovative chapters, Krug scrapes back the old to reveal something new. His writing has a cinematic, montage-like quality.[1] Montage is like pentimento. Many different things are going on at the same time, images sounds and understandings are blending and blurring, forming a composite, a new creation. An emotional, gestalt effect is produced.

Krug's chapters are infused with the logics of montage and pentimento. The chapters overlap, turn back on one another. They are written, always, out of his history, and of this he is certain. His first sentence, 'This is not the world in which I grew up, although it is the world in which I live, at least a part of me.' His invitation is clear. You and I, dear reader, share this world, if perhaps in different ways. But let us come together, to see if we can make sense of this world we both live in.

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He continues, his second sentence defines the project, and locates it within a painterly frame. He is not sure about the firmness of this world. It is in motion. He states, 'the world is constantly remade around us, not only the world of the present, the concrete here and now, but also the remembered world of the past and with it the unrealized world of the future.'

***

When I finish this book I am exhilarated. I have taken a complex journey, moving from the 9–11 event and its memories and representations, through a nuanced discussion of the commodification of language (Chapters 1 and 2), the social histories of photography (Chapter 3), writing and the divided self (Chapters 4 and 5), technologies of truth (Chapter 6), censorship and pornography (Chapter 7), and with Phillip K. Dick, science fiction, and the metaphysics of information (Chapter 8).

***

It is fitting that Gary starts almost immediately with 9–11. This event locates all of us in a complex, fractured, shared present. It started before 9–11 but nowadays, to paraphrase C. Wright Mills (1959: 3) men, women and children everywhere feel that their private lives are a series of traps. They feel a loss of control over what is important, including family, loved ones, sanity itself. The dividing line between private troubles and public issues slips away. People feel caught up in a swirl of world events, from the Middle East to Afghanistan, and Iraq. These events and their histories seem out of control. Life in the private sphere has become a public nightmare.

We live in dark and bitter times. Democratic public life is under siege. A culture of fear has spread around the world In the United States reactionaries and neo-liberals have all but overtaken the languages and politics of daily life, locating Americans in a permanent, open-ended war against faceless, nameless terrorists. We are poised on the brink of yet another war. Preemptive strikes, assassinations, and regime changes have become part of our new Bush-led foreign policy. Patriotism has become the national watchword.

The economy is slumping, unemployment is at a record high. Crony capitalism reigns. Conservative politicians tied to global capitalism advocate free markets defined by the languages of commercialism and commodified social relations. Neo-liberals contend that what is good for the economy is good for democracy. The gap between rich and poor widens. Social injustices extending from 'class oppression to racial violence to the ongoing destruction of public life and the environment' (Giroux 2003: 2) have become commonplace. The ideological relationship between capitalism and neoliberal democracy has never been stronger, and it must be broken.

We live in a new garrison state. Since 9–11 America's public spaces have become increasingly militarized. Armed guards and openly visible security cameras are

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in now in airports, pedestrian malls, outside hospitals and schools, even on college campuses. The President has authorized war tribunals, and detention camps for suspected terrorists. Civil liberties are disappearing. Racial profiling operates behind the guise of protecting national security. A five-level civil-defense alarm system is in place.

Public education and civic, participatory social science are in jeopardy. Academics and pacifists critical of the war on terrorism are branded traitors. More and more restraints are being applied to qualitative, interpretive research, as conservative federal administrators redefine what is acceptable inquiry (Lincoln and Cannella 2004). Right-wing politicians stifle criticism, while implementing a 'resurgent racism … [involving] … punitive attacks on the poor, urban youth, and people of color' (Giroux 2000: 132; also 2001).

***

These are the troubled spaces that Gary Krug's book enters. His closing words give me hope. There is a way out of this mess. Our task is to 'reassert the moral and philosophical necessity to find ourselves in self-reflection and dialogue, to create ourselves in the engagement with texts as if ideas, words, and symbols were still the bridges that consciousness builds to consciousness across the gulf of being.' This mutual recognition of our selves and others through language and conversation is one of our 'first acts as moral and social beings.'

When we do this we remember the problems of the spirit. To rephrase the quote from William Faulkner that starts Chapter One, 'these are the problems that have universal bones, the problems of the heart in conflict with itself.' Gary Krug's book calls us back to these problems of the heart.

Norman K. Denzin
Urbana, Illinois USA

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Note

1 Montage, of course, is associated with the work of the Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, especially his film *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925). In Einstein's films the use of montage allowed him to superimpose several different images onto one another to create a picture moving in several different directions at the same time.

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Preface

> In his pencil-like embrasure, the look-out and later the gunner realized long before the easel painter, the photographer or the filmmaker, how necessary is a preliminary sizing-up. (Paul Virilio 1989: 49)

This is not the world in which I grew up, although it is the world in which I live, at least a part of me. One can never be sure, for the world is constantly remade around us, not only the world of the present, the concrete here and now, but also the remembered world of the past, and with it the unrealized world of the future. These statements are so commonplace as to border on the banal, yet the banality illustrates the point. Each of us comes to be within the language, values, and beliefs of a time and a place. Yet, the process is not complete at any moment but continues through time. In our memory, though, we see the moments which still resonate for us as fixed and perfect, finished. We believe that we were defined in these, created in past moments and dragged into the present. This a piecemeal view of ourselves, though, and does an injustice to our understanding of the remarkable, transient processes of the creation of ourselves, though it may be the only way of preserving a sense of continuity. Selective amnesias of all stripes may be required by sanity.

So, this work is an act of anamnesis, a remembering of alternatives through the reconstruction of certain habits of thought, representation, and action. Many of the amnesias are made easily possible through contemporary communication technologies and their uses. To discuss the technologies which have facilitated, created, and transformed human thought one must take account of the ways in which self, culture, and technology mutually create and reflect each other. To separate one of these elements out of our thought on this subject would create an artificial cleavage into what is an organic whole. Nonetheless, it is the fashion to list the 'communication technologies' in various taxonomic tables based upon purely conventional and largely unexamined beliefs: one requires a chapter on economics, one on convergence, another to examine telecommunications, something on the World Wide Web, and of course a chapter on computers, etc.

However useful pedagogically in universities that have fought a losing battle against becoming trade schools since the 1950s, these categorizations are misleading. While the odd chapter on 'social consequences' might appear in texts, the social and the self are curiously unintegrated into discussions of the technologies themselves. Such a divorce of self, culture, and technology excludes the introduction of philosophical and historical dimensions into discussions of hardware, software, and systems. At best, philosophy in such instances

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becomes the question of policy, law, advertising, journalism ethics, or media effects. How we should live, what alternative ways exist of thinking about ourselves and our world, what is the nature of the world into which we become existent: such questions rarely find their ways into communication technology textbooks which are already busily training the next generation of technologists.

My project here is thus not to write a linear historical account of this or that individual technology. Technologies are always systems, and these systems are always linked to other systems. Rather, I seek to explore the relationships between systems of language, technology, and the social institutions and beliefs within which people create themselves. Throughout the book, contemporary problems, descriptions, and issues are raised as terminal points in trajectories to be traced between alternative or older practices and the current moment. I do not, however, propose that the contemporary time is truly an end point or *eschaton* in the elaboration of technologies. Now is simply the most current moment about which we can make observations, and I seek to illustrate that the current times, selves, and techniques are the products of particular lines of development, certain choices, and specific sets of activities. My aim is not to put forward general theories of history, technological change, or society. I seek to elaborate existing narratives and stories, standing histories, and sometimes ignored or neglected relations into a new set of narratives that were not present before. A conversation is formed from the voices present, and in this work, some of the voices are familiar within communication studies and others are still largely strangers.

Chapter 1 explores some of the philosophical background of the problems inherent in studying the relationship of language, the world, and consciousness in historical context. I begin with the present to outline some of the issues to be explored through the book, such as the commodification of language, the modernist imperative to achieve closure of meaning, and the consequences of using technical or scientific language in vernacular domains. This chapter sketches the contemporary scene and references historical, discursive, and philosophical alternatives to some current situations.

One difficulty facing any analysis of the relationship between culture and technology lies in avoiding the deterministic fallacy. Determinism arises primarily from the mistake of viewing culture and technology as somehow independent of the human participants and observers. To put consciousness back into the discussion of technology and society allows for an analysis balanced between the world, language, and mind. The fragmented self of the contemporary world is not caused by technology but emerges with the development of the dominant forms of technology. Similarly, fractured social relations and diminished social participation are not products of technology but are consequentially related to how technology is represented in symbolic forms that are in turn influenced by technology itself.

A central problem of contemporary social life arises from the apparent inability to meaningfully organize people into communities that allow for the existence of politics. The mass media paradoxically create a totalized view of the world in forms and structures that are not amenable to politics. Thus, Chapter 2

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takes up the relationship between technology, writing, and the vernacular. Through an exploration of the phenomenology of language, I examine the differences between a vernacular language and a manufactured one. The historical evolution of the split between official language and local ways of talking and making sense of the world traces as well the evolution of technologies of language and their relationship with the social. Philosophy, rhetoric, the liberal arts, and various other technologies of thought and language evolved out of people's engagement with the problems of negotiating meaning and interpretation.

The extent to which communication technologies take on uses and meanings in relationship to other social beliefs is a central theme of Chapter 3. Through an exploration, initially of differing perspectives on the use of images themselves and then in a detailed study of the history of photography, I examine the links between the social uses of images and the meanings that they have in society. The object is neither to document different 'scopic regimes' nor to trace the historical evolution of a modern or 'advanced' way of using images. Rather, the uses of images document diverse ways in which people associate consciousness with other people and with the world. People stand in relationships to both still and moving images, and they assume that what the image means and does is relatively fixed. Although certain theorists and practitioners of modernist and postmodernist philosophy, aesthetics, and art have highlighted the instability of people's relationships with images, the ways in which one formative technology, photography, emerged within discourses of truth reveal the emergence of certain constellations of power.

The modern self emerged within these and other social forms of power. Myths of origin and creation emerged to underpin the legitimacy both of the self and of the institutions and ideas that instantiated it within society and the state. Chapter 4 examines several key moments in the social history of printing and publishing and their uses in society. These historical examples establish the origins of the codes of the later mass media and demonstrate the historical depth of some problems in studying mass communications. For example, the reading practices of real people and the purposes that reading serves for them vary significantly across times and settings. Is the book an object of meditation, a transmitter of ideas, or a study in the meaning and credibility of virtue and truth? Various individuals and groups have sought to define the world both through print and through the printed version of the world, and sometimes these have not been the same thing.

Another major site of contention over the uses of meanings of a communication technology is to be found in letter writing, the history of which is examined in Chapter 5. In both its function and its meaning for the individual writer or reader, the letter was once a major contributor to and marker of the habitus. The same industrial social and institutional forces that created the mail system as an instrument of everyday use were simultaneously creating the need for a self that was divided between two competing forms: a narrative self and a lived self. While each was gendered and reflected existing class structures, the maintenance of multiple selves was necessary as the emerging world of industrial capital created conditions that required one to be simultaneously

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both present and alienated. The selves that emerged through and which were reflected in the nascent social forms were precursors of the kinds of selves necessary today. Chapter 5 is, then, a study of the ways in which the divided self had historical antecedents in early modernism. In particular, the characteristics of the modern technologically oriented self have their origins in letter writing and related literary practices of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Similarly, many characteristics of contemporary communication systems emerge during this period and have historical roots in the early postal systems.

Some ideological components of modern communication technologies, necessary for their emergence as totalizing social systems, were added in the nineteenth century. First, media began to establish what was information worth knowing and what was not, and second, this information was increasingly bound up with particular religious and industrial beliefs and mythologies. Chapter 6 documents some of the mechanisms by which social truth and mass truth emerged. Mass knowledge and mass 'truth' had their origins in the rise of the newspapers of the nineteenth century. However, this mass truth took a particularly technicistic turn in the twentieth century through the influences of the military-industrial institutions. In particular, Vannevar Bush and his proposed memex are prototypical of many aspects of contemporary thinking about information and its organization.

This manner of organization of information as a self-evident scientific truth has allowed knowledge, training, and information itself to be used since the nineteenth century as forms of social control. Chapter 7 examines the cultural transition to a technological, industrial culture and explores how information came to be seen as something with which to handle the emerging masses. With the triumph of industrially and commercially produced communications over all other forms, a moral and epistemological world was created by corporations and institutions which framed the experience of all who lived within it. A central part of this project was the reduction of 'culture' to quanta of knowledge and information that could be imparted in radio, films, and schools, and that could stand in opposition to the vulgar world of the ordinary person. Key examples are the emergence of film classification and the rise in calls for censorship and control of pornography.

Pornography shares several key characteristics with surveillance, beyond the simple observation that each constructs the subject–object relationship found in voyeurism. Chapter 8 explores the ways in which a military-industrial society conceptualizes and uses information as a 'truth' and as a social control. The logical fallacies inherent in these usages as well as the damage done to people's relations with each other are explored in the contexts of mass media politics, surveillance, and pornography. 'Information' has created a new world that masquerades as the natural. The contemporary understanding and use of information bear several significant similarities to gnosticism and constitute a 'digital antinomianism' in which information itself stands as the self-evident and self-legitimizing 'truth' of the gnostic system.

While these chapters may be read individually as histories of specific activities, later chapters build upon ideas and concepts laid down in earlier ones.

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Thus, discussions in later chapters may seem ungrounded if read out of sequence. The approach taken here necessarily eschews some kinds of linear development, and some connections, particularly across chapters, will not be apparent unless the text is taken as a whole.

Finally, because this work crosses many disciplinary boundaries, I inevitably make choices to include some authors and to exclude others. This might trouble some scholars, but I have deliberately sought to avoid too narrow a focus in any given field or area. Rather, my aim has been to bring together diverse threads of discussion into a new conversation. This book is thus not so much a university course as it is a series of conversations in a salon.

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Acknowledgements

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