2015

Hyperology: The Age of Chimera

Róisín Lally

Chapter 10

An Introduction to Hyperology

The Age of the Chimera

Roisin Lally

Given the current drive toward biotechnology and genetic engineering, the question concerning technology remains a leading question for philosophers today. The complex relationship between humans and technology has been widely documented,[1] yet contention lies within the conflicting critiques of technology. On either end of the spectrum are substantivism and instrumentalism (namely, the substantivist principle of an autonomous force underlying technology and the instrumentalist principle of human control over technology). Taken in the broadest sense, substantivism remains within the modernist tradition, most notably related to Martin Heidegger and Jacques Ellul, while the latter is identified with the postmodern tradition, commonly associated with Don Ihde, and John Dewey. Ihde argues that Heidegger does not overcome the essentialist project that seeks a stable condition of possibility in which to ground truth. He is critical of the work of phenomenology on these grounds, in particular Heidegger who, he argues, falls back into the illusion of the old metaphysics of presence. For Ihde because modern technologies are radically different to traditional technologies, they require a different philosophical methodology to understand them. He argues that the modernist project adheres to the illusion of an ultimate truth and an absolute language, which ultimately leads to the illusion of an essential reality. Rather, for Ihde, the world of contingent presentations proves to be more authentic and primary than the so-called true reality.

To make sense of these technological transformations, Ihde argues that we must make a methodological shift from the modernist phenomenological tradition to what he coins "postphenomenology." Thus, by naming postphenomenology, he constitutes it as a new cultural paradigm by differentiating itself from phenomenology; it is the difference between stability and multistablity (Ihde, Heidegger's Technologies, 2010) a difference, he argues, that

is overlooked by both Husserl and Heidegger. However, the notion of multi-stablity is already at play in the work of Heidegger. It is understood in terms of art. Art is a movement; more specifically it is a movement of truth. Truth is not identified with essence or stability or adequation; rather truth constitutes a genuine active participation in the making of and working out of a culture.

The move to postphenomenology in Ihde is philosophically substantive, however. He is interested in shifting the philosophy of technology out of the realm of metaphysics and into the realm of experiential scientific research by analyzing specific technologies. The tension between these two thinkers, therefore, is not the search for something beyond phenomenology but in the philosophical interests that drive their use of this method and their interpretation of its results. Ihde claims postphenomenology is purely empirical while Heidegger claims it to be ontological.

The task of this essay is to explore the interrelatedness of modernity and postmodernity as presented by Heidegger and Ihde, under a general concept hyperology. By clarifying the concept "hyper" as a condition of possibility for human-existence, I argue that hyper, hitherto thought of as a tension between the amplification and the negation of reality, functions as first-order distantiation of the human being; it is a pre-reflective, basic condition of human existence. In this way it is similar to Ihde's embodiment theory that he outlines in (Ihde, Bodies in Technology, 2002). However, I depart from Ihde on his theory of the "hyperworld" where he contends the hyperworld is a projection into the future: a projection into virtual reality (VR) (ibid, xiv). For Ihde this can only happen through instruments. I argue, on the contrary, *hyper* is the projection of the self onto the world; it serves as the bridge between humanity and culture. It is the-there or in Ihde's term, the "over-there" of the "real body," oscillating between the future time to come and the past that has been. Through imagination, *hyper* brings things into appearance that is invisible. This present essay will focus on works of art in particular works of bioart by two contemporary artists, Eduardo Kac and Patricia Piccinini.

Hyperreality is a postmodern term used to signify the Information Age. Paradoxically, hyperreality has been described as a world that ranges from excessive reality to a nonexistent reality.[2] The ambiguity lies in our understanding, or lack thereof, concerning the drive toward a *hyper-existence*. Hyperreality is not an uncommon concept. Etymologically *hyper* is taken from the Greek word *hupèr* meaning "over," "above," "above measure," or signifying a condition above or beyond. It's opposite, *hypokeimenon*, was used by Aristotle to describe the natural world of essences. For the most part, hyper was lost to philosophical reflection until the latter part of the twentieth century when it took on a different meaning with the advent of the Internet. People began to refer to the language of the Internet as hypertext and hyperspace, which was understood as a negation of both word and space.

The concept hyperreality has been advance by the French sociologist and philosopher, Jean Baudrillard in his book *Simulation and Subterfuge* (Baudrillard, 1994). He describes it as a conceptual point at which reality becomes indistinguishable from simulation, implying a presence that is nonexistent. It is the disappearance of reality brought about by the dominance of the mass media, a concept that is heavily influenced by Sausserian linguistics, in which signs are perceived to be an arbitrary psychological union of a signifier (sound image) and the signified (concept) (William, 1996) and signs only convey meaning through their relative position to other signs (Saussure, 1959). In hyperreality the experiential aspect of the subject that exists as interplay between temporal reality and the internal world of myth/ideology is distorted by simulations, thus threatening to destabilize the border between the real and the imaginary. The simulation is the implied presence of something that is nonexistent, producing a hyperreal: "the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere."[3] For Baudrillard hyperreality, through simulation, is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance, it is the generation, by models, of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. Baudrillard uses the example of Disney's Main Street as a kaleidoscope of hyperreal representations. It is, for Baudrillard, an orbital recurrence of models without reference to anything that is real, yet it emerges as a more authentic, exact, "real" than the reality that surrounds us.

Illustrative of this is hyperrealism, an art movement of the 1970s and early 1980s that includes the works of Andy Warhol. Here the real and the imaginary, production and art, are "confounded in the same operational totality."[4] The world of art no longer transforms everyday life. Instead it absorbs the most ordinary experiences, producing the image over and over. Warhol's art, iconic in its ability to reproduce without ceasing to be art, is so successful in combining the machine and the metaphor, that "Unreality no longer resides in the dream or fantasy, or in the beyond, but in the real's hallucinatory resemblance to itself" (Baudrillard, 1994). Like hyperreal art, architecture spirals upward simulating a representation of reality immanent in its repetition. Baudrillard calls hyperrealism an "allegory of death": it is the meticulous technical reproduction of the real where death itself is absorbed into the simulation. Virtual reality is the home of postmoderns, a world of eternal recurrence and immanent repetition. Ihde's contribution is to think through the way hyperreality is embodied in technology. As embodied beings, or beings with technology, these projected fantasies have become constitutive of consciousness; they have become the new metaphysical way of understanding the world.

Ihde gives a phenomenological account of the human body as embodied. Embodiment is, for Ihde, an unmediated perceptual-bodily experience. He conducts a hermeneutical phenomenology of embodied beings, and

concludes that phenomenology is only appropriate when talking about an unreflective life *without* technology. As bodies in technology we no longer live in this purely phenomenological world. Particularly as we communicate or play in virtual reality, we are absolved from the limits of normal embodiment as subjects confronted by objects. In these experiences, things that would have once stood out before us as objects become part of our lived experience. In his examination of body identification he breaks down the body into two components: an active "here-body" [sight 1] and imaginative "over-there" body [sight 2]. In his analogy the over-there body constitutes the world of fantasy, or as he suggests, a hyperworld. Knowledge of the world begins with body one, and projects outward into body two, through instruments and imagination. In contrast to embodiment we experience disembodiment when we communicate or play in virtual reality. However, hyper-reality cannot stand alone; it can never take the place of "real life."

In the example of the telescope, the reflexive seen-seeing of the image body [sight 2] and the here-body [sight 1] become an embodied observation even though its observation is not direct but mediated instrumentally (Ihde, 2002, p. 48). Here we have both the observed [sight two] and the observer [sight one]. The object to behold, thus far, remains invisible; it lacks visibility until the perceiver embodies the telescope. The observer and the instrument engage in a hermeneutical style of envisioning phenomena.

Prosthesis offers another example of embodied technology. Such devices are experienced through the body; however, this is never a simple replacement for the mode of embodiment that existed prior to the technological adaptation. The equivocal character of the prosthesis works in two ways: one in partial concealment, the other in partial withdrawal. For example, in hot weather prosthesis might conceal the heat of the day, or the hot earth, where the wearer cannot *feel* the earth beneath her feet. On the other hand, she might be more sensitive to the conditions of icy weather, where the prosthesis is more likely to slip. Thus, Ihde argues, these technologies can never become a full simulacrum of bodily sensory experiences, even though they are technologically embodied. Prosthesis is an extension of the here-body; the here-body and over-there body are interdependent. This is correct, and the high visibility of prostheses in our culture is changing the way we understand our body and the relation to the world. But can it be said that these technologies are a radical break with the past? Prosthesis, according to Umberto Eco, is

> any artificial construction, which prolongs and amplifies the possibilities of our body, from the first sharpened flints through to the lever, the walking stick, the hammer . . . In this sense the term prosthesis also cover chairs, or beds or clothes . . . they are all but natural extensions, and like our body, we take care of them and decorate them. (Eco, 2004, pp. 382–383)

We are embodied beings prior to our postmodern condition, prior to the simulation of reality through repetition, and prior to any scientific orientation to the world. As such, we have not moved radically away from the modernist project. We take care of our extensions because they matter to us, and we decorate them because meaning and truth are found in beauty. Unlike Baudrillard's dystopian view of art as an "allegory for death," Eco, like Heidegger, experiences beauty in all things and so it is an allegory of truth. In the "Origin of the Work of Art" Heidegger writes: art "makes public something other than itself; it manifests something other; it is an allegory" (Heidegger, OWA, 2009, p. 145). What matters is not what shows itself but only the possibility of *something* showing itself. Interpreting Heidegger, Günter Figal states that art is not something new, but lets things as a whole be seen anew (Heidegger, 2009, p. 13). Art, or truth or beauty, is at the core of all extensions or technologies; this is just as true of things today as it was with, for example, the Greeks.

This play on the emergence of things can be understood by way of Heidegger's example of the Parthenon. The Parthenon, as an objectively present object, no longer signifies the truth of a culture, but for the Athenians it was symbolic of the preservation of truth for society. If we think of it in terms of the image body, the project of the fantasy or hyperworld is manifest in the Goddess Athena. The technofantasy, Athena, as the "embodiment" of truth lasted as long as the world projected itself in that particular way. The fact that the Parthenon no longer functions in this way does not eliminate the essence of truth; it merely means we shift our meanings from one technofantasy to another. Every projection is contingent and arises out of multiple possibilities. According to our analysis this is not essentialism. Indeed it seems as though the essence of hyper-existence functions as technofantasy; it comes to presence through the embodiment of man, machine, imagination, and life world, but is not reducible to these.

In the latter example, the form, Athena, follows from her function, a symbol of truth. For Ihde, the form, bionic man, shows up as a symbol of strength and speed. In both cases, hyper-existence functions as a way to project or map fantasies onto the world. This means that hyper-existence and its essence, technofantasy, is prior to technology. For Heidegger what is prior to technology is the movement at the core of art. He calls it aletheia.

In other words, hyper-existence is made possible by a first-order distantiation from the world. Creating a distance from nature, human beings make space for invention. Invention is a uniquely human characteristic which begins with the unconscious tinkering of available material. Etymologically, tinkering comes from the word "itinerant" (Lt: *mortālis* to have human origin and transient; subject to death, destined to die, temporary). In German, to tinker is *basteln* or to do handcrafts, to make, to build. In Irish, *tincéir* stems from the

verb *ar tinneal*—"at-the-ready." Thus, to tinker constitutes a transient, know-ing and know-how: to tinker means to craft. The tinker fixes in-place [*steln*] or dwells with his or her technical skills. The Greek word is *technē,* and is tied to the idea of mastery and apprenticeship. It is the repetition and practice of skill. So what is tinkering that makes it stand out in its own nature?

Martin Heidegger describes craft as the "strength and skill of the hands." The essence of hand is not reducible to brute fact, as a grasping organ. In this case apes, too, would be classed as humans because they can grasp, but apes do not have hands. On the contrary "Only a being who can speak, that is, think, can have hands and can be handy in achieving works of handicraft" (*ibid.*) The craft of the hand is not merely a grasping, catching, pushing, and pulling. As Heidegger writes:

> The hand reaches and extends, receives and welcomes - and not just things: the hand extends itself, and receives its own welcome in the hands of others. The hand holds. The hand carries. The hand designs and signs, presumably because man is assigned. Two hands fold into one, a gesture meant to carry man into the great oneness. The hand is all this and this is the true handicraft. (Heidegger, 1976, p. 16)

Seen in this light, crafting includes the crafting of ideas, rhetoric, building, and art, and is the fundamental nature of human beings.

In *Building Dwelling Thinking* Heidegger pursues this idea of building as integral to humanity. He traces the verb *bauen* back to *baun* which signi-fies dwelling. However, buan also means to build, which, he concludes, *is* to dwell (p.147). Furthermore, *bauen* in its original sense says *how far* the nature of dwelling reaches, to dwell nearby or a "near-dweller" (ibid), that is to dwell with our neighbors and also ourselves, because *bauen* is also the German word for *bin* as in *ich bin*, "I am." In all this we are embodied beings, not unlike Ihde's embodiment theory. For Heidegger, humans dwell not just as tinkers, but as preservers of both time and distance. Here building as preserving and nurturing is not necessarily making anything, in contrast to the simple structures of temple-building. The twofold nature of building is cultivation and construction. Similarly, Ihde understands technology as both construction and as an activity, both instrumentally and as meaningful. But whereas for Ihde, human beings construct their reality technologically, and then embody those technologies socially and culturally, wherein humans transform nature; for Heidegger, technology is not passive, it arises within a horizon of meaning. We could say technology *shows up* as a telescope, or prosthesis, or virtual reality. The difference is that for Ihde technology is apart from humanity until humanity embodies technologies, while for Heidegger, technology is coextensive with humanity.

Revisiting the example of Heidegger and Ihde, we could consider the Parthenon a mere thing, but that may infer just an aggregate of properties, which clearly it is not (Ihde, 2010, pp. 74–77). The essence of the temple, its *huper-keimenon* comes from the idea of the craftsman and shows up as a symbol of spirituality: Athena, for example, is symbolic of courage, strength, arts, crafts, and truth. What emerges is the essence of what already exists. In other words, the core of the temple is not merely the materials from which it was made or of Athena, but the truth that grounds and directs the materials (Heidegger, OWA, 2009, p. 149). The essence or core of the artifact comes to light through imagination or in Ihde's way the "image body" and not through the technology itself. From the material, using both imagination and tools, truth emerges in the form of beauty.

On the other spectrum we have transgenic art or bioart. In terms of the language of embodiment, bioart is more a revival than an innovation. Ihde writes: "it is a return to pre-modernity in the sets of cultural beliefs that things could actually transmute or metamorphose. Devils inhabiting human bodies, human witches taking on animal shapes, the possibilities of monsters, prodigies, and freaks—were pre-modern morphs" (Ihde, 2002, p. 5). This, Ihde reminds us, is evidenced in Plato's pre-cinema cave wherein images of images were the only "realities" for the dwellers prior to Platonic liberation of the cave into sunlight. For Ihde, these illusions are harmless so long as there is a distinction between theatre and daily life. But phenomenologically, Eduardo Kac has challenged this notion as genetic technology has made the fantasy of ancient mythology a multistable possibility (Kac, 2005).

Transgenic or bioart is a new art form based on the use of genetic engineering techniques to transfer synthetic genes to an organism or to transfer natural genetic material from one species into another, creating unique living beings. Molecular genetics allows the artist to engineer the plant and animal genome and create new life forms. *Alba* the "GFP Bunny" (Green Florescent Protein) created by Kac in 2000[5] was originally albino, now, when shined with blue light, Alba glows a bright green. Alba is specifically a transgenic art not created for the purpose of breeding. She is to be viewed as a piece of artwork, according to her creator. This seems to transcend the very notion of reality where distinctions between real and virtual, subject and object, art and science are broken down. They are in Ihde's words extended technologies, where beings are embodied with science and technology. On reflection, Kac's work is an art work only insofar as the telescope can be considered an art work. GFP functions to reveal proteins that are invisible to the naked eye, in the same way as the telescope also reveals what is always already there. Both technologies make the invisible visible. But as a complex social event, neither the telescope nor the rabbit reveal the mystery of life. If we fail to recognize the rabbit as existing for its own sake, by treating it as an

object, we strip it of its very identity; it can neither exist in nature nor in the hyperworld of man.

Although an interesting scientific experiment in itself, it does not enter into the fray of beautiful chimeric artistry, envisioned by Kac, unless we are to objectify each living being as a work of art. Once it is exposed as bioart, the natural beauty of the rabbit disappears, and is replaced by a gimmick, that is neither beautiful nor useful. It is neither art nor technology. However, Kac's work anticipated the later works of bioart. It reveals the contemporary age of genetic engineering. Patricia Piccinini's work frames the bioscientific practices of manipulation and alteration of living beings. In her work she urges us to think of our new creations as blurring the distinction between human and nonhuman, between the organic and technological. Creating "new worlds" through stem cell research, genetic engineering, bioelectronics is already part of our world. She writes:

> The possibilities for my creations are already amongst us, and before too long the things themselves could turn up unannounced, without our ever having had the opportunity to wonder how much we want them. (Piccinini & Orgaz, 2007)

"Big Mother" from *Evolution* (Piccinini, 2005) displays a cultural world for understanding bioengineering and the possibilities for what is come. It highlights the similarities between humans and animals. She writes "One of my interests in acknowledging our animalness is also about trying to understand our humanity. There has to be more to life than genetics and biology." What does come to light is the crossing or transcending from human to nonhuman. Her work is a porthole into the past and future, oscillating between a chimeric ideal and a living reality. The distinction is so blurred that the boundaries no longer exist. The world of the chimera is a manifestation of the ambiguous relationship between the world of nature and the hypernatural world of man. This ambiguity is covered over when we think of ourselves as simply natural, or simply instrumental. Kac, Piccinini, and Ihde blur the distinction between science and technology, human and nonhuman. This blurring of boundaries can be interpreted reductively, but hyperology allows us to understand these blurrings in ways that preserve the ambiguous tension between science and technology, human and nonhuman. Bioart forces us to recognize the degree to which we are incorporating nonhuman beings into culture, and to take responsibility for the consequences.

Donna Haraway summarizes Piccinini's work as revealing that we must "learn how to confront the complexities of the new world in order to be able to move toward multi-species reconciliation." As Haraway says: "Apocalypse looms; in that story the past-nature is the time outside time and must

be restored in all its innocence. That kind of time is utterly wild, i.e., outside the care of responsible generations." Piccinini's art predicts a future of transspecies, hyperbeings; beings that were once merely virtual reality. These beings are chimeras. As we enter into a face-to-face relation with these new beings, Piccinini urges us to cultivate practices of care. What this means for philosophical thinking is that the hyperworld is not just the "image body" or VR as Ihde would have it; it comes to presence even when we think it is illusionary, or nonexistent or indeed invisible: in other words, even when we are denying its very presence. Piccinin's work is a study of human beings as embodied in science and technology; a constructed world that hovers above the world of essences, a place where humans dwell to escape the wild-country.

For Ihde the human body has become the site of continuous transformation through our scientific orientation toward the world. While Ihde sees this as a radical break with traditional phenomenology I have argued that this is also seen in Heidegger's analysis of art as a movement. Art serves as the truth of a culture but is never a stable quality. If this is the case, postphenomenology still acts within the phenomenological tradition. What the proliferation of contemporary technology reveals is not the reduction of meaning to the contingent materiality of multiple embodiments, but the timeless truth that meaning has always emerged in the space that humans create in distancing themselves from nature, that is, in the hyperworld. Hyperreality is already part of structures of the mind; from where the event begins its projection, allowing things to come into view. Projection is a thrownness into the world, not in the postmodern understanding as an "overthrowing" or negation of the world. To be thrown means existence is always "out there" prior to its arrival in the world.

So we ought to understand Ihde's work on embodiment in light of hyper-existence as pre-reflective, first-order distantiations. However, unlike Ihde I would argue, with Heidegger, that as we dwell in the world as mortals, we cultivate and construct the world around us, a world that begins with the "image-body" or the hyperworld of imagination. Technology as art—as the very ground of possibility for humanity—brings humans from mere existence into a space for dwelling. In dwelling humans necessarily engage in a hyper-existence. If this is true, the only way to understand contemporary technology and indeed the very relation between technology, art, and philosophy is to take seriously the drive toward hyperreality, a study I call hyperology, a study toward which all the present reflections point us. In an age when we reach into the mystery of life, into the secrets of our genes to create "beautiful Chimeras" the danger is that we become a species in wild country, where we will once again have to survive, instead of freeing a space for living as enlightened beings.

NOTES

1. See Andrew Feenberg, *Questioning Technology*, for a detailed description of his four theories of technology including critical theory and instrumentalization.

2. See Borgmann, 1992, Epstein, 1999, Baudrillard, 1985, Dreyfus, 1995.

3. See also the hyperrealism of simulation is expressed everywhere by the real's striking resemblance to itself in Albert Borgmann's *Across the Postmodern Divide* (1994) which claims that new technologies are taking us into the sphere of hyperreality, a term he borrows from Baudrillard. He argues we are losing touch with our bodies, with nature, with other people and with focal things and practices.

4. Baudrillard, Jean, "The Critique of Originality," in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, (ed.) Mark Poster. (Stanford: 1988), pp. 143–7.

5. Alba was created with GFP, an enhanced version of the gene found in Aequorea Victoria jellyfish first discovered by Osama Shimomura. This particular protein has the unique property of biofluorescence. In biofluorescence, available light is absorbed and converted into light of another wavelength, producing a different colored light. In the case of GFP, photons of light in the blue wavelength are converted into photons in the green wavelength. When introduced to mammalian cells, GFP produces fluorescence two times brighter than the original jellyfish gene.

REFERENCES

Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulation and Subterfuge.* (S. Glaser, Trans.) University of Michigan Press.

Eco, U. (2004). *History of Beauty.* (McEwen, Trans.). New York: Rizzoli.

Ellul, J. (1964). *The Technological Society.* New York: Vintage Books.

Feenberg, A. (1999). *Questioning Technology.* London, New York: Routledge.

Heidegger, M. (1976). *What is Called Thinking?* (Vol. XXI). (J. Glenn Grey, Trans.) New York: Perennial. Originally published by Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tuebingen under the title Was Heisst Denken? English translation by J. Glenn Gray 1954.

Heidegger, M. (1977 a). *The Question Concerning Technology.*

Heidegger, M. (1977). The Origin of the Work of Art. In M. Heidegger, & D. F. Krell (Ed.), *Basic Writings* (2nd ed., pp. 139–212). London, New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

Heidegger, M. (1993 a). *Basic Writings.* San Francisco: Harper.

Heidegger, M. (1993). The Question Concerning Technology. In M. Heidegger, & D. F. Krell (Ed.), *Basic Writings* (2nd ed., pp. 307–342). London, New York: Routledge.

Heidegger, M. (2009). On the Origin of the Work of Art: First Version. In M. Heidegger, *The Heidegger Reader* (pp. 130–150). Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Heidegger, M. (2009). *The Heidegger Reader.* (G. Figal, Ed., & J. Veith, Trans.) Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Ihde, D. (2002). *Bodies in Technology.*

Ihde, D. (2010). *Heidegger's Technologies Postphenomenological Perspectives.* New York: Fordham University Press.

Kac, E. (2005). *Telepresence & Bio Art Networking Humans, Rabbits, & Robots.* The University of Michigan Press.

Piccinini, P. (2005). Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art. *Feminist Art Base.* Melbourne, Victoria. Retrieved from http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/gallery/piccinini.php?i=1002.

Piccinini, P., & Orgaz, L. F. (2007). The Naturally Artificial World. *Tender Creatures*

Saussure, F. (1959). *A Course in general Linguistics.* (W. Baskins, Trans.). New York: The Philosophical Library.

Schmidt, D. J. (2013). *Between Word and Image.* Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Selinger, E. (Ed.). (2006). *Postphenomenology A Critical Companion to Ihde.* New york: SUNY.

William, B. (1996). *The Simulation of Surveillance: Hypercontrol in Telematic Societies.* New York: Cambridge University Press.