

# STS.464 :: The Intellectual History of Technology

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What Is Technology?

1 February 2005

## Class exercise

When you think of technology now, what comes to mind?

- tools
- computers, internet
- technological systems
- systems for organizing human endeavor, making it more efficient
- systems for mediating human experience
- machines
- mechanical (non-digital/electronic) systems
- human-machine interface
- devices for mediating
- nonnature
- newness, novelty, meets with cultural resistance
- contested, otherness, unfamiliar
- “problems and wires”
- POWER
- specialized knowledge
- proliferation of knowledge
- business, technology & entrepreneurship
- what we use to do magic, miracles
- automation
- moving parts
- electronics
- changing the relationship between humans and nature
- changes in how you view the landscape (*e.g.* flying in a plane, seeing the world from space)
- changing your sense perception
- something you can't fully see or touch: a black box, something not fully understood
- artificial information processing systems (as opposed to natural)
- conceptual genius, pre-form

→ **There is no settled definition of technology!** As we have proven, it is plastic, amorphous, despite the fact that we use it every day. It is conceptual, social, material, and intellectual.

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## Reading

DeLillo, Don. *White Noise*. New York, NY: Penguin, 1985, pp. 127-129. (From "A few minutes later..." to "...wore life jackets and carried flares.")

Three-Mile Island (1979)

Bhopal (1984?)

Chernobyl (1986)

1. **aesthetics:** the idea of the *sublime* (Kant, Burke)  
seeing the *beautiful* → order, harmony  
seeing the *sublime* → disorder, the infinite, boundlessness, fear, awe  
*the technological sublime* (David Nye) → technology replacing nature as the locus of the sublime
2. **dread:** changes in the prevailing feeling/mood/tone of human life with respect to technology

### Responses to the passage:

- adjectives used invoking the sublime
- threat
- the unknown: illuminated by the spotlight, yet not being contained
- sense that things are still intact, clinging to some "structure"
- no sense of terror in the narration
- alienation
- a human-created thing which appears to be a force of nature → is technology a like a force of nature now?
- yet... it is measurable and made in a lab
- technology & science // nature
- seems like a spectacle, a community event, not a disaster
- "the disaster utopia" → sudden bonding of people
- implication that we can control technology (manmade things) but not natural things
- empathetic narration: "our", "we" → community; in this situation, we understand what everyone else is going through, urgency
- sense that there is a specialized knowledge that they don't have: "primitive"
- blurring the boundary between technical and natural → at what point have we created a "natural" force?
- nature is blameless, whereas that which is manmade can have finger-pointing
- professionalism → how do we respond to this? act like professionals, act like you know what you're doing
- authoring technology, idea of the human becoming superhuman → playing with fire, gets beyond your control even though you created it

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Hannah Arendt: uncertainty as the description of the new human condition → you can set in motion something you cannot control; unpredictability

- passage about history: is the implication that “history” is something you can control?
- technology isn’t the only thing that results in unpredictability... is the expectation that we will be able to control this? a matter of degree of uncertainty, extent of consequences? changes beyond the local? global impact?
- allusions to *Hamlet*? a postmodern retelling of traditional themes, not history because not a “story of kings,” not epic because about us?

**What does this say about the central question of the class?**

- technology, power, control
- technology as display, spectacle, theater
- physical experience, visceral experience
- accident versus intent, loss of agency
- provides conventional wisdom (“*This was a death made in a laboratory, defined and measurable...*”) and the defies it; doesn’t really offer an alternative
- initial assumption: we aren’t to blame; but then we see that it was us
- when something is so intense that you can’t describe it, it becomes beauty? wear, art...
- juxtaposition of that sort of language with technology
- God acting through priests/kings → technology acting through scientists

→ One cannot think about/experience technology without using art.