

## Borgmann and the Borg: Consumerism vs. Holding on to Reality<sup>1</sup>

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Albert Borgmann, *Holding on to Reality: The Nature of Information at the Turn of the Millennium*, University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Borgmann's *Holding onto Reality: The Nature of Information at the Turn of the Millennium* is an epochal book. It seeks nothing less than to develop a theory and ethics of information that will fundamentally counter an uncritical cultural enthusiasm for "information" (apparent in our calling ourselves an Information Society, as we inhabit an Information Age, etc.) – first of all, by establishing a taxonomy that distinguishes between natural, cultural, and technological information. The goal here is not to fall into yet another Manichean polarity (all too characteristic of both popular and academic literature) that portrays information and communication technology (ICT) as either the demise or salvation of all things good and true. Rather, Borgmann hopes to cut through such dualisms with a more balanced view – one that will help us see that "...the good life requires an adjustment among the three kinds of information [natural, cultural, technological] and a balance of signs and things" (Borgmann 1999, 6). In my view, the book largely succeeds in achieving its ambitious goals – and along the way, Borgmann teaches us much about music and architecture, computers and binary numbers, orality and literacy, and such "focal activities" as reading, performing, and collectively celebrating. In these multiple contexts, Borgmann provides a number of much-needed correctives to the enthusiasm for ICTs – not only with regard to the crucial human concern of how we are to know and live (his central focus), but also with regard, say, to education and business.

In short, one cannot praise this book too much. In particular, it is increasingly clear that the optimism and (largely postmodernist) celebration of ICTs as opening up revolutionary forms of "liberation in cyberspace" that dominated discussion of networks and computer-mediated communication in the 1980s and early-to-mid-1990s has given way to a much more sober appreciation for the realities and potentials of ICTs. Both theoretical critiques of the postmodern underpinnings of such enthusiasm and a rapidly expanding body of empirical research demonstrating that the more extravagant claims made for ICTs are simply not borne out in *praxis* have fueled this shift from revolutionary enthusiasm to a more informed and

cautious approach. But this turn is relatively recent – and Borgmann's book stands as a premier philosophical contribution to and anticipation of this turn.

Much can be said, then, in support of Borgmann's analysis and arguments. What I would like to do here, however, is suggest a reading of Borgmann that brings to the foreground the *religious* elements of his analysis and approach. In doing so, I want to call attention to particular strands of Borgmann's argument that deserve our attention as they not only stand at the beginnings of, but may also contribute to, a more contemporary dialogue and debate on ICTs. At the same time, reading Borgmann through this lens will suggest at least one area in which I believe Borgmann's analysis can be clarified and perhaps made even more substantial.

In the following, then, I review Borgmann's discussion of *embodiment* and consumerism. Borgmann's treatment of these, it turns out, is characteristic of the view of the world religious scholars often denote as *prophetic* – i.e., a view that both attacks the idols of the present and affirms the goodness of *this* life as suffered and enjoyed by embodied beings in human, natural, and divine community. Bringing these two threads together – that is, Borgmann's critique of consumerism and his affirmation of embodied existence – highlights a certain peculiarity in Borgmann's conclusion, a conclusion more expressive of *apocalyptic* rather than prophetic religious sensibilities. While Borgmann clearly stands with Christian orthodoxy to invoke both the prophetic and the apocalyptic, I will point out that the apocalyptic aspects of his theory entail at least two risks. Firstly, his more apocalyptic conclusion in fact shares ontological ground with precisely the proponents of "liberation in cyberspace" whom he seeks to undermine. My concern is that Borgmann's overall project may be weakened by this tacit agreement with his opponents. Secondly, Borgmann appears to fall into a larger dualism characteristic of apocalyptic thought – a dualism that pits the evils of this world (in Borgmann's argument, the dangers of humane and moral dissolution in cyberspace) against a salvation in an afterlife. Such a dualism, however, runs directly counter to Borgmann's larger project of seeking a *balance* among the worlds of natural, cultural, and technological information – a balance anchored in part, in fact, in just his more characteristic *prophetic* affirmation of embodied existence in the natural and cultural worlds. As a way of offsetting his closing dualism, I conclude by recalling Borgmann's suggestions for a more balanced appropriation and use of ICTs, and reinforcing these with examples from contemporary theory and *praxis*.

## Embodiment

Borgmann's argument begins with a characterization of "natural information" and the development of his central philosophical equation: "INTELLIGENCE provided, a PERSON is informed by a SIGN about some THING within a given CONTEXT" (21). Natural information, further, is part and parcel of what Borgmann then calls the "ancestral environment (as) the ground state of information and reality. Human beings evolved in it, and so did their ability to read its signs" (24).

These human beings are presumably embodied beings – a point that Borgmann makes explicit in a wonderful evocation of the contrast between writing and speech:

Spoken language is not so much a thing that a person uses as it is a representation of the way a person is. Speech is to the mind as skin is to the body. It is the way a person comes to be a definite and expressive creature. Speech is as inseparable (even though distinguishable) from a person's thoughts and feelings as skin is from bones and muscles. And just as bodily movements are fluid, passing, and largely instinctive, so is spoken language (46).

Our rootedness in our bodies is part of Borgmann's larger argument for the primacy of natural and cultural kinds of information – and thus punctuates his critique of virtual reality and technological information. So he later comments:

The human body with all its heaviness and frailty marks the origin of the coordinate space we inhabit. Just as in taking the measure of the universe this original point of our existence is unsurpassable, so in venturing beyond reality the standpoint of our body remains the inescapable pivot (190).

And this is precisely what undermines the (postmodern) temptation to believe that life online – in this instance, in a MUD – can totally eliminate and replace life as embodied creatures:

Sooner or later, the gravity of their bodily existence pulls MUD players through the veil of virtual ambiguity into the entanglements of ordinary life (190).

This "gravity" includes for Borgmann our experiences of *eros* (in contrast with online and thus disembodied experiences of sexuality) and *thanatos*,

death (in contrast with the promises of immortality in cyberspace – in the extreme, as our consciousness might be reduced to a package of bits and routines and uploaded into a computer for eternal keeping [so Moravec 1988, as cited by Borgmann]).

Borgmann provides an important example of the contrasts between embodied *eros* and online sexuality as he later discusses "the parasitic nature of technological information":

When David Bennahum was drawn to the semivirtual "alluring woman named amazin," did he not wish to be amazed by an actual woman, someone like Laban's daughter Rachel who "was beautiful and well favoured"? But if amazin is the semivirtual product of technological information, Rachel, for all we know, may be a figment of cultural information. Why should Rachel have a greater claim on our engagement? The crucial difference between the charms of a MOO and the story of the Bible is that the former reduces persons to disposable commodities while the latter celebrates a person whose beauty was so commanding that "Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her." (Borgmann 200)

Risks of patriarchy and sexism in this example aside, Borgmann here not only reiterates the sharp contrast between embodied *eros* and online but disembodied sex: he further notes in passing that the online world runs the risk of reducing persons "to disposable commodities...." This provides an important conceptual connection to the discussion of consumerism in the next section.

His recognition of the central importance of embodiment further serves to ground part of his critique of distance education. In contrast with the diverse forms of natural and cultural information that, while sometimes scant, derive from a range of sources in relationship to a fluid body engaged with the world through all of its senses, "Technological information, to the contrary, comes endlessly and relentlessly pouring forth from one source to address *an immobilized body* via one sense" (208: emphasis added, CE). This contrast between an engaged, multi-sensory body in a world of natural and cultural information and the user at a computer then serves his later critique of virtual reality. Here Borgmann hopes that

Within the postmodern lightness of being, to the contrary, the moral instruction of reality can restore its material force and with it our fundamental welfare – the full engagement of human capacities. We

are essentially bodily creatures that have evolved over many hundreds of thousands of years to be mindful of the world not just through our intellect or our senses but through our very muscles and bones. We are stunting and ignoring this ancestral attunement to reality at our peril (220).

Again, to be fully human for Borgmann is to be fully embodied subjects of *eros* and *thanatos*, engaged with a diverse range of informations – not simply (technological) information receivers limited to what can come through our screens as we sit passively and who thereby mistake this disembodied existence for a fully human one.

This emphasis on embodiment, finally, can be seen as implicit in Borgmann's central philosophical equation, "INTELLIGENCE provided, a PERSON is informed by a SIGN about some THING within a given CONTEXT" (21). The PERSON here, that is, is clearly an *embodied* one, at least insofar as the signs involved are natural and cultural ones. In this way, his discussion of embodiment should be seen as part of Borgmann's critique not only of an exclusive and misleading focus on technological information but, thereby, of modernity at large. That is, in referring to the symmetry in this equation between intelligence and person, on the one hand, and thing and context on the other (with the two sides conjoined by the SIGN), Borgmann observes that

In the modern period, this symmetry is thought to have split down the middle. The resulting division of mind and world seems to have given humans dominion over reality. I am here, the world is over there.... (22)

In other terms, Borgmann attacks here an especially Cartesian dualism characteristic of modernity – one that indeed splits not only mind and world, but also mind and body. By bringing to the foreground the significance of *embodiment* in our lives as fully engaged human beings, Borgmann thus counters modernity's understanding of what it means to be human in a way that is perfectly consistent with his critique of modernity as the period in which "Eloquence and meaning began to drain from reality" (10) and thereby laid the foundations for the current threat that technological information (as favored by the disembodied mind) will flood out natural and cultural information (as known by embodied human beings engaged with their world.)

In this way, Borgmann is in excellent philosophical company. While the literature on embodiment vis-à-vis ICTs has grown explosively in the past

few years, here it will serve to mention the work of Nancy Baym (1995, 2000), Barbara Becker (2000, 2001), Jay David Bolter (2001), Hubert Dreyfus (2001), Katherine Hayles (1999), and Käte Meyer-Drawe (2001). These theorists recognize that part of the enthusiasm for a putative "liberation in cyberspace" rests precisely on the presumption of a Cartesian dualism: only on the basis of such dualism – expressed most strongly in the characteristic contempt for the offline world as "meatspace" (Gibson 1984, Barlow 1996) – can one consistently believe that the evils and inconveniences of the offline world (not only injustice and oppression, but also gender discrimination, labor, and death) can be escaped in a purer, freer, potentially immortal existence in cyberspace (see Ess 2002 for a more extensive discussion). Here it suffices to say that Borgmann's attention to embodiment as part of a philosophical critique of especially postmodern enthusiasm is both consistent with, and indeed, with the exception of Hayles, anticipates this turn in more recent literature towards embodiment as a key point of analysis in a "post-post-modern" or "post-human" (so Hayles) view.

### **Consumerism**

As noted above, Borgmann's discussion of embodiment suggests in one place that our *dis-embodiment* in cyberspace reduces persons to "disposable commodities" (Borgmann 200). In this way, Borgmann suggests a link between commodification and consumption, on the one hand, and the 1990s enthusiasm for cyberspace, on the other. Clearly, his interest in the economic dimensions of ICTs and their social impacts is not his first priority. He remarks at the outset, for example:

Will information technology create a new division between haves and have-nots or deepen the old division? This is surely a fair question. But it tends to divert us from the deeper question of whether the recent and imminent flood of information is good for anybody, rich or poor (4).

Nonetheless, Borgmann notes at least on occasion the ways in which consumerism plays into our enthusiasm for ICTs. To begin with, drawing on the work of Bill McKibben (1993), Borgmann writes:

An emblem of the dissolving nearness of things and of the ensuing restlessness that haunts our culture is "buying simply for the pleasure of the act itself," as McKibben puts it. Television advertising constantly abets our belief that ever new bits of property can make up for our failure to appropriate the focal area of our lives (26).

By contrast, for Borgmann and for McKibben, the "ancestral world," as the origin and shaper of our primordial relationships to signs and things, is a place where you can't *buy* things (26).

Consistent with this – and again involving a reference to McKibben – Borgmann later suggests that our contemporary cultural interest in acquiring what he characterizes as the transparency and control of ICTs rests on a kind of material greed: "It is the craving for the unencumbered enjoyment of all the riches the world and imagination can offer" (177). In more philosophical terms, we can characterize Borgmann's point this way: our enthusiasm for the control and transparency of ICTs rests on the desire for the ostensibly *unlimited* consumption they promise. For philosophers and religious persons, however, this rings of *hubris*, if not idolatry, as we thereby seek to overcome our limits as finite, mortal creatures (subjects of *thanatos*) – an overcoming equally apparent in our quest for technologically-mediated immortality.

In fact, for Borgmann it is the domains of "leisure and consumption" where he sees the tragic loss of the "powerful skills and habits of realizing information" characteristic of pre-modern eras more fully immersed in natural and cultural forms of information (183). This is indeed one of his most trenchant expressions of how ICTs threaten our ancient connections with natural and cultural worlds:

Technology as a way of taking up with reality has put the power of technological information in the service of radical disburdenment. At the limit, virtual reality takes up with the contingency of the world by avoiding it altogether. The computer, when it harbors virtual reality, is no longer a machine that helps us to cope with the world by making a beneficial difference in reality; it makes all the difference and liberates us from actual reality. Of the five terms of information where, INTELLIGENCE provided, a PERSON is informed by a SIGN about some THING in a certain CONTEXT, intelligence, things, and context evaporate and leave a person with self-sufficient and peculiarly ambiguous signs (183).

If we can fairly denote contemporary human beings utilizing ICTs for leisure and consumption as simply consumers then Borgmann's critique here amounts to a powerful critique of consumerism. The consumer, in his term, is disburdened by the technology, to the point that connection with "actual reality" – as well as with intelligence and context – is lost altogether.

Borgmann offers a last critique of ICTs as consumed – this time, in the context of his critique of distance learning as "disburdened" from the constraints of offline life:

The disburdenment from the constraints of time, place, and the decisions of other people is the unique accomplishment of modern technology and finds its everyday realization in consumption. Supported by the machinery of technology, consumption is the unencumbered enjoyment of whatever one pleases. The pleasures of consumption require no effort and hence no discipline. Few proponents of course would claim that distance learning will be effortless. But they fail to see that the discipline needed to sustain effort in turn needs the support of the timing, spacing, and socializing that have been part of human nature ever since it has evolved in a world of natural information (207).

In sum, the consumer of technological information via ICTs – even in the context of education, much less at leisure – is dramatically far removed from the effort, discipline, and skills sustained by embodied subjects of *eros* and *thanatos*, engaged in the offline worlds of natural and cultural information.

As with his remarks on embodiment, Borgmann is here again ahead of the curve. While especially the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory has long criticized the role of capitalism in undermining the liberation promised by the Enlightenment, such a critical approach has been rare in the Anglo-American world, especially with regard to ICTs – at least until recently. In particular, there has been some criticism of the role of commercialization and consumerism as transforming ICTs – notably, the Internet and the Web – away from their promised potentials as public spheres facilitating greater democracy, freedom, and equality, to commercial spaces that reinforce economic hierarchies, competition, and concentrations of wealth and power (e.g., Besser 1995, McChesney 2000; Yoon 2001). In this light, Borgmann's critique of consumerism as fostering a kind of careless acceptance of technological information and a correlative loss of the skills and engagements that defined the good life in pre-modern worlds is a significant contribution to such criticism.



**Questions and Critiques: Free markets and Apocalyptic Solutions?***Free Markets: Borgmann and the Borg*

But it is in connection with his criticism of consumerism that I must raise a first question regarding Borgmann's analysis. In his concluding remarks, Borgmann expresses a surprising optimism regarding free markets and their ability to overcome overt misery and poverty (Borgmann 232). This optimism is surprising because endorsing free market capitalism as the engine that will "wire the world" and thus lead to the realization of the utopian vision of an "electronic global village" is part and parcel of the 1990s' enthusiasts' position (as articulated most famously by Negroponte 1995) – i.e., the position that Borgmann is at pains to undermine. It is even more surprising given Borgmann's sharp critique of consumption as abetting our disengagement from the worlds of natural and cultural information and the correlative loss of skills and discipline needed to engage as embodied beings in those worlds. It is certainly arguable, as Borgmann asserts, that free markets raise economic activity: but it is by no means clear that the result is a *generally shared* alleviation of poverty. On the contrary, there is good evidence that the Digital Divide is growing rather than shrinking as, more generally, is the divide between the rich and the poor – both internally in the U.S. and globally.<sup>2</sup>

Hence we must raise the question: if we are to realize the good life as Borgmann envisions it (i.e., as it involves an ethically-informed balance of natural, cultural, and technological information as taken up by embodied human beings) must we not recognize both the powers and dangers of free markets? This approach would follow analogously to Borgmann's larger argument that we not eliminate information technologies and technological information, but that we recognize "limits and caution as regards the advancement of information technology and a strategy of incorporating technological information into contemporary culture deliberative and realistically" (Borgmann 201).

To make this point a final way: I have argued elsewhere (Ess 2000) that a thoughtless consumerism threatens to turn first-world computer users into the Borg – the machine-like cyborgs of *Star Trek* who relentlessly consume the biological, cultural, and technological capital of all species they encounter, reducing them all to a single homogenous "culture." Insofar as "the other" – other persons, especially as representing cultures other than our own – is present to us on our screens only as manipulable and consumable pixels, the

consumer, like the Borg, can assimilate the other at will and without resistance ("resistance is futile"). In Borgmann's terms, consumerism, as a drive for disburdened, skill-less, but unlimited enjoyment of merely virtual realities, thus threatens to eliminate our embodied engagements with natural and cultural information: specifically, it threatens to eliminate our embodied engagements with *others* as likewise *finite* subjects of *eros* and *thanatos*. It is better to be a Borgmann than a Borg. But I suggest that we are more likely to realize Borgmann's vision of the good life as embodied human beings engaged with multiple modes of information – and, by extension, with multiple cultures as defined by distinctive conjunctions of such information – by extending his critique of consumption and consumerism to include a more critical understanding of both the powers and dangers of free market capitalism.

#### *Apocalyptic solutions?*

Borgmann concludes his book with a final warning of the dangers of cyberspace, followed by a final, specifically *religious* "attestation" (not contestation), one that invokes a specific religious thematic (*apocalyptic*) within a specific religious tradition (Christian). First, the warning:

But while information technology is alleviating overt misery, it is aggravating a hidden sort of suffering that follows from the slow obliteration of human substance. It is the misery of persons who lose their well-being not to violence or oblivion, but to the dilation and attenuation they suffer when the moral gravity and material density of things is overlaid by the lightness of information. People are losing their character and definition to the levity of cyberspace (Borgmann 232).

In the face of these dangers, Borgmann leaves us with words of assurance – very much a blessing and a benediction:

Christians, for example, owe what fidelity to persons and festive things they possess to a strong reading of cosmic contingency – the history of salvation. Whatever definition they attain as persons through their engagement with reality they see as precarious and in need of final resolution. The world as sign makes them look forward to the event when

Liber scriptus proferetur,  
In quo totum continetur,  
Unde mundus judicetur.  
A written book will be brought forward

Wherein everything is gathered

Whence the world may be adjudged.

All of us will be remembered and more; our souls will be rocked in the bosom of Abraham. (233).

On the one hand, closing this volume with Abraham is remarkably apt. Abraham appears frequently and importantly in Borgmann's arguments and analyses – first of all, as the story of Abraham stands as a primary example of "conventional signs and the fullness of information" at work in the domain of ancestral information (30-37). In fact, it appears here that Borgmann wants to introduce an additional component to his semiotic equation, intelligence+person//sign//thing+context – namely, faith:

In a passage like this, the People of the Book see the origin and fullness of information. Spirit informs reality. What is needed to grasp this is not just intelligence but faith. Accordingly, Abraham is often called the man of faith. What the faithful receive is not some sign, but the word of God, and that word is not about some thing but regards the beginning and end of all things – divine authority and the fate of humanity. Finally the message is not encompassed by a certain context but by the spirit of God. Nonetheless, what is at issue here is information, not presentation. The nearness of God is audible rather than visible (31f.).

Correlatively, Borgmann affirms what believers would call the revelation to Abraham:

It is as though Abraham received the big bang of divine information, while we are left with faint cosmic background radiation. The meaning of reality has declined and become occluded. It has been reduced to contingency – the unexplainable residue of accident and randomness (33).

Abraham in this way is affiliated not only with the ancestral domain of natural signs and embodied existence – but, indeed, with the emergence of *literacy* (see pg. 37). In this light, it is appropriate that Borgmann closes with the promise that, in the face of the threats of losing character and definition, moral gravity and the density of things, all may be redeemed in a *book* of judgment and the bosom of the Abraham affiliated with faith and the emergence of literacy.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, Borgmann's final salvation from the dangers of cyberspace – like his apparently uncritical endorsement of free markets – is

also surprising. It is surprising first of all because it seems to present us with an all-too-easy dichotomy between the danger of losing our moral gravity, character, and definition in cyberspace, and salvation in the form of inscription in the book of judgment and embrace in the bosom of Abraham. This dichotomy is clearly at odds with Borgmann's intention to avoid precisely such Manichean dualisms and to achieve instead a balance among natural, cultural, and technological forms of information.

This closing dichotomy becomes even more problematic when considered from the perspective of religious tradition. Briefly, visions of salvation through a final judgment and vindication of the righteous from an irredeemably corrupt material world belongs to the *apocalyptic* traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Apocalyptic thought and belief sharply contrast with the more original *prophetic* tradition – and in ways that are decisive for the large debate between modernity and postmodernism, on the one hand, and theorists such as Borgmann, Hayles, Becker, and others whose critique of postmodern enthusiasm for liberation in cyberspace in part rests squarely on their endorsement of embodiment.

That is: the prophetic tradition – including no less a figure than Abraham – begins with the affirmation of the goodness of creation, including our status as embodied creatures who are to engage in relationships of compassion and justice with the larger human family, the natural order, and divinity. In this view, history is a trajectory towards recovering *in this world* and *in this life* an original harmony between Creator and creation – a recovery denoted as God's Kingdom (perhaps better, God's Presence) and characterized by *shalom*, peace and prosperity, where this peace includes the elimination of even "natural" predatory relationships in nature ("the wolf shall live with the lamb") and between humanity and nature ("the nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp" – Isaiah 11.6, 8). By contrast, the apocalyptic vision of salvation in an afterlife arises in times when the world seems irredeemably corrupt, so that the realization of God's Presence must be postponed to an afterlife: but this postponement requires precisely the assumption of a *soul* as separate from and ultimately superior to the body and the material world (Ess 2001).

This soul-body split and the correlative *contemptus mundi* ("contempt for the world," as Nietzsche reminds us in his various critiques of Western dualism as "the metaphysics of the hangman" [Nietzsche 1988, 500]) characteristic of apocalyptic belief takes a number of expressions in Western traditions, including gnosticism (Ess 1999). Moreover, this religiously-based dualism

clearly undergirds Descartes' more secular epistemology and metaphysics – one that centers modernity and, arguably, postmodernity, as these endorse a subject radically divorced from body and thereby the material world. In this way, apocalyptic dualism undergirds not only the modern split between subject and object that Borgmann (along with Hayles, Becker, and others) critique as they seek (rightly, in my view) to restore a conception of the human subject engaged as a fully embodied creature with the natural and cultural worlds (what Becker calls a *LeibSubjekt*, "BodySubject"). Moreover, apocalyptic dualism, as it emerges from and inscribes suspicion and contempt for the world of matter and body, undergirds precisely the postmodern quest for liberation and immortality of disembodied selves in the virtual realities of cyberspace (e.g., Ess 1999, 2001). But this means: as Borgmann closes his argument by invoking a more apocalyptic than prophetic resolution to the threats to our humanity presented by cyberspace, he unfortunately inclines us precisely in the direction of disembodied dualism that undergirds what he seeks to critique as the modern loss of meaning and the postmodern enthusiasm for liberation in cyberspace. He seeks to overcome these, as we have seen, in part by an attention to embodiment, precisely in keeping with his prophetic starting points. But an apocalyptic closing, however apt and appropriate from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy, threatens to realign Borgmann philosophically with precisely the modern and postmodern positions he is most at pains to critique and overcome.

### **Finding the Balance: ICTs and focal activities?**

Finally, the closing dichotomy between a secular cyberspace and an apocalyptic salvation, by emphasizing the (very real) dangers and problems of life online, tempts us to miss the likewise real possibilities for an engaged and perspicuous (to use one of Borgmann's favorite terms) life *through* life online – a life that Borgmann should endorse as part of the balance he calls for at the outset.

Indeed, at points, Borgmann – despite his call for balance, etc. – seems close to an absolute condemnation of ICTs. So he writes:

Whatever else computers may be in our culture, they are automatic in the sense that they do things for us that we cannot or do not want to do ourselves. To be sure, rather few computers are entirely automatic, excluding human agency altogether. But all of them cushion and comfort the human condition. In some way they disburden us from having to cope with the contingency of reality (Borgmann 144).

But this is surely going too far. Indeed, Borgmann shortly notes that in the very early days of personal computing, given the comparative primitiveness of the machinery, at least some persons could engage in

...a microcosm of technology that they were able to comprehend and inhabit in its entirety, unlike the world of their work where they were confined to a small niche and unlike society at large that alienated them through its forbidding and irrational complexity. For technically untutored or timid persons, the early computers presented an opportunity to become acquainted and easy with some of the complexities of mathematics, science, and engineering and so to acquire a franchise in the dominant and distinctive culture of our time (163).

This would seem to suggest – consonant with Borgmann’s larger project of achieving a good life that includes the balance of natural, cultural, and technological information – that our engagement with ICTs, rather than only disburden us from reality (especially as known via natural and cultural information), might also help us better engage with reality. Such engagements are exemplified, for example, in Borgmann’s description of using computers to better understand the force and character of mathematical equations (172-74). By extension, using ICTs to convey information about persons and places distant from us – especially if we do so in ways that sustain their resistance as Others – would seem to expand our understanding of especially cultural realities in ways hard to imagine in a world restricted to print or orality (Ess 2001). In fact, Peter Sy (2001) is optimistic that, in the face of the threats of a colonization of the filipino lifeworld via ICTs, it will be possible to develop new forms of Borgmann’s focal activities *in conjunction with* ICTs. Such a conjunction is already exemplified in the filipino cybercafe, an Internet café that includes more traditional forms of focal activities (poetry reading, musical performance, etc.).

By the same token, the 1990s’ unbridled enthusiasm for "online communities" as potential replacements for offline communities has given way to a more refined understanding of how ICTs may sustain and enhance face-to-face communities (e.g., Fernback 2001, Pew 2001, Wellman et al 2001: see also Sveningsson 2001, ch. 4, and Baym 2000 for additional discussion and references).

Similarly, as we have already seen, our engagement with ICTs is helping to sharpen our understanding of what it means to be embodied creatures. While

there are still those excited about the prospect of becoming a cyborg (e.g., Warwick, 2001), it is as users and researchers bump up against the limits of the machine-body interface that we are gaining an increasingly clear understanding of the meanings, powers, and limits of embodiment. Indeed, Borgmann's essay itself contributes to this understanding in ways noted above.

My critique of Borgmann thus amounts to a concern that his own goal of balance be kept in mind as we read the more apocalyptic dualism that closes his argument and thus runs the risk of undermining our efforts towards balance, indeed, of returning us to the philosophical foundations that support the very positions he seeks to counter. That said, let me balance this concern with a final affirmation. Borgmann's work functions not simply to recover and remind us of more primordial relationships with more primordial realities: in doing so, it further recovers and reminds us what it is to be a *subject* in especially Kantian and phenomenological terms. In this way, there is a double benefit: if Borgmann is right to argue for a foundational *relationship* between intelligence + person // sign // thing + context as the necessary context of meaningful human life – then he thereby points the way towards overcoming a (post)modern split between subject and object in which we lose sight of *both* reality *and* what it means to be human as an embodied subject. This double recovery – of both reality and humanity – is clearly urgent and essential. At the same time, it is ironic. It is an ironic but perhaps a necessary pattern that our appreciation for embodiment follows upon an extended enthusiasm for escaping the body in technologically-mediated ways. More broadly, in an age in which American enthusiasm for all things technological, and most especially all things Internet and World Wide Web, urges an unbridled immersion into the virtual and the online, it is ironically and paradoxically the philosophers – and most especially, Albert Borgmann – who help us see how we might hold on to reality.

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#### End Notes

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, U.S. Department of Commerce et al, 2000. More recently, Lisa Nakamura (2001) has observed that quite contrary to earlier phase of utopian scholarship, more contemporary scholarship has lost confidence in the social transformative potentials of the Internet. To put it bluntly, she notes that what started out as the biggest revolution since Gutenberg ends up as a gigantic yard sale. In her view, the Internet revolution is definitely over – leaving us in a “post-Internet epoch.”

<sup>3</sup> This ending is even more apt is one compares it with the final paragraphs of Norman McLean’s *A River Runs Through It*, a volume Borgmann also cites:

Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world’s great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs. I am haunted by waters. (1976, 113)