

A Phenomenology of Mass-produced Things and our Relation with the More-than-human World

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Whatever your opinion on modern, technological society, it is a fact that as far as our animal bodies are concerned, this world is unfamiliar. The smooth surfaces and hard angles of our built environments must remain, on some fundamental level, completely alien to us. I want to focus on one particular aspect of our experience of this new world; I want to attempt a phenomenology of mass-produced things, which I will sometimes call “technological objects.” I claim that technological objects dialogue with our senses in discernibly different ways than natural or handmade objects. I want to investigate what those ways are, what they mean, and why they matter. How do these objects appear to us? How do our senses encounter them? And, most significantly – how does the way we encounter technological objects bleed over into our encounters with non-technological (natural or handmade) objects?

This project will build on Heidegger’s critique of technology, David Abram’s environmental phenomenology, and Albert Borgmann’s discussions of technology, commodification, and deep and shallow objects. As much as is possible, I want to remain limited to pre-cognitive sensory experience; in other words, I want to attend to the shape of objects and the way those shapes strike our bodies and minds prior to conscious recognition, naming, or knowledge about the object. I will argue that our perception of mass-produced things, a perception unique to and only possible within technological culture, dulls our senses and de-emphasizes the basic materiality of all things, thereby discouraging connection and engagement with the more-than-human world.

Part 1: Description

When I say that I am attempting a phenomenology of technological objects, what precisely do I mean? I want to argue that there are describable commonalities in how people in our modern culture encounter mass-produced objects, and that these shared modes of encounter are unique to these objects. I will then argue that these commonalities influence the way individuals within a technological culture encounter non-technological (natural) objects. Specifically, I will argue that the commonalities of experience technological objects provoke in

us are then imposed upon natural objects, therefore alienating individuals from a specific kind of embodied engagement with the natural world. This is a heavy task, and relies first and foremost on whether the phenomenology of technological objects that I attempt can be believed. It is also abstract. I encourage you, then, to ground and to test what I talk about today in your own memories and experiences. Ask yourself if you encounter the things in the world around you – whether technological or natural – in a way resonant with what I am describing.

My first task will be a description of the unique commonalities with which we encounter technological objects. Any encounter with any object stems first and is deeply informed by the way that object appears to us materially. For this reason, it is necessary that I begin with a picture of the specific shared physical traits of mass-produced objects. There are two traits that I believe are central and uncontroversial: nearly all mass-produced objects attempt to be both uniform and unobtrusive.

Uniformity is almost definitional in the idea of mass-production; the goal of producing something *en masse* is to create copies, and, ideally, copies are indistinguishable from one another. This striving towards perfect uniformity among copies of a technological object is especially clear when we consider that all deviations are encountered as flaws – for example, the cracks on my iPhone screen, or the fact that my car came with a bad battery. The idea of a spontaneous neutral or positive deviation is entirely unfamiliar to us. No one has ever been pleasantly surprised by receiving a smartphone with a slightly larger screen, or a car with an unexpectedly nice green tint. These sorts of idiosyncrasies, even if they did occur, would be just as highly selected against as the more obvious flaws. The goal of perfect uniformity follows directly from the commodification of technological objects. When something is removed from its context and placed into a global (or even local) market economy, it becomes necessary to provide the item exactly as advertised. Anything unexpected in the product would cause it to fail in providing the promised commercial function.

This goal – of pure functionality – leads into a discussion of the physical unobtrusiveness of technological objects. To be sure, there are more exceptions to the claim that mass-produced objects are unobtrusive than that they are uniform. The Wacky Wavy Inflatable Arm-Flailing Tube Men that threaten to cause traffic accidents outside of car dealerships are certainly obtrusive. As a rule, however, technological objects attempt to be as physically *not-there* as they can afford to be. The ideal car (to many people, perhaps not to car-lovers) is one that is quiet,

sleek, smooth, and purely functional. This is not simply a question of design style. The field of ergonomics is based around providing a user with the least amount of resistance between their intention and the feedback given by the product, whether that product be an office chair, a computer mouse, a laptop, a pen, a television, or a spiral notebook. The perfect technological device, in most cases, is one that does not *exist*, yet that still does what we want it to *do*.

Uniformity and unobtrusiveness can both be seen as expressions of Borgmann's device paradigm, which posits that technological objects present to us as more and more inconspicuous as technology improves. Borgmann traces a pattern of technological advancement over the modern era, and finds that the machinery of devices is shrinking while the commodity of those same devices increases. The first television was a massive box (machinery) with a very small screen (commodity). It is clear, given the direction of progress in creating newer and better televisions, that the ideal TV is one that has no machinery and is merely screen – entirely commodity, entirely function. As the machinery of technological objects shrinks, Borgmann claims, those objects become less and less comprehensible to us. It is equally true that they become less and less materially present to us. A device's uniformity annihilates any sense that we are interacting with a unique, particular object, and its unobtrusiveness ensures there is hardly anything physically there to interact with in the first place. Our senses, when dialoguing with a mass-produced object, are dulled and almost unnecessary; all we need to know about an iPhone as a sensed, material object is that it is "an iPhone." There is no need for us to have any particular experience of *this* iPhone – or at least, not one that "iPhone" as a category could not provide.

All of this, taken together, leads into the main claim I want to make about how we perceive technological objects: we experience them as *general* and not as *particular* objects. What is a general object? I mentioned earlier that mass-produced objects are, by the definition of mass-production, copies. A copy is made from an original. Yet the original, in the case of an iPhone, is surely not some prototypical individual phone that the devices we carry in our pockets are mere imitations of. We don't view Steve Jobs' prototype as *the* iPhone. Instead, the original in the case of mass-produced objects is the blueprint, the idea – inevitably, also, the *ideal*. The original iPhone is essentially the Platonic Form of an iPhone, with an unreachable set of perfect traits. However, as a result of the inherent uniformity and unobtrusiveness of technological devices, the line between ideal and instantiation nearly disappears. To the extent that your iPhone

is uniform (meaning it has no cracks and has minimal idiosyncrasy) and unobtrusive (meaning it reduces its presence as a physical object as much as possible) it is identical with the *idea* of an iPhone in how it is encountered. Your Brita filter, your Nike sneakers, and your new Decomposition Book are all encountered and considered not as particular objects with their own sets of traits, but as manifestations of the form and function of the more general object they represent. On my drive to present this paper at a conference in Spokane, I stopped at a Walgreens to pick up some contact solution. As I did so, it occurred to me that both the Walgreens and the contact solution occupied space in my consciousness not as a particular place and a particular thing but as a non-place and a non-thing, unbound by space and time. The bottle of contact solution waiting for me on a shelf in Coeur d'Alene was, as far as I was concerned, the exact same bottle I had forgotten on my bathroom sink in Missoula. The Walgreens, too, in the implicit, pre-cognitive assumptions of my senses, had beamed itself down from the transcendental immaterial realm where Walgreens lives and onto this street corner in front of me.

This kind of perception is significant – and deeply weird – but in order to understand why, it is necessary to discuss how we encounter objects that are not mass-produced¹ as a contrast. The first and most obvious physical difference between technological and natural objects is that natural objects are *not* uniform. Idiosyncrasies abound in nature. While at first glance, a pile of smooth stones on the bank of a stream may look the same, on any close inspection they are each unique – one may have a vein of quartz bisecting it horizontally, another may look more blue when wet, and none will have the same shape or size. Each blade of grass in a field may seem identical, yet each will have profound variation – some will be chewed by bugs, others will be yellow near the edges, and so on. These idiosyncrasies are not flaws, but are in fact inherent to how the natural world progresses and changes. Obtrusiveness is, again, the trickier quality to discern, but because natural objects are not reducible to a function, their physical presence is inherently more of *what* they are. One of those river stones may not be obviously obtrusive, but it is certainly physically present; each crevice or minute detail states something to the eye or hand that would be meaningless if the object were a device and its physical existence merely served some established end. Whereas the screen of an iPhone is all but ignored by the senses in favor of the function of information-delivery it provides, the veins in

¹ I will shorten this category to “natural objects.” Though I fully acknowledge how problematic the word “natural” (and to a lesser extent, even the word “object”) is, there is no better recognizable descriptor that fits.

a river stone have no function that overshadows its sensuous presence, no built-in end that requires “seeing past” its materiality. To reference Heidegger, the stone, unlike the iPhone, has not made the transition into a resource within the technological framework, and therefore it is able to retain its particular physical presence.

These differences in the traits of technological and natural objects have a large impact on our pre-cognitive, sensuous perception of them. David Abram writes that when we attune to our animal senses, we begin to notice these differences. “The countless human artifacts with which we are commonly involved,” he writes, “all begin to exhibit a common style, and to lose some of their distinctiveness; meanwhile, organic entities... begin to display a new vitality, each coaxing the breathing body into a unique dance” (63). We can dialogue with these entities with an “inexhaustible depth” because they are “composed of repetitive figures that *never exactly repeat themselves...*” Meanwhile, mass-produced objects “draw our senses into a dance that endlessly reiterates itself *without variation*” precisely because they are “constrained by the specific ‘functions’ for which they were built” (64). In other words, natural objects have the potential to be more deeply engaging to our physical senses, even while technological objects voraciously grab at our attention.

Part 2: Implication

Several years ago, a close friend and I hiked a small mountain near my house in New York. At the peak, we looked out over the forests and rolling hills. I could spot a stream that I played in as a child. I could see enormous oaks, slender birches, rolling meadows of yellow grasses. It was a stupendous vantage point to take in so much. My friend, who had lived his entire life in Tokyo, glanced out and said, “Wow. There’s just nothing.” It goes without saying that my friend did not believe he actually saw nothing. He did indeed see trees, hills, streams, and meadows. Yet it was also obvious that his statement went beyond a mere figure of speech; there was a difference in what we experienced, and ultimately, he was bored. I want to argue that the manner in which technological objects engage with us – as general, almost abstract objects rather than as individual beings – bleeds over into our perceptions of non-technological objects.

It would be helpful here to explore Albert Borgmann’s distinction between deep and shallow objects in order to further clarify what exactly is changing about our perception of

natural objects. A shallow object is, simply put, an object that is *merely* its function; nothing besides its use is important. A TV remote is a good example of a shallow object. So long as whatever device you are holding can turn on the television, none of its other physical characteristics matter (unless they obstruct said function). In fact, it's also of almost no concern whether the object is the same one today as it is tomorrow; if someone broke into your house and switched your TV remote with another working remote, it is safe to assume this act alone would be of almost no concern. Deep objects, on the other hand, matter in their specificity and particularity. Your straight razor might be a shallow object, but your deceased grandfathers' straight razor is almost certainly deep. A more obvious and striking example of a deep object is a human being. It certainly would matter if the robber switched your child with another who was, for the most part, similar! It is not just the function that matters here in the case of your child, but every characteristic of the thing, including its history and physical detail. As a rule, shallow objects are allographic (can exist in many instances and be interchangeable) while deep objects are autographic (only have one authentic instantiation).

Having already established a description of how we engage with commodified technological objects, I don't believe it is controversial to say that they are specifically constructed to be encountered as general, shallow, and allographic. What may be more controversial is what I would like to suggest as a further point: that the inundation of technological objects surrounding us in modern society predisposes us to view non-technological objects as general, shallow, and allographic out of habit where we would have otherwise encountered them as particular, deep, and autographic. It may sound strange at first to claim that physically *being around* iPhones makes it easier to perceive trees as "just trees," but why should it be such an odd claim? We learn how to engage with our world through experiential encounter with it, and that experience is unique to the culture of technology. At no other point in history were human beings surrounded by so many objects designed to appear non-specific and non-physical – and this doesn't even approach the more recent and dire phenomena of virtual objects and virtual experience! Why should it be controversial to suggest that this experience shapes and forecasts our modes of encounter with objects that *aren't* designed? My friend had a different experience than me because while I was encountering significant particular objects, he saw only "trees." Despite the fact that natural objects are inevitably and intricately various, our habitual encounter with mass-produced devices designed to be both uniform and unobtrusive has dulled

our senses and trained us to ignore this engaging individuality. When I looked out across the valley I was raised in, I saw many various and particular beings, and each demanded its own kind of attention. Whereas my friend, looking out over the same valley – yet having no personal connection to or familiarity with these beings, nothing that would overcome the perceptual influence of technological objects – saw only copies of the idea of a “tree.”

I believe this experiential bleed-over is a first step towards the way natural objects undergo a challenging and become a resource within Heidegger’s framework. This is how it is possible to view a particular beech tree, growing on the bank of a river and providing a home for owls and countless insects, as merely “some lumber.” In this case, it is less a matter of how we *conceive of* the tree than of how we *perceive* the tree, and, in fact, our perception has to see the individual as merely its category in order to be able to make the conceptual leap to view it as *only* a resource to begin with. The losses for the tree here are obvious; it will be killed, reduced to its functional purpose and used, to that end, as a resource (when you perceive an object as general, individuals are not considered).² However, engaging the tree in this way, as a mere “tree,” also carries significant losses for the perceiver.

So what are these losses? Why *should* it matter to us whether or not we view once-deep, once-specific, once-autographic beings as shallow, general, and allographic? For a complete answer, I think it is necessary to talk about Heidegger’s critique of technology. For Heidegger, technology as a whole works to disengage us from our world by relieving us of the need for demanding practices. You no longer have to brave the cold with a bucket to fetch water from the river, but can instead turn on a tap. The benefits here are enormous, and involve better sanitation, less time required for the task, and less dependence on the weather in determining if you will be able to retrieve water. Though clearly less significant than the benefits in this example, there are still costs, particularly in the manner this technology distances you from engaging bodily with the larger more-than-human reality you are ensconced in. Fetching water from the river, with a bucket, requires skill and attention; it is a practice. It requires energy and exertion, and demands physical interaction. You must *learn your world* in specificity and directly engage with it, and

² Also relevant to the disposability of natural objects is the designed disposability of mass-produced objects. Mass-produced objects tend to be not only shallow in theory (we could switch them and not care) but also in practice (we often switch them and don’t care). This disposability is reinforced by planned obsolescence, single-use plastic, and so on. I know an arborist who reports that almost all of his clients that request he remove a tree from their yard regret it afterwards, saying things like, “Well, I didn’t realize it would just be *gone*.” As a result of the disposability of mass-produced objects, we are accustomed to disposing of things in our world when they become inconvenient to us, and this has a profound effect on our treatment of that world.

therefore you become more connected to it. The tap demands none of this from you; it requires no practice, but instead simply performs a function.

Engagement and practice do not only demand activity, they also demand attention and perception. In fetching water, you must not only engage your body physically, but you must attend to your body as well, along with all the particular characteristics of the land, the climate, and the weather. The demands of engaging practices are demanding of our eyes, of our ears; they demand attention to our physical senses, not just our physical exertion. They encourage the encountering of natural objects as particular, deep, and autographic. It is the case, then, that mass-produced devices discourage this form of encounter on two separate yet connected fronts. Not only do these objects *by their very physical form* dull our senses and train us into a way of seeing that ignores particularity, but they also, as is shown here, remove the need for practices that demand attention to this particularity, thereby further disconnecting us from an embodied engagement with the stuff of our being.

Where does this leave us? It leaves us in immateriality. We become divorced from a world of beings that engages in dialog with us through our practices and inhabit, instead, a world that is proto-virtual, nearly not-there. This matters, because despite our devices, and despite becoming accustomed to the culture of technology, we are still at base only animals with animal bodies. All our desires, emotions, values, connections – all the things that are meaningful to us – originate within our animal selves, and these animal selves are deeply material. They seek intimacy with particular, deep, and autographic beings in the human and more-than-human spheres – an intimacy that is, by definition, only possible with particular, deep, and autographic beings. This tendency away from that mode of perception brought on by the design of technological objects therefore threatens meaning itself. It is an incredibly worrying thought that we may forget this mode of engaging with the more-than-human world, or even with other human beings, and instead unknowingly seek to fill the void left by its lack through more and more production, more and more advancement, more and more efficiency and function at the cost of materiality and intimacy. Only by attending deeply to the senses and engaging in practices with the world of particular beings that surrounds us can we remember this enlivening mode of engagement. If we don't, we not only risk forgetting the world, but also who and what we are.