

bar for those wishing to follow in Rauschenberg and Bivins' steps. Learning more in seven days than in seven years, it is difficult to say anything against this compilation. It might be possible to summarize for you what is Charleston about Charleston furniture, but you really should find that out for yourself by reading these texts. In fact, all furniture texts should be rewritten using the same terminology and in-depth analysis. It is the foundation resource for all to use and should reset and standardize all descriptive registrarial and research documentation

hereon. Thus I cry out for someone learned to write a guide for a standardized cataloguing terminology system, but insist that they use Rauschenberg and Bivins as their launch pad. These volumes sit in an honoured place in my home office and while I would like to share them with you, I'll probably be re-reading them when you call. So, in order to see future studies like this published and to witness fundamental furniture research at its best, it is essential that you buy this phenomenal compilation yourself!

Christina Garsten and Helena Wulff, *New Technologies at Work: People, Screens, and Social Virtuality*

Eric Higgs, Andrew Light and David Strong, *Technology and the Good Life?*

DAVID MCGEE

Garsten, Christina and Helena Wulff. *New Technologies at Work: People, Screens, and Social Virtuality*. Oxford: Berg, 2003. 224 pp., cloth, US\$74.95, ISBN 1859736440; paper, US\$24.95, ISBN 1859736491. Higgs, Eric, Andrew Light and David Strong. *Technology and the Good Life?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. 384 pp., cloth, US\$65, ISBN 0-226-33386-8; paper, US\$25, ISBN 0-226-33387-6.

The jacket copy for *New Technologies at Work* shouts that the new information and communication technologies have completely revolutionized our work practices, career patterns, professional identities, and generally everything in the workplace, as a result of far-reaching, fundamental and irrevocable changes that have had a huge impact on the workplace in an amazingly short time.

This is the usual breathless technological determinism linked to yet another technical revolution that has been used to sell books about technology since Jacques Ellul's *Technological Society* (1964) and Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* (1970). According to the determinist story, new technology comes along like an invading army, reshaping the world and controlling our lives whether we like it or not. Very frequently, the pitch is coupled to a heroic stance along the lines of: "The invader is at the gate. Read here to find out how we can stand up and defend our freedom against the machines."

The problem with this approach is that if the premise of technological determinism is correct,

then by definition there is *nothing* that can be done — so why read the book? If something *can* be done, then the premise of the book is false. So why read it?

They say, however, that you should not judge a book by its cover and this is particularly true of *New Technologies at Work*. Far from being filled with tales of technological determinism, inside this edited volume are a series of "ethnographic studies," almost all of which are more or less explicitly anti-determinist in orientation. In fact, most focus explicitly on the ironic discrepancies between determinist hype about information technology (like that found on the book cover) and the actual realities of the workplace. None involve any heroic stance of workers fighting against the machine. Almost all reveal workplace denizens in a familiar, all-too-human muddle, as some attempt to use information technology to accomplish their goals, while others adjust their behavior to finesse both the intended and unintended consequences.

Daniel Miller makes this theme explicit in his introductory "Living with New (Ideal of) Technology," which is perhaps the most stimulating essay of the book, and provides an insightful summary of the other articles as well. According to Miller, "virtual" means "ideal," and particularly the separation of ideals from actual practices of people and their labour. What he refers to are statements like: "the internet will bring democracy;" the "technologies of the open office will bring a

sense of team;" "Information Technology [IT] will bring about the globalization of markets;" "giving people access to IT would connect them to the new economic engines of society." These are statements of technological potential that have in many cases become oppressive fetishes. While Miller argues that the insistence on these fetishes is far more problematic and destructive than the technology itself, all the articles examine the discrepancy between these fetishistic ideals and what actually happens in a variety of workplaces.

Several other essays stand out. Nigel Rapport examines the appropriation of new technologies by porters in a Scottish hospital. Sarah Green looks at the effects of information technology on women's community services in Manchester. Anna Hasselstrom considers the increasing importance of human interaction in highly computerized financial firms on both sides of the Atlantic. Heinrich Schwartz examines the installation and unexpected results of a technology-based open office scheme in a London architectural firm. Washabaugh et al. look at the role of computers in classrooms for at-risk kids in Milwaukee. All these articles contain unexpected observations and surprising results concerning what humans are actually doing with their technology, punching holes in the wind-filled balloons of internet hype that we hear so often.

On the other hand, it may be argued that all the essays in the book suffer from what might be called the "ethnographic condition." In some there are the expected excesses of jargoneering. In others, there is the annoying anthropological habit of merely citing other papers in support of an idea, as if the citation makes the idea true, without any discussion of the relevant concepts. Some ideas are never clearly explained. I never did get a firm grasp of what "social virtuality" was supposed to mean.

At a more fundamental level, the problem is that individual case studies cannot support wider generalizations. That is to say, there is not enough evidence in such short studies to support the conviction that what is true in one workplace might be true more widely. Thus, if the main theme of the book concerns the problems caused by the existence of large-scale myths about workplace technology that are divorced from reality, there is nothing here to replace the bad intellectual apparatus with a new conceptual order.

Indeed, if the central premise of this book is that all abstractions are virtual "ideals," necessarily divorced from practice, and always capable of becoming oppressive fetishes, then the value as well as the very idea of attempting new conceptualizations is undercut. On this pessimistic line

of reasoning, it would seem we are doomed to be conceptually defeated by the role of technology in modern life. It appears from this book that this pessimism is justified.

The initial premise of this book of essays is that, while the philosophy of technology may have succeeded in becoming a minor academic discipline, so far as having any wider impact on academia, philosophy or public thinking, it is a failure. This failure is acknowledged in unhappy essays by Paul Durbin and Carl Mitcham — the two men who may be regarded as the deans if not the founders of philosophy of technology in North America. The idea behind the book, however, is that the development of a more successful philosophy of technology might be kickstarted with a discussion of the philosophy of Albert Borgmann.

Borgmann, like almost all the authors in this volume, views new technology as a largely negative force in modern society. He describes this negative role in terms of "focal things" and "devices." A good example of a "focal thing" would be a violin. To learn to play it you have to study and practise, you have to have discipline. You have a relationship with it through "focal practices" that not only build your character but integrate the object into your life as well as your life with others. A focal thing thus leads towards the good life. A corresponding "device" would be a CD player. Using a CD player to enjoy music requires no study and no practice. It builds no character. Moreover, putting on the headphones cuts you off from society. You don't play music with your friends. You don't go to concerts. Your life is impoverished. The problem, then, is that millions of CD players are sold, and that there are hundreds and hundreds of other kinds of devices, and new ones every day, also sold in the millions, replacing focal things and destroying our focal practices. In this scenario, technology is making our personal lives worse and worse, and society likewise.

This account of Borgmann's philosophy is necessarily simplified, but it captures an account of the modern technological situation that is more or less accepted by all the authors in this book. It's more or less the determinist invading technology re-shaping our world story again (although almost all the authors would probably deny they are determinists). Borgmann's rather modest suggestion for a heroic stance in the face of our technological condition is that we should adopt focal things and focal practices whenever we can. The book as a whole, however, wants to cast philosophy of technology itself into the heroic role, which would be one way of providing us with a way to *think* our way out of our perilous situation and "take control of the machines."

The problem is that it can't work. Readers will ask, if the determinist description of our technological condition is correct, what good can any philosophy possibly be? And if adopting a new attitude and acting accordingly can really change things, then the philosophical description of our condition underlying the philosophy of technology must be wrong. So who is going to adopt it?

One might add that no one is going to adopt the academic philosophizing found in these essays,

many of which are quite good, but nevertheless concerned mostly with the presentation and fine-tuning of various analytical concepts. There is, however, a more fundamental question, raised by this book, which needs to be addressed by philosophers. Is it the very concept of technology as a mighty, determining force in society that renders philosophy of technology impotent? The very concept that is used to justify the existence of philosophy of technology in the first place?

Joan Skogan, *Mary of Canada: The Virgin Mary in Canadian Culture, Spirituality, History and Geography*

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Skogan, Joan. *Mary of Canada: The Virgin Mary in Canadian Culture, Spirituality, History and Geography*. Banff: Banff Centre Press, 2003. 328 pp., 70 duotone illus., paper \$29.95, ISBN 1-894773-03-9.

Mary of Canada is a very personal book written by Joan Skogan, for Joan Skogan. Promoted by the publisher as cultural anthropology, religion and history, the book belongs to none of these categories. Rather, it is a deeply private memoir of the author's quest to find Mary. Skogan first encountered Virgin Mary at sea, on fishing vessels while working as a fisheries observer for the Canadian government. Polish, Russian, and Mexican seamen often brought with them pictures of Byzantine Madonnas, the Mary of Czestochowa or the Virgin of Guadalupe, which they displayed in lockers, in captain's cabins, kitchens or crews' messes. Fishermen shared these images with Skogan, hanging Mary over her bunk, to protect their guest during a long voyage. As she became familiar with the sailors' various forms of Mary, Skogan adopted her as her own guardian and consolation. Among foreign, male crews on the ships, Mary became her female companion, the only other woman on board.

Although, she loved her offshore work, Skogan was forced to abandon the sea. She does not elaborate in the book on the reasons for leaving her job, yet she makes it clear that the transition to life on land was difficult and painful. While she had to give up the sea, Skogan did not want to leave Mary behind. Thus, she set on a personal voyage to find, what she rather feebly describes as, "a possibility of Mary." *Mary of Canada: The Virgin Mary in Canadian Culture, Spirituality, History and Geography* is an unfortunate result of this quest.

In all fairness, Skogan's knowledge of the subject is extensive. She has obviously studied in-depth Marian history, art, literature, imagery, and symbolics. Yet, she devotes little effort to conveying this erudition to her audience. Skogan seems to assume that her reader is already familiar with Marian sources. In fact, anyone with only a minor interest in religion or raised in a non-Christian environment will find it difficult to follow the author's train of thought as she alludes to various dogma, myths, and apocrypha in Turkey, Georgia, Poland, Egypt and Syria in as little as three paragraphs.

Moreover, Skogan chooses a lyrical style, full of literary tropes to talk about Mary. Her syntax is complex and her sentences several lines long. The narrative is built around a metaphor of a sea voyage and is closed with a literary ellipse, beginning and ending with an image of an ocean. This imagery reinforces the idea of a quest, and also renders a fluid meaning that Mary carries throughout the time and space. Skogan, who is also an accomplished journalist, a fiction writer and a poet, proves in some instances that she can well imitate language used by Polish fishermen at sea, and the style of Canadian playwrights. Yet generally, the tone of the book is ceremonial and repetitive with a long litany of epithets. A typical paragraph from the book reads as follows:

Mary the Mother of God knows Canada by heart. She has the recipe for a certain life-giving tea made from the bark of Thuya occidentalis, the eastern white cedar. Atop the pillar supporting Our Lady of the World in Marystown, Newfoundland, the Burin Peninsula's unemployment rate is on her mind, and in St. Norbert, Manitoba,