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DMST 4200 Discussion leader assignment: Davis, *TechGnosis*

“New technologies of perception and communication open up new spaces, and these spaces are always mapped, on one level or another, through the imagination” (Davis, 90).

“Our modern technological world is not nature, but augmented nature, super-nature, and the more intensely we probe its mutant edge of mind and matter, the more our disenchanted productions will find themselves wrestling with the rhetoric of the supernatural” (Davis, 48).

In his book *TechGnosis*, author Erik Davis asserts that technology innately tickles the human imagination, leading consumers to explore the realm of the spiritual to better understand the principles and devices at hand. While Davis leads readers through history, exploring the ways in which various media compelled humans to investigate the unknown, the aforementioned quotations perhaps best represent the keys to Davis’ argument.

The first quotation concerns how new technology is manifested, and how humans assimilate such manifestations. New technology of perception and communication — which can perhaps more generally be considered technology of information transfer — creates new dimensions through which content is manifested. Traditional writing manifests itself through ink and paper. Radio content manifests itself through invisible electronic waves. Film manifests itself through an illusion of motion. Davis asserts that consumers are forced to use their imaginations to unravel the intricacies of these new methods of manifestation.

TechGnosis rests upon this concept, and it uses it to account for the “myth, magic and mysticism” that has simultaneously arrived with each new medium. As implied in this passage and written more directly elsewhere in *TechGnosis*, theories of such myth, magic and mysticism can be extrapolated to future media. This excerpt implies that it is of human nature to consult the imagination in attempting to grasp the principles of new technology. The text lacks exploration as to why this is so, as well as suggestions as to how one may be able to overcome this cycle when new media arrives.

The second quotation makes an assertion about the state of society, and the human response to technological advancements. The great technological advancements of the last 50 years have created a world vastly different from that of generations before it. Men and women can forge relationships without physically meeting. Films are screened in three dimensions, making the audience feel as if it is taking part in prerecorded action. One falls into the minority if he or she lacks instant, pocket-access to the information superhighway. What had once been a tangible world has transformed into one of intellectual stimulation and invisible seas of information— a super-nature, as Davis calls it. The great push to understand this world threatens all technology that has become explored and understood. Inevitably, Davis contends, one is forced to resort to supernatural language in an attempt to grasp what is not yet understood, as the supernatural accounts for the unknown. Much like the first excerpt, the second excerpt refrains from investigation as to why such disenchanting productions find “ themselves wrestling with the

rhetoric of the supernatural.” Perhaps it is of human nature to do so, as implied in the former quotation?

Before moving on, one must consider the differences in Davis’ word choices in the first and second quotations. In the first, Davis writes of the imagination, while in the second, he writes of the supernatural. What drives the difference in language? One implication that emerges from this comparison is that imagination and the supernatural are synonymous. The supernatural is manifested in one’s imagination. Ghosts, the divine, faith and spirituality are vehicles of imagination, as they cannot be registered through the five human senses. (This seems to be a reason such topics are subjects of heated debates.)

While *TechGnosis* often lacks specific answers to questions of human nature, secondary points can lead to further implications. Consider the following passages, beginning with a vision of the telegraph:

“The telegraph, with its instantaneous transcendence of space, was embraced as a particularly glowing sign of the young land’s self-imagined destiny: to build heaven on earth” (Davis, 73).

Next, consider an Extropian fantasy:

“Here then is the real wonder: that informational technology allows even the most hard-core materialists to ruminate once again of slipping the incorporeal spark of the self through the jaws of death unscathed” (Davis, 148).

Third, consider literary scholar David Porush’s concept of technological advancement:

“Every time culture succeeds in revolutionizing its cybernetic technologies, in massively widening the bandwidth of its thought-tech, it invites the creation of new gods” (Davis, 37).

Finally, consider the following: “Wiener even suggests that order- and form-generating power of information systems is basically analogous to what some people call God” (Davis, 105). From the earliest electronic technologies through the newest, most advanced systems of information processing, humans have sought something beyond what was within their mortal reaches. Human beings seek to achieve nirvana by creating an oasis on earth during their lifetimes, or by cheating death altogether and becoming immortal. With the introduction of modern technology, the latter becomes a topic of great interest. An age has emerged that one may be able to call “post-god.” It is an era in which god has been replaced by information technology. Technological advances allow power to be obtained that was previously unfathomable to the human mind. This may fuel the Gnostic goal of self-divinization and attainment of god’s knowledge (Davis, 115). Those with the power of a god have an advantage over those without such power. While *TechGnosis* aims to disenchant technology, it seems to do so with the goal of mitigating the differences in power.

Coupling these secondary points regarding divinity with the theses that govern *TechGnosis’* text, an implication arises: Human beings are at unease with their own mortality, and it leads them to seek the divine for comfort and assistance. Not only is this manifested through the obvious outlet of religion, but also — as *TechGnosis* points out — it is manifested through the consultation of the imagination

and the supernatural in the struggle to understand new technology. Given the seemingly natural inclination to seek the divine, it logically follows that the supernatural and elements of the imagination become elements in this struggle.

An example of the tendency to consult the supernatural can be seen in this clip from the History Channel's documentary television show *Inside of History*, and its episode studying the Salem witch trials of the late 1600s. Specifically, consider the segment between 2 minutes and 46 seconds, and 5:08, which details the symptoms of witchcraft as seen by those in colonial Massachusetts.

As the video details, two popular methods of diagnosing witchcraft were searching for the "devil's mark" on the suspected witch's skin and testing the buoyancy of a suspected witch. According to *The Encyclopedia of Witches and Witchcraft*, a devil's mark was any wart, mole, tumor or skin abnormality. Of course, the notion that a skin abnormality indicates allegiance to Satan is absurd. Likewise, the method of testing one's buoyancy can be immediately refuted with basic laws of physics, which dictate that one will float in water if his or her buoyancy force pushing upward is greater than the force of gravity pushing downward. Generally, those whose bodies are less dense are more likely to float.

In the Puritan town of Salem, Massachusetts, the cause of such skin blemishes, as well as the laws of physics that concerned buoyancy, were unknown, or at least unaccepted. Also, this example indeed has limits. Those who sought witches may have been unconsciously seeking to fulfill self-fulfilling prophecies. Furthermore, the Puritan society of Salem was deeply religious, adding an additional predisposition to consult the supernatural. Nonetheless, parallels can be drawn

between consultation of the supernatural in Salem, and the consultation of the supernatural in more recent times. Consider Thomas Edison's attempts to establish a telepathic radio channel "between worlds" (on page 78 of *TechGnosis*) and Tesla's speculation that aliens are invisible and among us (on page 90).

However, examining the differences between the Salem witch trials and the supernatural components of new media exposes another element of *TechGnosis* that Davis perhaps did not thoroughly emphasize, or emphasize with the necessary clarity: What may lead humans to consult the supernatural is precisely the fact that new media frequently manifest themselves through means undetectable to the human user. Radio waves cannot be seen, individual film frames cannot be distinguished and very rarely can an observer recognize the constantly updating pixels on a television screen. These media deal in the otherworldly, much like the supernatural. While the contrast of these high- and low-tech societies draws attention to the way new media garner supernatural interest, one can also make an argument that citizens of the information age have similarities to the Puritans of the late 1600s, as both are grappling with elements not yet fully understood.

With the previous points in mind, several additional questions arise regarding *TechGnosis* and the purpose of Davis' writing. Davis states that he sympathizes with attempts to "disenchant technology and deflate the banal fantasies and pernicious hype that fuels today's digital economy" (Davis, 12). His goal seems to be to mitigate the power struggles present in the digital economy. This begs the question of if this attempt is worthy. Davis spends a significant amount of *TechGnosis* following the enchantment of technology through history, and

with each new medium, the process seems to repeat itself. If Davis is to succeed in disenchanting current technology, what is to keep the next new medium from following in the path of enchantment of its predecessors? Does Davis hope to put an end to enchantment of all future media? Furthermore, will an increased base of widespread scientific knowledge render prevent supernatural consultation obsolete, or will this base instead lead to increasingly rapid growth in technology that leaves citizens in awe?

While it is not entirely clear if Davis ultimately strives to end this cycle of new-media-enchantment, it seems as though Davis may be wasting his breath. If humans naturally consult the supernatural to explain what is not understood, the process seems doomed to repeat itself with future technology or anything that falls in the realm of the unknown. Breaking this cycle would require an alteration to what is arguably an element of human nature. Perhaps whether the cycle can be broken lies in the answer to the final question. If scientific knowledge can become widespread, perhaps the hegemony can be ended, but if the pertinent scientific knowledge continues to be a commodity available to a select few, one could hypothesize that such hegemony will be exacerbated.

Links:

Salem Witch Trials video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KqjX-9UNB7s>

Encyclopedia of Witches and Witchcraft:

[http://www.themystica.com/mystica/articles/w/witch%27s mark.html](http://www.themystica.com/mystica/articles/w/witch%27s_mark.html)