



March 8, 2013

## Being Human in the Age of the Cyborg

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The role of digital technology in a classical education has been a topic of much discussion among the faculty and administration over the last year. If we grant that the medium can trump the message and that practices shape us more profoundly than discussions do, what should we do with emerging technologies that seem to have educational benefit, yet seem also to participate in a digital culture whose fundamental effervescence is at odds with the tradition we embrace? On the other hand, surely we would not say that classical education is essentially a hermitic pursuit: that its only contact with the modern world is a kiss goodbye as we head into the desert to seek God in solitude. It is a thorny discussion, but it is a crucial discussion, and I believe that we as a group are particularly well suited to have it. Without attempting to resolve the tensions inherent in using iPads to read Plato, or to delimit the appropriate use of technology in the classroom, I want to argue simply that the classical tradition offers an indispensable perspective on the role of digital technology in our lives, because it is fundamentally about how to be a human being.

William Gibson is a contemporary author of science fiction most famous for grasping the concept and coining the term “cyberspace” in 1984, before “cyberspace” was a thing to be grasped or coined. His stroke of insight—that eventually we’d all have personal computers and we’d link them together in a vast network of shared information—earned him a reputation as a futurologist, much to Mr. Gibson’s annoyance. Gibson has said in numerous interviews and articles that his stories were never about the future; they were always about the present, as all good science fiction is. Science fiction is a modern mythology, a set of fantastic but familiar stories that provide a framework for understanding and interpreting human experience.

Take, for example, our stories about cyborgs—hybrid creatures that are part man and part machine. They are featured in many science fiction stories and films, often as soulless killing machines, sometimes as objects of pity. (Consider this familiar image: A pale but beautiful woman lies in a vat of goo, industrial-gauge cables running from her head to a massive computer suspended above. She is a cybernetic oracle, enthralled to her gods of prophecy. The cables are her Python; the glowing mainframe is her Apollo. She has power, yet she is still a figure of pity and horror.) Our stories about cyborgs are not really implausible yarns about a distant future. They are part of the working-out of our anxieties about the extent to which our humanity has been compromised by our technology. At what cost, we wonder through our stories, do we graft technology into our lives?

But we tend to treat this troubling question as a hypothetical future event, as something that might happen if we are not careful but hasn’t happened yet. And here Gibson’s cultural insight again proves valuable. In a 2002 talk to the Vancouver Art Gallery during an exhibition on

representations of the cyborg, Gibson made the following observation, which is worth quoting at length.

The real cyborg, cybernetic organism in the broader sense, had been busy arriving as I watched ... television in 1952. I was becoming a part of something, in the act of watching that screen. We all were. We are today. The human species was already in process of growing itself an extended communal nervous system, then, and was doing things with it that had previously been impossible: viewing things at a distance, viewing things that had happened in the past, watching dead men talk and hearing their words. What had been absolute limits of the experiential world had in a very real and literal way been profoundly and amazingly altered, extended, changed. And would continue to be. And the real marvel of this was how utterly we took it all for granted.

Science fiction's cyborg was a literal chimera of meat and machine. The world's cyborg was an extended human nervous system: film, radio, broadcast television, and a shift in perception so profound that I believe we're yet to understand it. Watching television, we each became aspects of an electronic brain. We became augmented. ...

The physical union of human and machine, long dreaded and long anticipated, has been an accomplished fact for decades, though we tend not to see it. We tend not to see it because we are it, and because we still employ Newtonian paradigms that tell us that "physical" has only to do with what we can see, or touch. Which of course is not the case. The electrons streaming into a child's eye from the screen ... are as physical as anything else. As physical as the neurons subsequently moving along that child's optic nerves. As physical as the structures and chemicals those neurons will encounter in the human brain. We are implicit, here, all of us, in a vast physical construct of artificially linked nervous systems. Invisible. We cannot touch it.

We are it. We are already the Borg, but we seem to need myth to bring us to that knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

If to be human (as I have overheard Mr. Kevin Clark say) is to be limited in time and space, then we have long been busy augmenting ourselves to push back against those limits of our humanity. As I sit to write this article, I rely upon—and use seamlessly—a communal memory that augments my own. Connected to this external brain, I have perfect recall of dates or names or phrases I only hazily remember. Knowledge that I have never labored to obtain, let alone master, is accessible with a mere thought and a flutter of my fingers. I considered making a reference to Faust in this article. I was able within minutes to cross-reference the versions by Marlowe, Goethe, and Guonod, skimming both summaries and the full text. This required no labor of my body or my mind: I did not have to search stacks or carry books or flip through pages or consult an index or write observations. Access was instantaneous, effortless, almost gnostic in its denial of incarnation.

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<sup>1</sup> The full text of Gibson's essay is published as "Googling the Cyborg" in his recent book of essays, *Distrust that Particular Flavor*. It is also available on his blog at [http://www.williamgibsonbooks.com/archive/2003\\_01\\_28\\_archive.asp](http://www.williamgibsonbooks.com/archive/2003_01_28_archive.asp).

The permeation runs even deeper. We spend large segments of our day in virtual worlds of our own sovereign choosing. If the room is noisy, we can attend a private concert of our favorite musicians, arranged in whatever order suits us (or randomly if we've chosen not to choose). If the view bores us, we can transport ourselves to a million better ones. If the conversation is dull, with averted eyes and tapping fingers we can enter another with a circle of friends whose locus is not a shared activity, interest, workplace, church, or neighborhood, but *me*. I myself am the only thing all these people have in common. Never before in human history have we as a species possessed such unlimited power to see and to hear, that is to experience, at all times and in all locations, *whatever we wish*. Virtual reality was not tossed into the landfill with those awkward wrap-around goggles of the 1980s—it metastasized.

The result is that even our “unplugged” moments are perceived through a cybernetic filter. Our experience is so perpetually mediated by digital technology that we have difficulty imagining experience apart from it. We perceive ourselves, David Foster Wallace convincingly argues in “*E Unibus Pluram*,” as characters in our own sitcoms. This is why some undignified stretch or scratch or noise in a solitary moment still feels ridiculous: because we are not alone; we are performing for a viewership of one. Or recall those times we imagine a witty Facebook post about some situation, even as it's happening. Our perception, and thus our experience, is framed by the digital technology we are already interpreting it through.

If this sounds dire, that is only because I want to offer a blunt assessment of our condition. I am no Luddite, as anyone who knows me can attest, but we must consider the cost of any technology we adapt. Plato denounced writing as a crutch for the memory. And Plato was right: what man or woman lives today who can memorize the twenty-four books of the *Iliad* and recite them over three nights of feasting? But where would our civilization be without writing? The technology had enormous benefit, but it came at a cost. I do not doubt future generations will say the same of our digital immersion.

This broader perspective is what makes a classical school especially well-suited to discuss the role of digital technology in education. We are self-consciously about the project of reviving a connection to a Christian humanist tradition. By going outside of our own hybridized perspective to grasp “the really human things” that have stood the test of time, we can learn to be human in the age of the cyborg.