



Gathered round the hearth

Description

Is this scenario familiar? You order your dinner online, wait for the home delivery, then eat it while multi-screening in front of the television and checking Facebook, while other members of the household work late, snack or play computer games in different rooms.

For philosopher of technology Albert Borgmann that script signals the moral as well as the economic commodification of mealtimes, sociability, leisure, work, and home life: “A thing or a practice is morally commodified when it is detached from contexts of engagement with a time, a place, and a community” (29).

That quote is from an article published in 2010. In the 1980s Borgmann started translating Martin Heidegger’s messages about technology in terms that twenty-first century tech pundits might recognise.



Heidegger wrote about technological objects, mere objects manufactured and circulated under the command of instrumental reason. Borgmann described such mass produced objects as **commodities**

or **devices**. In contrast to devices there are the **things**, of which Heidegger also wrote, and that he favoured. *Things* are situated, corporal (relate to the body) and involved in human practices. Things provide a focus for significant human actions, draw people together, and depending on their scale act as places to gather. For Borgman the archetypal example of a *thing* is the domestic **hearth**, that in earlier times provided a focus for domestic activity and a locus for thinking about the home and the family, encouraging tropes such as comfort, warmth, centre, storytelling and the trappings of sociability. Such *things* are still with us in the technological age, but take on a different significance.

Thickening and widening

As well as the importance of *things*, Borgmann identified the role of **focal practices**, examples of which include the preparation and serving of a shared meal, hiking and jogging, not just as leisure diversions but as totally engaging activities that unite means and ends, effort and accomplishment, labour and leisure. Engagement is key.

Focal practices may also recruit *devices* (such as running shoes, camping equipment, highways and motorised transportation), but the devices are in the service of the focal practices, not the other way round. Borgman thinks that technological contexts and focal practices can enhance one another. According to Borgmann, radical reform within technological society will come about by attending to, accommodating and enhancing the relationship between devices, things and focal practices. In his more recent writing Borgmann provides a nuanced illustration of how this enhanced relationship can operate.

If you order your food from [SeamlessWeb](#) (it delivers a ready-to-eat gourmet meal to your doorstep) and eat it while surfing the internet, you are in the thrall of technology. If on a late afternoon you and your children go harvesting in your vegetable garden and if in the evening you prepare the meal with your spouse and sit down to dinner with your beloved, you are blessed. If on the way home you pick up prepared food at the store, warm it, wait for your spouse, and sit down to eat it with her, you are on the side of the angels. Contexts of engagement can be thickened and widened by degrees (34).

He translates such engagement to the larger economy: “If that turn should be widely taken, the economy will change too. It will produce fewer cars and more buses and trains; fewer jet skis, more canoes; fewer DVDs, more books; fewer iPods and more flutes and guitars” (34).

Stoking the fire

I buy this argument but I think it leaves out one important function for high tech devices, which is to disturb, and bring into relief our focal practices by setting up contrasts. For some people, some of the time, the ready meal might just increase a sense of the value of home cooking, communication on the Internet makes you value face-to-face personal contact even more, mass production brings the value of hand crafting into awareness. Of course, there’s deskilling and re-skilling in train, the local gets weakened in favour of the global, and we can become addicted, deluded, desensitised, stressed and duped by hegemonic technologies. But there must be some occasions when reflecting on our dependence on technology prompts an enhanced awareness of life off line.



Notes

- Borgmann draws extensively on Martin Heidegger who proposed an antidote to the inevitability of commodification in the technological age, calling for a new attitude. In his text, *Discourse on Thinking*, Heidegger asserted: “We are able to use technological objects and yet with suitable use keep ourselves so free of them that we are able to let go of them at any time. We are able to make use of technological objects as they ought to be used. But we are also able simultaneously to let them alone as something which does not concern what is innermost in us and proper to us” (54).
- I explored the implications of Heidegger’s thinking for design in *Designing Information Technology in the Postmodern Age: From Method to Metaphor*, where I also referenced Borgmann.
- On the benefits of outdoor activity see Florence Williams’s article [Take two hours of pine forest and call me in the morning](#) in *Outside Magazine*.
- See an interesting and critical article by Thomas Wendt on [The Internet of Things and the Work of the Hands](#). Thomas explains how Borgmann characterises devices (as opposed to things) as eroding “the user’s bodily engagement with an activity.” Borgmann thinks this is because the inner workings of devices are opaque to the user.
- Also see [Heidegger on technology](#), [The benefits of walking](#), [What buildings want](#), [Audience disengagement](#), [In meditative mood](#), and [No-thing as it seems](#).
- Of course, the hearth and the making of fire feature prominently in architecture’s mythos (from Vitruvius to Frank Lloyd Wright), and also relates to the sacrificial altar. For example, see Dagmar Motycka Weston’s essay on Le Corbusier.
- Jacques Derrida thinks that architecture’s insistence on the centrality of the hearth is symptomatic of architecture’s dependence on metaphysics. See [Architecture as the last fortress](#).
- See Holm for an interesting statement against the phenomenology of place: “The doctrine of place and place-making that is so dear to architects who detour their practices through phenomenology is a self-indulgence, as if space existed in order to ground me. A good bump on the head puts everything in perspective.” Holm, Lorens. 2010. *Brunelleschi, Lacan, Le*

Corbusier: Architecture, Space and the Construction of Subjectivity. London: Routledge. p.192.
[Note added 2 April 2014]

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Category

1. Architecture

Tags

1. hearth
2. Heidegger
3. technology
4. things

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