Posthumanism of the New Intermedia: The Cellphone Named Desire / Tomek Kitlinski, Joe Lockard and Stéphane Symons

<1> The mobile phone networks promise global communication, wholeness, plethora, safety, and romance. Instead, cellphones silence us. In a repressive pseudo-democracy, we are silenced.

<2> The cellphone is posthuman neo-mobile fetishism, both Freudian and Marxist. It commemorates infantile sexuality and reifies humanity; it provides a status symbol; it is a badge of globalization that is not happening. Cellphones are dumped onto Second World countries and bottom-rate minutes are wholesaled over shared village phones in the Third World, a replication of the global economic hierarchy. These fetish-phones are conducive to propaganda and manipulation; they can spread and distort any message, but not critique it.

<3> Cellphones are the promise of simultaneous mobility and communication, an entry into neo-mobile society. They provide more than communication: they are an empty fetish-symbol of universal provision and freedom. In the neo-mobile society, communications consumption constitutes freedom. As one US cellular service company advertises, "Get the freedom you need with an Alltel wireless plan," as though an empowered social subjectivity were a patentable invention. The neo-mobile society commodifies freedom as a communications product, transforming a basic human right into a marketing campaign and profit center. A fetish-symbol is an object emptied of its use-value and transformed into a cultural totem bearing a range of meanings. A cellphone serves as communication device, empty promise, and reminder of that emptiness.

<4> Yet all is not emptied: the cellphone remains a security fetish. Words and images are predictable: security-manic, safe and the same. A continuous noise-and-image stream reassures us of predictability. It is this same manic security that destroys communication. The cellphone network is conducive to surveillance; it invites control, and incites "discipline and punish." Turn the phone on, and you can be located; turn it off, and you are in hiding in the non-networked invisible underworld. The network turns sinister in its potentialities; neo-mobile culture has a vastly more powerful reach than Industrial Age modernism, when Thoreau wrote from Walden about discerning "invisible bolts," the white noise of a nearby railroad branch-line, penetrating through his consciousness. [1] The woods no longer hide and shelter. Neo-mobile invisibility now reaches out to police social subjects, identifiable as network nodes.

<5> Cellphones are yet another network for censorship. The policed World Order rushes to keep full control on each and every cellphone. Cellphones stabilize our labile self and change it into a docile body. The phones voice neither episteme nor doxa, but secure information. These portable network nodes are part of the spectral, ominous, and omnipotent state, the same state that can become a police state without hesitation.

<6> The cellphone is European, if not Eurocentric. [2] It is cheaper and more popular in the "Old" World. Yet the mobile phone network spreads like the Blob throughout the world. And like the Arendtian Blob, [3] it is all too social, that is collective and passive, instead of public, or deliberative and active. The cellphone constitutes immobility as much as symbolizes mobility. There is a social immobility and class paradigm stasis where mobilomachy rules. Whose is more connected? more powerful? richer?

<7> La donna e mobile; the mobile telephone is not. Cellphones serve technology
and power. The cellphone is enslaved and enslaving, and in our servitude we love it. Cellphones enchain us: we harness ourselves, figuratively and literally, to serve them. Contrary to their promised mobility, cellphones are static. It is an inert, invertebrate technology. A cellphone is not mobile, dynamic, changeable, protean; instead, it mobilizes a postmodern techno-identification. It seduces; we want to be seduced, and will pay for the privilege.

8 Breaking news on your cellphone. Nasdaq and Dow Fut too, or sex ads. Or just wearing, sporting, holding, hiding your cellphone. This is recognizable as all-too-human onanism. Masturbation is the spice or, if you prefer, chocolate of life. Bachelors, as Marcel Duchamp depicted it, grind their chocolate by themselves – Duchamp’s masturbatory machines célibataires, or machines for bachelors. [4] The cellphone is a machine célibataire. Pornography on Internet-enabled cellphones, predictably, is the new wave: well-established European cellphone sex sites are being joined in the United States by new providers such as Xobile.com and ohmobile.com. [5]

9 Alterity is not the cellphone’s cup of tea; sameness is. Susan Sontag cites a Kierkegaard fragment that defines this sameness in terms of nineteenth-century technology: "A double leveling down, or a method of leveling down in which double crosses itself. With the daguerreotype everyone will be able to have their portrait taken – formerly it was only the prominent; and at the same time everything is being done to make us all look exactly the same – so that we shall only need one portrait." [6] To analyze the anti-specter that haunted Europe in 1848 – capitalism – was to analyze its product, the daguerreotype, in 1854. To analyze the real mobility of global capital and illusory mobility of global labor in the twenty-first century, is to analyze the mobile phone in 2008. It is to analyze the social reproduction of an unreflective sameness in order to standardize and globalize markets. As goes the communications market, so goes global culture.

Global Mobile

10 Mobile phone networks aim at impermeability: a porous network is an anathema. That is an impenetrability coextensive with contemporary social biographies and economic existence. Babies are born with parents, doctors, and midwives using cellphones. Children are raised under the tutelage of cellphones. The poorest slave to have, possess, and take pride in a cellphone. For those without means, a cottage industry from Vilnius to Kolkata, and from Cape Town to the East End of London, unlocks stolen cellphones. We are the wage chattel of the mobile classes, of mobile telephone corporations; we contend with service providers, controllers and censors from cradle to grave. We live in a global neo-mobile culture.

11 As a new religion, the mobile networks opiate the masses. The links, connections, and bonds the mobile phone networks generate are imaginary, but they cultivate rituals, liturgies, elations and consolations. The mobile network is a network of loners, and there is nothing wrong with it. In Giacomo Joyce, James Joyce wrote: 'Envoy: love me, love my umbrella.' [7] Love me, love my cellphone.

12 The neo-mobile world embraces a global bourgeois obsessed with capital, savings, protection of data and property. The cellphone becomes a repay and replay of itself. Does the mobile mobilize the public realm? It does not. Text-message mobbing is a consumer’s game, not democratic mobilization. Do we deliberate on the cellphone? Beneath the appearance of deliberation, we associate in order to sustain our identities as cellphone consumers. We create a communications market by having a cellphone conversation, any conversation.

13 According to Rosa Luxemburg, imperialism is driven by the search for new outlet markets. [8] Cellphones find their outlet in the Second and Third World – to enslave them. We become postindustrial serfs, magnanimously given a toy by global imperialism. Power, property and gender relationships become more and more sadomasochistic, [9] and cellphones keep us in touch with our empained pleasure.

14 Get in touch! Get in touch? Armed to teeth with cellphones and other devices, we do not want to get in touch. There is a forced and false hospitality in the welcoming voice messages on our cellphones. Do we really want “them” to leave their messages, to hear from “them”? The opera of voice messages is limited to a couple of arias. The cellphone is a weapon of mass miscommunication. Are cellphones the Enlightenment or the Counter-Enlightenment? With cells in hand, we fall more and more incommunicado.

15 These voice-catchers are sites of electronic memory. But only a memory? They commemorate unreal friendships, relationships, and near-lost acquaintances. The
lists of "friends" on our cellphones are catalogues of Don Giovanni's conquests – not loves, not possessions, but multiplications of mimetic annexations. We annex name alongside name, number alongside number. At the same time, we entrench ourselves behind PINs and other security measures – against the names and numbers of others. Losing ourselves in security, we lose ourselves.

If you text message, if you are text-messaged, you are one of us. The mobiles increase textuality, and also image-obsession. Cellphones are used and abused as cameras. After hours of waiting, sightseers at the Vatican snap phone shots of the pope lying in state at St. Peter's basilica. Evacuating passengers emerging from the bombed-out London Underground snap shadowy cellphone images. At a Coldplay tour performance, a countdown projected onto the stage back-screen synchronizes the audience, who hold up thousands of cellphones in order to shoot a picture together. Then the band pulls out their own phones and shoot back at the audience.

Cellphones beckon, lure, and cast a communitarian spell. The phantom community of cellphone users do not talk to each other; each and every user talks to himself. The will to a mobile collective of cellphone users is the will to violence over oneself and others. The cellphone invites participants into a collective of prejudice. In Poland, cellphone companies use misogyny and homophobia in their ad campaigns; in the United States, the advertising is all about a heterosexual family plan (although one T Mobile ad does feature discovery of a cross-dressing teenager in the family).

There is a mobile slavery in the mobile. The cellphone shackles us. It shackles us in time and space: no time for inner life, no space for others. It shackles us literally: our hands, pockets, bags hold — or are held by — the cellphone. Some hunch their ear to their shoulder, holding the cellphone between in an expressive Rodin-esque grotesque pose, so that their hands remain free to work. Although their hands are free, their shackles are even more visible.

Then there is the slavery of cellphone-haves versus cellphone have-nots. The cellphone as capitalist gadget re-defines personality. "Capitalism is not only an outrage upon the 'have-nots' and the oppression of the 'have-nots', it is above all an outrage upon and the persecution of, human personality, of every human personality," [10] writes Berdiaev. A cellphone equals rationalism, determinism, technologism, and intricately-designed routine.

But as Zygmunt Bauman reminds us, a modern state used rationality and technology to fashion the Shoah: trains, radios, timetables, and reductive administrative systems. [11] What use is being made and will be made of cellphones and their global network? Cellphones have become the domain of the rationalized state: the current version of the anti-state, al-Qaeda terrorists, have learned to stay away from even throwaway cellphones. The use of cellphones for complex state systems, however, begins with a complex relationship with the bodies of individual citizens.

Posthuman Bodies

The cellphone is a fetish of postmodern citizenship, a monument to infant caresses socialized into adulthood. It becomes a cherished object in which one invests libidinally and aesthetically. The cellphone equals narcissistic desire plus autoeroticism: a cellphone is part of my body, it is for pleasure. It is masturbatory: it reaches out to others for solitary or shared jouissance. We treat our cellphones with adoration, with ostentation. Men and women keep cellphones in their pocket to increase their phallic bulge and potential thrust. The phone becomes a new codpiece. It vibrates and tickles and fondles; it attempts both penetration and self-penetration.

A cellphone gets spat at, kissed, nibbled, shouted at, whispered into, worshipped, and hated (when it doesn't deliver or delivers too much talk-text). It is more than an instrument; it is a desiring machine, a machine of the libido, a body part, a body apart, a mini-cyborg of maxi sexuality and politics. Why do we insist on fingering cellphones incessantly? Why the touch? We hold, cup, cuddle, and cradle the phone. We touch cellphones and are touched by them. Instead of fingering the other tool, we play with our cellphones. This is not substitution; this is pleasure here and now. And yet sensation does not entail sentiment. We are not only attached to the phone; we bond with it. Corporations work their sales
through this pleasure, torturing us with offers and sales, humiliating us even as they tempt us.

The human thumb is not as agile as in the ape, but due to its opposition to the other fingers, is gripping, catchy, and haptic. Anatomists call the thumb opponens: strong and prominent, it counterweights the rest of the hand, which enabled us, in our life on trees, to grasp branches. Now we grasp cellphones, holding them in our palm and typing with our thumbs. The German word for a cellphone is “handy”, a pseudo-anglicism. The hand is precise and is precisely mapped in the brain; it functions through archaic genetic memory. The hand knows how to hold a carrot or a stick. Today our hand holds the stick of the cellphone. An Elias Canetti comments, the stick epitomizes the distance and pathos of power. But we with our sophisticated wonder-stick become powerless, overcome by the stick itself.

The oldest exercise of the hand, writes Canetti, is combing through the hair of friends as apes and humans do to each other. This doing of each other’s toilet is part of a social and sexual life. Grasping and typing on the phone harks back to the childhood of humanity, collective and individual. Here comes the pleasure of the fingers: the epidermis is stimulated. The skin, according to Freud, is erotogenic. Yet the delicate skin of the fingers is special: they are the most enervated regions of the body. The way of all flesh, the way of all cellphones.

Does the phone lend a hand to the human? Does the human lend a hand to the phone? Whichever, the flesh combines with the cellphone. The ear to the phone, the phone to the mouth, the hand to the phone: a complex mechano-sensory circuit. Plastic, wires (or wireless chips), and software blend with the body. An opposing and enclosing thumb expands its reach by holding a mobile, and wireless mobiles that free hands make invisible that magnified reach. Corporeality fuses with techno-reality: the mobile phone expresses posthumanism.

The dialectic of nature and culture drives the human brain-cum-phone continuum. Will the inorganic triumph over the organic? Where does embodiment begin or end? What is hardware? What is software?

One report combines post-technology with dentistry: “Speculative improvements in the future may be inspired by an English team led by MIT Media Lab researchers James Auger and Jimmy Loizeau who in 2002, developed an implant designed to be inserted into a tooth during dental surgery. This device consists of a radio receiver and transducer, which transmits the sound via bone conduction through the jawbone into the ear. Sound is transmitted via radio waves from another device (ostensibly a mobile phone) and received by the implant. The implant is currently powered externally, given that no current power source is small enough to fit inside the tooth with it. In addition, the implant was only designed to receive signals, not transmit them. Directly tapping into the inner ear or the auditory nerve is already technologically feasible and will become practical as surgical methods advance.” From hand to teeth to the future.

Does the cellphone exist as a monad in its own right? It remembers itself, locks itself, disables itself, and, generally, is quite solipsistic. This is the self-containment of the monad. When it communicates, a cellphone employs imperatives, orders: Touch me! Ring! Leave a message! The silent screams of the cell. When we do want to use the cellphone, it is blocked. We forget our PIN – is it ours at all? The phone rings; we cannot find it.

We are not in control of the cellphone; it is in control of us. If the cellphone is an erotic organ, it is also a political organ. Mobile users convene in a communion that is not a community. Under communism, vodka provided the universal alleviation, sublation, Aufhebung. Both Brezhnev and an Ivan on the street annulled the communist system while drinking vodka. Now is the day of the cellphone. To alleviate, sublate, and annul the capitalist system, we buy, cherish and carry our cellphones around. And after the first disastrous bill, we use them frugally. Bills define our neo-mobile class status.

On capitalism’s renunciation of life, Marx wrote: “The less you eat, drink and buy books; the less you go to the theatre, the dance hall, the public house; the less you think, love, theorise, sing, paint, fence, etc., the more you save – the greater becomes your treasure which neither moths nor rust will devour – your capital.” The less you talk on the cellphone, the less you talk. For those abstemious in using the tool in every sense of the word, the greater the tool. We withdraw from sex, hoping for better conquests in the foreseeable future. And
rightly, stoically so. Faithful only to human economy, we raise the tools of the cellphones and of embodied desire. Both tools are *miletes gloriosi*, sham heroic warriors.

A cellphone invites possessive touches. This is a sadomasochistic touch. Like the monad, like Sartrean song out of a destroyed record [18], the cellphone is indestructible. You kill it, but it remains in artificial memory. Who is inside? A dwarf of Kempelen's chess automaton. To twist Heidegger, the cellphone obscures everything, and what has been covered over gets passed off as something familiar and accessible to everyone and no one. Cellphones make the uncanny canny.

Cellphones lack in sensuality and sense, speech acts and communicative action. Self-censorship and censorship of the networks delete the flights and falls of the psyche. Belonging to a network encroaches upon being. There is no *Gesellschaft*, but a *Gemeinschaft* of mobile users. Without a cellphone, you are a pariah, and "Honey, you gotta leave town."

Does the cellphone realize the ideals of Donna Haraway: a hybrid of organism and cybernetics? [19] Mobiles render human beings superfluous. Richard J. Bernstein claims this is the vexing, or rather burning, issue of today. [20] The mechanical thing takes hold of the human. The question is, does this constitute atrophy of subjectivity or atrophy of volition?

A cellphone is a penis-expander and a hubris-expander. But both the hard-on and hard-won cellphone age. This is its (his?) hope for becoming more handsome. Ruiniste Walter Benjamin wrote how railroads had begun to age. [21] Now as then technology ages, decays and acquires a patina of melancholia. We begin to mourn our aging cellphones; they are too old-tech to get it up for a picture.

"Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life", wrote Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*. [22] The cellphone is not determined by life, but life by the cellphone. The human is not on the rise; the cellphone is. In the view of Julia Kristeva, human beings today have been reduced to a set of organs, ready to enrich capital. [23] Have we been reduced in parallel to our individual use-value as communicative nodes, and to our collectivity as a technology market?

We are not entering posthumanism; posthumanism is in full swing. The un-freedom and immobility of mobile systems have us in thrall.

**The Neo-Mobile State**

The cellphone is what renders the state into its spectral form - a state that disincarnates itself but, precisely through this non-presence, remains more present than ever. It is the fold in which inside and outside are indistinguishable; the nexus where public and private sphere have become so interchangeable that it is not even possible anymore to speak of the disciplining of individuals by the state, nor about the colonization of the public sphere by private interests. The cellphone is the expression of the control-society, a society in which the state can only increase its powers through some sort of self-modification, by annihilating the locus of its center and becoming dispersed, thus increasing its effectiveness by becoming imperceptible.

The cellphone illustrates what Benjamin calls the 'degeneracy' ([Entartung)] of the original violence that characterizes the juridical state; a degeneracy that, not in the least, weakens the intrinsic violence with which the state enforces the law (both in the sense of instituting the law and preserving it - processes that, according to Benjamin, can never be clearly distinguished), but rather, in essence, alienates it by granting it the invisibility that allows it to function more effectively than ever. [24]

In this respect, Derrida writes about "the State's monopolization of the protection techniques of the secret of the private as a manifestation of the ‘police of polices’, a police which becomes hallucinatory and spectral because it haunts all. This police are everywhere, even where they are not... Their presence is not present." [25]

As such, it is not only real communication that is being made impossible, for even direct connection between people isn’t allowed; instead, the possibility that what was meant to go immediately from one person to another is being monitored by state mechanisms can never be excluded. The question ‘Why do people fight for their servitude instead of for their freedom?’ has become more relevant than ever before (a recent survey in Belgium reports that 50 percent of the population does not have a problem with state eavesdropping on their telephone conversations) [26]
since we live in an era where state control makes itself increasingly unrecognizable. It strives for an updated panopticon, a non-topos that can only allow the state to perceive everything if it succeeds in becoming imperceptible.

**Mobility of the Outside: "Watch Out, the World’s Behind You"**

<42> The control society has transformed us into postmodern versions of Bartleby [27] who, as a former employee of the Dead Letter Office, remains the best witness for the possibility that letters, messages, etc., do not reach their destinations but instead end up in the hands of institutions controlled by the state. But, on the other hand, it is precisely in that experience and the inherent potential of communication to break down and never reach the person it was meant for, that one is confronted with the potential of certain technological processes to elude the means with which the state seeks to manipulate our behavior and control our desires. For what has become the vehicle of the spectral state nevertheless deserves to be explored as the one instrument that surpasses these efforts to manipulate our desires. Just like, in Deleuze’s reading of Melville’s story, Bartleby ends up transforming the experience of communications gone wrong into processes of becoming-Other, the new media that streamline our daily lives have undeniably opened up our horizons toward an e-mancipation of the Self. Through the rhizomatic structure of its network and lack of a localizable center, the cellphone gives us an opportunity to reach what is always and necessarily out of reach. That which is so immediately present that every active effort to seek it out cannot but fail: the (non-)topos of the Other.

<43> Giving in to the promises for enlightenment that, ever so seducing, resound in the invention of new means of communication, to some minds the fleeting moment when we mix up our telephone numbers and dial a wrong one or the brief instants when we click on a link we mistook for another one and land on a website we did not want, appear as experiences that strip the Other from the otherness that, up to now, made him inaccessible. Though this would certainly testify to a most naive belief in universal progress (in so many ways, the 20th century, instead of deconstructing them, tried to update and market some of the cheapest ideals of the 19th century), there is indeed something in the very structure of modern communications technologies that makes them particularly fit for an openness toward the unanticipated. This is related to their uncontrollability and their inherent capacity to go beyond the simple means-end rationality that characterizes other instruments. For it is precisely their devilish ability to function autonomously, to stubbornly not-do what we want them to do and do what we do not want them to do that allows them to transcend our horizons of expectation. As such, our era is confronted with the paradox that it, in its search for what not only can never be found but cannot even be searched, i.e. an openness for the Other, shouldn’t neglect the logic of technology that functions autonomously. When the moment when technology shakes off its character as a means to serve our ends is thus discovered in its potential as an emancipation of the Self, cellphones, Internet, etc., are explored as ways to bring the outside in the insider: through them we tear down the walls that seclude the particularity of our environments and seek a possibly enriching contact with what lies beyond our control.

<44> In a way, the cellphone never really belongs to the Umwelt that forms the horizon through which we orient ourselves: it is what haunts the homely, the canny (Heimlichkeit) that gives stability to our thoughts and actions. [28] It is presence and absence at the same time, the spectral face of an Other that is never anticipated but always there. It is part of our daily activities but delays our ability to effectively organize ourselves. It is an milieu of things but only by pointing to the irreducibility of what lies at the outside.

<45> Through this quasi-untenable position as that which cannot but remain 'outside’, the cellphone attains the status of the monad. For it is, paradoxically, precisely through this non-negotiable isolation from the world that the cellphone is capable of becoming an instrument that brings the whole world immediately at hand. Like the monad, never being in the world but always in front of it, the cellphone can only afford itself to be on the outside because it carries the whole world inside. Moreover, the fact that it carries the whole world inside is precisely what makes the cellphone fall outside of that world. It is only because it always seems to keep its distance from the security of the environment we are so familiar with that it is able to bridge the distance that separates us from the rest of the world. As such, its windowlessness is nothing else than the very condition of the privileged position that allows for the perception of the world in its entirety.

<46> Hence, if the cellphone is excluded from the world, it is only because the whole world is included in it. It is only under this condition that the cellphone can be discovered as a device that stimulates our desires and that it thus
transcends the way in which it is being used by a control society that robs these desires from their intrinsic energy. By reaching out to the rest of the world, the cellphone becomes capable of transforming us into bodies without organs; it transmits and registers fluxes of desire. It gives us an opportunity to "release an atom into the luminous void, an impersonal yet singular atom that no longer has a Self by which it might distinguish itself from or merge with others". [29]

As If I Were a Mobile!

<47> The cellphone is a repository of fear and fascination, one that all too often echoes with our impoverished inner lives. Simultaneously due to and despite of its openness toward the Other, our telephonophilia speaks to a phobia of ourselves and others. Like the child who in Melanie Klein's theories contains objects, we incorporate the cellphone to destroy and repair it, at once. The black thing at our mouths and in our hands stands for our inner emptiness. There is only a cellphone inside us — and it isn't ringing.

<48> The cellphone is our fever. Yet at least half of humanity has never used a telephone. In the neo-mobile world, exclusion and hierarchy remain our fundamental social paradigms.

Notes


[2] "Old" Europe is the epicenter of mobile telephony. In "New" Europe, on the one hand, the mobiles epitomize the new capitalism of the transition, on the other, continue the exaltation of technology practiced by Communism. Russia and Eastern Europe is now part of the global economic and cellphone network. "What was called 'mafia-nomenklatura privatization,' leading to 'casino capitalism,' eliminated Russia's economic independence, tying the country irrevocably to the global system," writes Susan Buck-Morss. In her book Dreamworld and Catastrophe (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2000) she also demonstrates the Stalinist mania of industrialization with its adoption of Taylorism and Fordism. Nowadays, post-Communist countries join the cellphone culture and enter the global system of exploitation. [']


[16] The system of monads in Leibniz's philosophy has been frequently alluded to in cultural analysis when researching into the cyberspace. Slavoj Žižek asks in *On Belief* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) 26: "does our immersion into cyberspace not go hand in hand with our reduction to a Leibnizean monad which, although 'without windows' that would directly open up to external reality, mirrors in itself the entire universe? Are we not more and more monads with no direct window onto reality, interacting alone with the PC screen, encountering only the virtual simulacra, and yet immersed more than ever in the global network, synchronously communicating with the entire globe?"

Here we invoke the monadology of Leibniz, remembering that the idea of the monad harks back, as Leibniz wrote himself, to Pythagoras; the monad was part of the philosophy of English thinker, Anne Conway (1631-1679), and her cabalist inspirer, Francis Mercurius van Helmont. [']


[26] Inge Ghijs, "Kijk maar in mijn bagage, luister mijn telefoon maar af" ("Check my bags, tap my phone"), *De Standaard*, September 7, 2005, 9. [']


[29] Gilles Deleuze, "The Greatest Irish Film (Beckett’s 'Film')," in *Essays*
Critical and Clinical [Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco, trans.] (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 26. [^]

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