

# Distance and Presence in Analogue and Digital Epistolary Networks

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**Abstract:** This paper considers the particular ways in which the familiar letter (for thousands of years the predominant means of communicating over distance) and twenty-first century technologies like the Internet differinglly shaped and shape our experience of distance and presence. It follows Heidegger, Dreyfus, and Borgmann in critiquing the kinds of experience and action the Internet makes possible, and—by way of Benjamin’s concept of “aura”—argues that while mediated communication over distance might have never been easier, faster, or cheaper, this increase in our effective power comes at the cost of a diminution of the affective power of the messages carried.

**Key words:** ICTs, epistolary culture, ontology of digital objects, telepresence, aura

## Introduction

As is well known, the world has shrunk. A letter sent from England to India in 1800 would likely take between three and six months to arrive (and sometimes much longer). When we send an email the same distance, it takes seconds—traveling as packets of data down fibre optic cables at something approaching the speed of light. Technologies which transport either our bodies or our communications move ever faster, bringing places closer to each other in terms of the time taken to travel or communicate between them and increasing our extensible opportunities for action and interaction (Janelle 1973: 8). This effect is commonly called “time-space compression,” succinctly defined by Allen and Hamnett (1995: 9) as the “reordering of distance, the overcoming of spatial barriers, the shortening of time-horizons, and the ability to link distant populations in a more immediate and intense manner.” The metaphor of the technological abolition of space and time is longstanding, used at least since Hannah More wrote in 1787 “of . . . the

annihilation of space, I cannot partake,” mourning the fact that her town was not served by the new high-speed, horse-driven mail-coaches (Roberts 1834: 270). Today, with the extensible opportunities of the Internet, the metaphor appears to some as literally true. Nicholas Negroponte, for example, proclaims: “Distance means less and less in the digital world. In fact, an Internet user is utterly oblivious to it” (Negroponte 1996: 178). The Internet, in such terms, requires no more than a few mouse-clicks or keystrokes to open up magical access to experiences and actions anywhere in the world. The World Wide Web seems to instantiate the techno-utopianism of Marshall McLuhan’s “Global Village,” bringing the world closer together, opening access to information, and reshaping our working and social lives.

Some philosophers, such as Hubert Dreyfus (2000, 2009) and Albert Borgmann (1999, 2000), take issue with this rhetoric and its assumptions. They criticise the kinds of experience and action the Internet makes possible and unite in intuiting that there are: “fundamental differences between what is near, what is far, and what is neither and that issues that are moral in a broad and deep sense revolve around the ways we acknowledge these differences and assign them their place in our lives” (Borgmann 2000: 91–92). Dreyfus and Borgmann both draw heavily upon the thought of Heidegger, for whom the technological annihilation of space by information technologies was a substantive concern. Heidegger’s specific technological target moved with the times: in 1927’s *Being and Time*, it was the radio (Heidegger 1962: 140); later, his ire was aimed at the television as the “peak of this abolition of every possibility of remoteness” (Heidegger 1971: 165). We can have little doubt that his reaction to the rise of mobile phones and the Internet would have been similarly austere.

This paper examines critically the concerns of Heidegger and his followers, discussing the ways in which modern communication technologies change our experience of distance and presence. Following a broad discussion of these issues, the paper narrows down in its latter half to become a critical comparison of the particular ways in which the familiar letter (for thousands of years the predominant means of communicating over distance) and twenty-first century technologies like the Internet differinglly shaped and shape this experience.

### **Heidegger on Why “Short Distance Is Not in Itself Nearness”**

Heidegger begins his 1954 essay *The Thing* with an evocative and provocative paradox. Time and space are shrinking, yet things have never been further away:

*All distances in time and space are shrinking.* Man now reaches overnight, by plane, places which formerly took weeks and months of travel. He now receives instant information, by radio, of events which he formerly learned about only years later, if at all. . . . Man puts the longest distances behind him in the shortest time. He puts the greatest distances behind himself and thus puts everything before himself at the shortest range. Yet the frantic abolition of all distances brings no nearness; for nearness does not consist in shortness of distance. What is least remote from us in point of distance, by virtue of its picture on film or its sound on the radio, can remain far from us. What is incalculably far from us in point of distance can be near to us. Short distance is not in itself nearness. Nor is great distance remoteness. (Heidegger 1971: 165, original emphasis)

The key to unlocking this passage is to understand the ways in which distance and remoteness differ for Heidegger, and to do so it will pay to examine his discussion of our existential spatiality in *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1962: 22–24). In line with the general anti-Cartesian project of that work, Heidegger presents two very different ways of conceiving space. Firstly, there is Cartesian “world-space,” space conceived “in a purely cognitive manner” (Heidegger 1962: 140), as an otherwise empty container filled by present-at-hand entities and events, a bare stage within which props are situated and actors act. In such a geometrically ideal space the distance between two points is both metrically determinable and objectively true for all people. “Distance,” then, denotes for Heidegger the ontical, measureable space that lies between present-at-hand entities located in objective “world-space.”

For Heidegger, however, the kind of space in which we mostly live is not objective in this way; we have a more primordial spatiality, one I will call ‘existential-space.’ How near and far things feel is not merely a matter of distance. I can walk a kilometre very easily, but not if it is up a mountain, or through five feet of snow, or if I have a bad leg.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the places which are most familiar to me—my home, my street, my office—are not merely objective geometric spaces, they are familiar regions marinated with memory and meaning. Familiarity with places is what makes them ready-to-hand, it is why they feel intimate, comfortable, and ‘homely.’ They are our spaces, filled with our things—things that have a history for us, which evoke meanings, and with which we identify. This is something grasped by Wordsworth in his poem *Michael*, about a shepherd whose eighty years amongst the green valleys, streams and rocks of the Lake District meant the landscape “like a book preserv’d the memory,” and whose fields and hills “were his living Being even more / Than his own Blood” (Wordsworth 2000: 226).

Our everyday spatial involvement implies a pre-thematic sense of where things are, where we are in relation to them and how accessible they are. My copy of *Being and Time* is not thirty-five centimetres away; it is *at hand*, lying where I left it, on my desk, between the coffee cup and the thesaurus, ready to be consulted. Of course, I *can* measure or guess at its metric distance from my body, shifting the book from its readiness-to-hand to presence-at-hand; but I usually do not, I just get on with my work, circumspectively dealing with the equipment that is helping me write this paper. In reaching for the book, I do not thematically measure off stretches of space and calculate whether it is worth the effort; the book shows up as available to me, as *within reach*, and needing it, I pick it up. In sum, then, we are not phenomenologically present in ‘world-space’ for Heidegger; the familiar, everyday world in which we dwell is one of existential-space. Distance denotes merely the measurable *ontical* space of present-at-hand entities occupying any of a multiplicity of positions in objective ‘world-space.’ Remoteness, on the other hand, is an ontological, substantive phenomenon we experience when we are engaged in our everyday, skilful coping with things as ready-to-hand: “What is ready-to-hand in the environment is certainly not present-at-hand for an eternal observer exempt from Dasein: but it is encountered in Dasein’s circumspectively concerned everydayness” (Heidegger 1962: 140).

Heidegger distinguishes two aspects of our spatiality, *de-severance* and *directionality*. Directionality describes the way in which we orient ourselves towards objects, while de-severance (*Ent-fernung*) “amounts to making the farness vanish—that is, making the remoteness of something disappear, bringing it close” (Heidegger 1962: 139). Being startled by a sudden noise, I will naturally turn (directionality) and seek out (de-severance) its source. As long as something is not de-severed, it remains remote, no matter how close it is distantly. This does not just mean things I have no knowledge of, but also familiar things which have so far withdrawn in their readiness-to-hand that they are no longer perceptually present to me, like the spectacles “which are so close to [me] distantly that they are ‘sitting on [my] nose,’ [but] are environmentally more remote from [me] than the picture on the opposite wall.” “Such equipment,” says Heidegger, “has so little closeness that often it is proximally quite impossible to find” (Heidegger 1962: 141). From this, we can take two things. Firstly, for Heidegger, things are only “near” when they are both something I am concernfully engaged with *and* when they themselves are the locus of my attention (Dreyfus 1991: 134). Secondly, technology has some role to play in de-severing the world; the spectacles (a technology) help bring close the picture on the wall (which would otherwise remain a

blur). Equipment for seeing and hearing, in its readiness-to-hand, withdraws from my perception in order to bring close what would otherwise evade my perceptual capacities. As I speak on the phone, the receiver recedes into remoteness allowing me to bring close the voice of a friend. This friend is, at that moment, closer to me than my girlfriend in the next room.

So what is Heidegger's objection to telecommunication technologies like radio, TV and the Internet? Albert Borgmann (2000: 99) gets at the root of Heidegger's complaint when he says that the technological abolition of distance "does not so much bring near what is far as it cancels the metric of space and time." All things become "equally far and near," Heidegger says, which is also to say that "everything is neither far nor near." In the end, "[e]verything gets lumped together into uniform distancelessness" (Heidegger 1971: 166). For heuristic purposes, we can break up this complaint into two related, though distinct, claims:

That the cancelling of the distinction between what is near and far compromises certain aspects of experience that have been traditionally important for our being, specifically our being bodily situated in a particular geographic, socio-cultural location.

That "despite all conquest of distances the nearness of things remains absent" (Heidegger 1971: 166), which is to say that information technologies do not bring things to presence in a sufficient way.

We will address these points in turn in the following two sections.

### **Location, Situation, Experience**

As Merleau-Ponty (2002: 294) says in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, "Being is synonymous with being situated." To be is to be *somewhere*—'here' instead of 'there.' Telecommunications technologies impact upon our sense of place in the world by making our boundaries of physical location more porous and mutable, and weakening the correlation between location and experience. Community boundaries, which have traditionally played an important role in the formation of social identity, become distorted as an unbounded multiplicity of social contexts open up to us. When Heidegger returned to his hometown of Meßkirch in 1961 to deliver a talk on the meaning of home, he was powerfully struck by the cornfield of radio and television aerials that had sprouted atop each house. He saw these antennae as symbolic of the way in which "human beings are, strictly speaking, no longer 'at home' where, seen from outside, they 'live'" (Heidegger, quoted in Pattison 2000: 60).

Modern telecommunications equipment swells our spatial horizons far beyond those relatively narrow limits within which our ancestors dwelled, opening up possibilities for perception and action across the entire world. With the remote control at hand, I can witness world-events without leaving my armchair, able to “simultaneously ‘experience’ an assassination attempt against a king in France and a symphony concert in Tokyo” (Heidegger 2000: 40). My friend in America is as near as the phone, while my next-door neighbour remains a stranger. What is served up by our TV screens and radios is “closer to man . . . than his fields around his farmstead, closer than the sky over the earth, closer than the change from night to day, closer than the conventions and customs of his village, than the tradition of his native world” (Heidegger 1966: 48). What this means, for Heidegger, is that “humanity is, as it were, in a process of emigration. It is emigrating from what is homely [*Heimisch*] to what is unhomely [*Unheimisch*].” This erosion and erasure of “home,” he feared, might lead humanity to a “condition of homelessness” (quoted in Pattison 2000: 60).

A traditional way of life, more definitely situated and constrained by space and time, had a very distinct “here,” the locus of perception and action, of things present to the body or within easy reach, and an “away” which constituted the world of strangeness, myth, absence and otherness. Today, as Catherine Wilson (2000: 71) argues, our technological reach is so large that the old multiplicity of localised “heres” is “diachronically converging to a single large ‘here.’” The disorientation which can result from swimming in this sea of distancelessness is poetically grasped by Jerzy Kosinski in his novel *Being There*: “Everything on TV was tangled and mixed and yet smoothed out: night and day, big and small, tough and brittle, soft and rough, hot and cold, near and far” (quoted in Malpas 2006: 279).

Without distance, it is difficult to get a real sense of the magnitude of things or to assess their relative importance. If the view of the Taj Mahal from the entrance gates of its gardens could be had from the end of my street, or if I just have to flick a channel to see it on television, surely I will derive less *ecstasis* at seeing it than if I actually travel the miles of land and sea to see it in person. The effort we invest in achieving our ends has some importance for the amount of joy we derive from their achievement. This is not to say that things in cyberspace lack context, but that that context is much more mutable and fluid, being unconstrained by the limits of physical presence. Without a definite “here” and “there,” the manifold of contextual relations that make up our lives and on the basis of which we choose to do *this* rather than *that*, to be *this* rather than *that* person, are to some extent diminished. If everything lies about available and easy, it is less necessary to think about what matters before choosing, and what we choose can matter less.

### Presentation and Re-presentation

Heidegger's second objection is that "despite all conquest of distances the nearness of things remains absent" (Heidegger 1971: 166). He is here suggesting that where things aren't disclosed in the right way, they are not really present for us. Here it will be helpful to distinguish between direct perceptual experience and indirect, or mediated, experience. In the words of Bertrand Russell (1911: 108), when something is just *there*, "I have a direct cognitive relation to that object" and "am directly aware of the object itself," which is "presented" to me. Indirect experience, on the other hand, comes second-hand by way of signs of some sort. To take an example, I have a painful twinge in my knee right now. I am aware of it because it hurts; it is directly present for me. By describing this twinge in language, I make you, the reader, *indirectly* aware of that pain. You do not feel the pain yourself, but knowing what pain is and what knees are, you can approximate some impression of how I feel. Indirect experience, then, is mediated by description of some kind. It need not be by means of language—I could try to paint a picture of the pain, or create some dissonant piano-piece, or dance about on one leg; but however I try to convey this pain to you, I cannot make you feel it, short of bashing you on the knee myself (and even then I would only make you feel *your* pain, rather than *mine*). This is as much as to say that the "object" of an experience is not presented in indirect experience, but re-presented.

Using this distinction, it is possible to say that the voice coming through the telephone is not really my friend's voice, although it sounds a lot like it, since it has been technologically processed: sound-waves were converted into electric pulses in one location, travelled very quickly down some long wires, and were then changed back to sound waves by my telephone receiver's earphone. We should also note that in the process of being re-presented by the telephone, it is not only my friend's voice that has been changed. The rest of her—her body with all of its expressive movements—is not present at all: her presence has been *attenuated*. In any analogic or digital process of converting physical objects into a re-presentation, something of the original gets necessarily lost in translation—its physicality, if nothing else.

The Internet works almost exclusively on our distance senses of sight and hearing, particularly the former. The attenuated way in which objects show up through these channels has an obvious impact upon the ways we can engage with them. Viewing an indirect re-presentation of something, like a photograph, is to lose any chance of hearing, touching, smelling or tasting it, of seeing it in mo-

tion, of walking around it, or seeing its wider contextual environment outside the frame of the picture. It is to be unable to know what took place before or after the moment in which the photograph was taken, hence to be innocent of the extent to which the picture was staged beforehand or manipulated later. In a similar way, to communicate with an attenuated re-presentation of someone via phone or email is to forfeit a wealth of interactional cues which significantly aid understanding when we talk in person, where face and body (so indicative of identity and expressive of emotion) are visible. It is distaste for such attenuations of presence that ultimately underlie the concerns of Heidegger, Dreyfus and Borgmann, who all fear a possible future in which mediated relationships, based on (what they perceive to be) shallow, projected (and perhaps delusory) images, become the norm rather than the exception. The extent to which mediated relationships themselves suffer the attenuations of their medium remains a source of conflict<sup>2</sup> that perhaps requires, ultimately, an empirical rather than a theoretical answer. Maintaining our theoretical stance, we can make two specific objections that assail the Heideggerian critique at its roots.

## **Two Objections**

Firstly, we can call in the Derridean “purity-police” (Scholes 1988: 285) to deconstruct the binary distinction between presentation and re-presentation, *précising* this strategy by noting that for Derrida, that quintessential borderer, Heidegger swaddles himself in “the security of the near,” soothed by an “insignificant rhetoric” of “proximity, of simple and immediate presence, associating with the proximity of Being the values of neighborhood, shelter, house” (Derrida 1969: 54, 51). The deconstructivist argument goes like this: when we talk about presence, what we really mean is a lack of mediation. However, as Albert Borgmann himself admits, cognitive science teaches us that “all perception is mediated and processed whether the object of perception is ten light years away and whether it is Newtonian or electronic” (Borgmann 2000: 91). Even talking face-to-face, we are not *wholly* and *immediately* present to each other; our interaction is mediated by the space that light-waves and sound-waves must cross to reach my eyes and ears, and indeed by our perceptual senses themselves. Sometimes, at our best, it might seem that we are immediately present to each other, but in most of life some psycho-social distance pervades our interaction: meanings get lost in translation, misunderstandings occur, and some measure of anxiety and reserve influence our interaction. Unless we could plug into each other’s minds, our communication will always be distanced and mediated in some sense. By limiting their recognition of this fact, Dreyfus and



Borgmann can be accused of a Derridean “metaphysics of presence,” conceiving of the body of the thing as a “transcendental signified,” a meaning which surpasses all signs. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida argues against the possibility of a transcendental signified, agreeing with Charles Peirce that “the idea of *manifestation* is the idea of a sign” (quoted in Derrida 1976: 49). Derrida continues:

*The thing itself is a sign. . . . There is . . . no phenomenality reducing the sign or the representer so that the thing signified may be allowed to glow finally in the luminosity of its presence. The so-called “thing itself” is always already a representamen shielded from the simplicity of intuitive evidence. . . . From the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs. We think only in signs.* (Derrida 1976: 49–50, original emphasis)

The deconstructivist critique is useful in reminding us that all communication, whether face-to-face or technologically mediated, is a semiotic activity. Even if something or someone is physically present, I still have a great deal of interpretative work to do to understand it or them. Your words and actions—whether you intend them to be or not—are mines of potential meaning, the coalface at which I labour to understand you. Whether I see your Porsche and guess you are rich, hear you yawn and assume that you are tired, or notice your “I love Heidegger” t-shirt and take it that you are a fan of fundamental ontology, the things I am reading are signs. Viewed in this way, all interaction is mediated by signs of some sort, and thus the privileging of presence over representation seems less significant. We must not overemphasise this point, however. To do so would be to repeat a common flaw in deconstructivist argument, making the underlying assumption—which Richard Rorty dismisses as “awful”—that because a distinction cannot be made rigorous and precise it is therefore no distinction at all (Rorty 1984: 22). All communication might be via signs, but in face-to-face meetings many more signs are available to us than through technological mediation and this fact is important. Moreover, being physically present in the same space remains affectively significant, something wonderfully summed by Dreyfus’s statement: “Whatever hugs do for people, I’m quite sure telehugs won’t do it” (Dreyfus 2009: 68). Nearness matters. That you are here, travelled miles and miles to see me because I called to say I need you; that the Taj Mahal is in Agra and I must save up my money and book flights and ride overnight trains to see it: these things are significant. The affective experience of something is influenced both by our proximity to it and our difficulty in overcoming its remoteness. Location, situation and embodiment have experiential impact. Nevertheless, the crucial insight that all communication

is in some sense mediated allows us to consider the imperfections of face-to-face interaction and the possibility that distance can aid rather than harm interaction in some circumstances. This opens the liminal space for our next objection.

Our second objection, then, is that in concentrating on the attenuations of technology we are insufficiently attentive to its benefits. Don Ihde's (1979: 21; 1990: 76) theory of the amplification/reduction structure of technologies claims that in the immediate employment of any technology, we simultaneously enhance some capacity or capacities for experience or action and reduce or negate others. My car speeds up my movement but attenuates my bodily movements and muffles the sounds and smells of the world whizzing by outside. While looking through the telescope I can see the scars and pockmarks of the face of the moon but cannot see my own toes. In other words, there is always a balance sheet of gains and losses in the use of any technology. Heidegger and his heirs too often stress the negative side of this equation, fixing their philosophical sights on the lost possibilities for perception and action, without giving due thought to the benefits brought. Even when this consideration is explicitly addressed, as by Malpas (2000: 117–18), their opinion is—in my view—too often negative.

That digital information presents an attenuated version of the object is obviously true; but the object can be remarkably *enhanced* in many respects. A digital image of an illuminated manuscript might lack many significant qualities of the original—its physicality being not the least—but the tractability of the image has undoubted advantages. For example, Keio University's Toshiyuki Takamiya (2001: 347) lists among the benefits of that institution's project to digitise their copy of the Gutenberg bible (one of only forty-eight in the world): the provision of wider access to the object, preservation of the original, legibility enhancement where text is damaged, and the possibility of remote comparison, line by line, of different editions located as far afield as Japan, Germany and the United Kingdom. In terms of communication, technologies can be perfectly sufficient, perhaps superior, for some purposes. If I simply need to know whether a colleague in a different building has completed some piece of work before I get on with a related task, would it really be preferable to have to walk over to ask them in person? If I have had an argument with a fractious family member and want to clear the air but know that to see them now would just reignite high tempers, then I am glad to be able to take the time and distance to compose a letter of reconciliation, to draft and redraft and ensure the tone is exactly right.

The most remarkable enhancement offered by these technologies remains, though, the extraordinary fact that we can communicate over such large distances

so quickly and easily. We might well prefer to interact face-to-face in most circumstances, but this does not mean our new modes of communication cannot be appreciated. Consider this question: if your beloved sister were living in Bengal and you in England, which would you prefer, today's panoply of instant communicative means or just pen and post and a six-month wait for news? For people in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, such a subject would have been felt very close to home—every one of the collections of family letters studied by Susan Whyman in her exhaustive work *The Pen and the People* described one or more family members travelling abroad or living in the colonies (Whyman 2009: 13). Even where distance was not insurmountable, as Konstantin Dierks attests of citizens of the emerging United States, although “[p]ersonal visits and face-to-face conversation remained the ideal mode of social interaction . . . heavy workloads and busy schedules often made letter writing the only realistic alternative” (Dierks 2009: 164).

All this is to say that rather than arguing over whether face-to-face is better than mediated communication—in many or most situations it might well be—we should be instead assessing the ways in which we are made present to each other by our mediating technologies. What kinds of mediation are available, in what circumstances, and how does this affect the ways we interact? Having now mapped out the broader underlying philosophical stakes, we are now in a position to bear down, in what remains of this paper, upon the more particular question of what the familiar letter and twenty-first century technologies like the Internet bring to ‘presence.’

### **Epistolary Presents**

The most obvious thing presented to us by letters is handwritten text and hence we should here note the affective resonance (in contrast to typescript) of handwriting. As Heidegger rightly says in his otherwise off-beam rant against the typewriter during his Parmenides lecture-course of 1942–1943, “mechanical writing . . . conceals the handwriting and thereby the character. The typewriter makes everyone look the same” (Heidegger 1998: 81). The cultural link between handwriting, identity and personality is long standing. As J. L. Austin (1975: 60) observed, our written signature on a contract or other document identifies us, in our bodily absence, as the “utterance origin” of a speech-act. Our signature, and by implication our handwriting, is thus held to be a proxy for our body. As van Dijck and Neef (2006: 15) point out, the handwritten signature is an explicit attestation of identity, “an absolutely individual and non-exchangeable sign, almost as unique as fingerprints or other biometrical data.”

Our handwriting is also popularly believed to express our personality. Whether it does or not—and graphology is now generally dismissed as unadorned pseudo-science—the fact that graphologists continue to do good business in disconcerting areas like business recruitment (Greasley 2000: 47) indicates the strength of this association in the public mind. These associative links to the body, identity and personality mean that handwriting is usually considered more intimate than ‘im-personal’ typed writing. Even in the days of pen and paper, letters written in one’s own hand were thought warmer than those written by a third-party scribe. When we receive a personally-written letter from a friend, as Erasmus said, “[w]e feel as if we were listening to them and seeing them face to face” (quoted in Daybell 2009: 651). In addition to these features of identity and personality, handwriting can convey significant semiotic clues that elude typed writing. Handwriting can speak of the evolution of the writer, most obviously in childhood, and can point towards the situation in which it was written—hurried handwriting could indicate the force and flow of the writer’s feeling or their rush to meet an impending deadline, for example. The biographer Edmund Morris captures the complex interplay of all these characteristics when he says: “Script’s primary power is to convey the cursive flow of human thought, from brain to hand to pen to ink to eye—every waver, every loop, every character trembling with expression. Type has no comparable warmth” (quoted in Gioia 1996: 29). When we communicate textually today, it is for the most part by means of computer-generated typescript, and although we can select from a range of different fonts, this writing nonetheless loses much of the personality of handwriting. Still, though, since we can now hear the “living voice” of the other over the telephone, and even see their faces through video-calling, it would be somewhat romantic to overemphasise this loss.

The symbolic value of letters extended beyond text. The kinds of materials used—paper, ink, seals and endorsements—could all speak of the writer’s respect for their addressee (Daybell 2009: 654). So too could the layout of the page. As Jonathan Gibson (1997: 4) has shown with his formulation of “significant space,” “honoured margins” and heavy spacing between salutation, body of text and subscription would all indicate the depth of reverence for the name and person of the addressee. These cues had consequence. Willemijn Ruberg (2005: 249), for example, argues convincingly that the formal and linguistic features of letters were an important means of expressing identity for the social elite of the Netherlands from 1770 to 1850, a code of inclusion and exclusion which acted to reinforce ideals of ‘correct’ behaviour and manners among the Dutch upper classes.

### Benjamin and the Aura

Letters were not merely vehicles for signs; their materiality made them gifts in themselves. Here it is helpful to introduce Walter Benjamin's notion of "aura," a concept that powerfully captures some of the experiential changes we encounter as mechanical reproduction and digitisation blur the spatio-temporal boundaries of things. Benjamin describes the aura as an "ornamental halo" (Benjamin 2006: 58) which attaches to persons, cultural and natural objects, and derives from their links to the venerations of tradition and their gathering, over the course of time, an identity and history as the person or thing which they are. In his most famous essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin considered the way in which mechanical replicability had diminished the uniqueness and existential singularity of artworks and thus lessened their cultural resonance, authenticity and authority:

The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object. One might subsume the eliminated element in the term "aura" and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. (Benjamin 1999d: 215)

Any physical thing (or person) has a singular presence in time and space, "its unique existence at the place where it happens to be," which is the determinative setting in which it endures change, accumulates associations with other entities, and amasses its historical testimony (Benjamin 1999d: 214). The existences of people and objects can be more or less remarkable, and while all will have their stories to tell, a few—by the happenstances of their origin, their particular characteristics, and proximity to remarkable institutions, people and events—garner great cultural significance, becoming *awe-some*. The aura, says Benjamin, is a "strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be" (Benjamin 1979: 250). The auratic object

commands our attention while remaining remote and unapproachable. Standing out against the background of so many other taken-for-granted things, it has an essential otherness, an alterity that confronts us and commands attention, invested with “the ability to look at us in return” (Benjamin 1999b: 185). The seeming inaccessibility of the object opens a contemplative space across which it seems to stare back at us, invoking, questioning and affirming our reverence for the people, things and traditions it represents. The poets Philip Larkin and Andrew Motion describe just this emotional response in relation to manuscripts. For Larkin, the “magical value” of manuscripts lies in the startling realisation that “this is the paper [the writer] wrote on, these are the words as he wrote them, emerging for the first time in this particular miraculous combination” (Larkin 1983: 99). For Motion, it is the “gut-amazement of thinking, wow, Keats (or Tennyson, or Wilde, or Hardy) had this piece of paper when it was a blank sheet, their hand touched it, their breath swarmed all over it, and they made something immortal out of nothing” (Motion 2010: 120).

The manuscripts of esteemed poets, of course, derive their cultural import from the reverence we hold for those poets and their poems. But aura attaches not only to museum pieces and masterpieces—according to Benjamin (2006: 58) it “appears in all things”—its experience depends on the knowledge and sympathies of the viewer. While it might be questioned whether the quotidian mass of familiar letters, in their time, held any auratic import, I would argue that this is precisely what they held for the one person who really mattered: their addressee. Opening your mail to find a hand-crafted letter from a loved-one means something to *you*: the experience of the aura is yours, I would not feel it. But feel it you can, in the touch and scent of the paper, upon which the author leant as they etched words with authenticity and identity in their own hand, before sending it out into the world as “the scene, the stage, of [its own] fate” (Benjamin 1999c: 62), to journey space and time to be here now, in your presence. The powerful, auratic sense of presence which can be fostered by familiar letters explains Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s reaction to receiving “a letter from William Wordsworth!” in 1842: “Don’t tell anybody but I kissed it!” (quoted in Milne 2010: 53). It was, moreover, described as early as the first century AD, by the Roman statesman Seneca in an epistle to his friend Lucilius:

Thank you for writing so often. By doing so you give me a glimpse of yourself in the only way you can. I never get a letter from you without instantly feeling we’re together. If pictures of absent friends are a source of pleasure

to us, refreshing the memory and relieving the sense of void with a solace however insubstantial and unreal, how much more so are letters, which carry marks and signs of the absent friend that are real. For the handwriting of a friend affords us what is so delightful about seeing him again, the sense of recognition. (Seneca 1969: 82)

Letters, then, brought two things to ‘presence’ simultaneously, symbols (words) and substrate (the paper they were written on). The material object carried with it something of the auratic presence of the author, but it also chained the message to the physical world and ensured the speed at which it could circulate was limited to the pace at which paper could be made to move, a fact mitigated but not eliminated by the coming of planes, trains and automobiles. The great communicative leap forward in this regard was the splitting of symbols from substrate, the conversion of messages into electric pulses, or light-waves, or radio-waves for conveyance via wire or radio, to be reconstituted in a human-readable form at their destination. As Tom Standage rightly points out in *The Victorian Internet* (2007), the first technology to achieve this breakthrough was the electric telegraph in the mid nineteenth century, which had humans convert textual messages into a binary language (Morse code) for transmission as electrical pulses along copper wires. The electric telegraph called for, and thus inaugurated, our modern project of wiring the world with lines of communication, a scheme which accelerated in the twentieth century as telephones and cable television became commonplace. The invention of radio in the late nineteenth century—initially called “wireless telegraphy”—made information airborne, and continues to support our mobile telephone and wi-fi networks.

Since the latter half of the twentieth century, networked computers have taken these methods of binary processing to a new level of efficiency. Computers deal with “bits” of information—1s or 0s—which are transported in “packets” of data. In this respect, they are similar to the telegraph; but computers do not require humans to process signals as did the telegraph, and since computers can process signals with much greater accuracy and efficiency than humans, much more complex messages can be sent—with current processing power, we can now send not only text but also pictures, video, sound recordings and so on.

Technologies like radio, telephones and computers, then, allow information to flow as fast as electricity, light or radio waves, and it is this fact that underpins the pronouncements of the technological abolition of space and time with which we began this paper. Yet there is, as always, a balance sheet of losses and gains to be reckoned in our shift towards this way of moving information. Yes, we have

made our communications much more fluid, tractable and mobile; but we have also made them much less substantial and left ourselves utterly reliant on a morass of mediating technologies to help us render them readable. The final section examines the major implications of this change.

### **Digital (Im)materiality**

Edmund Husserl asserts that “every thingly being has its place in world-space,” a proposition he believes holds “in fact and *apriori* for *every thingly being whatever*” (Husserl 1989: 31, original emphasis). Similarly, Heidegger says:

[P]lace pertains to being itself, the place constitutes precisely the possibility of the proper presence of the being in question . . . Each being possesses in its Being a prescription toward a determinate location or place. The place is constitutive of the presence of the being. . . . Place is something belonging to beings as such, their capacity to be present, a possibility which is constitutive of their Being. The place is the ability a being has to be there. (Heidegger 1997: 73, 75)

What place do digital objects like emails, text messages and blogs occupy? Where is, for example, the Microsoft Word document upon which I write these words? The most obvious answer would be to say that it is on my laptop screen, the thing I am currently seeing and interacting with. But since this on-screen representation endures only intermittently, conjured into existence as I open the document and disappearing completely when I close it, this answer is incomplete. For this document is the same one I was working on yesterday, and that means that something of it endures even when the representation does not. The thing that endures is, of course, the bit-pattern, the binary code manifested as voltage differences in transistor cells. We could perhaps, then, try to argue that the digital object *is* the bit-pattern, and that the representations it produces are merely secondary effects, like the shadows cast by objects in sunlight. But while the bit-pattern is the necessary causal basis for the screenic representations, it would be unsatisfactory to regard it alone as the digital object, since in most instances I remain utterly unaware of it and even if I could bring it into view it would remain meaningless—were I, for example, to print out a copy of the bit-pattern of this Word document, what I would get would not be an intelligible copy of an academic paper, but just a very long series of 1s and 0s. Without representation, the bit-pattern is useless; but, equally, the representations could not exist without the bit-pattern. We must conclude, therefore, that both together constitute the digital object and that, while material



things have a unique presence in space and time, digital objects lead double lives as both perceptible on-screen representations and as imperceptible bit-patterns of binary signals. This means that digital objects can never be directly presented to us, but only ever re-presented; they require, by their nature, the mediation of computer software and hardware, and lie at all times behind the screen of technology.

The presence of digital objects is indistinct for a series of other reasons. Firstly, digital objects are perfectly replicable; we can create copies that are in almost every way the same as the original. Hence the *same* bit-pattern, to all intents, can be in many locations simultaneously and so it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to maintain any straightforward distinction between digital originals and copies. This fact further problematises the identity, authenticity and authority of the object, already depreciated by mechanical reproduction. Secondly, the same representation can be in many places at the same time. Joohan Kim (2001: 98), for instance, gives the case of geographically dispersed players taking part in an online environment like *Second Life*, where a digital-object such as an avatar can be on multiple screens at the same time. Thirdly, networked computers and distributed storage make it possible for the composite parts of some digital objects, such as newspaper webpages, to be hosted on different servers in different parts of the world (Kim 2001: 98). Finally, the networked nature of Web documents makes it very difficult to define their boundaries. As Michael Heim rightly argues, the very character of hyperlinking implies the presence of other texts, which are only ever a mouse-click away. Indeed, Heim goes so far as to say that the Web makes all documents “virtually coresident” and seems to collapse “the whole notion of a primary and a secondary text, of originals and their references” (Heim 1993: 35). For these reasons, digital objects lack the determinable spatio-temporal location of physical objects. This is, of course, a decided benefit for futurists like Negroponte (1996: 228), who is triumphal in declaring “bits will be borderless, stored and manipulated with absolutely no respect to geopolitical boundaries.” But, if we follow the logic of Heidegger and Husserl, it places digital objects on an unsound ontological footing. Indeed, their status as “thingly beings” is entirely questionable, and they seem insubstantial and more akin to dreams, hallucinations, and ideas (Kim 2001: 107). This uncertain ontology has concrete consequences for the ways in which we interact with digital objects.

Firstly, digital objects are both more robust and more fragile than physical objects. More robust because the bit-pattern can in principle endure forever without degradation (though in practice bit-rot can occur) and because the possibility for faultless replication means that endless back-ups can be made—as the wonder-

fully named Stanford digital preservation project has it, “Lots Of Copies Keep Stuff Safe” (Reich and Rosenthal 2001). On the other hand, the fact that alteration of any part of the bit-pattern can markedly alter the object, the complexity of the software and hardware needed to render the bit-pattern readable combined with the galloping pace of technological obsolescence, and the fact that it can only take a keystroke to delete the bit-pattern forever, means it has a much more frail existence. As Joohan Kim says, digital objects are marked by two paradoxical possibilities, “eternal endurance and instant vanishment” (Kim 2001: 100).

Secondly, computers are bafflingly complex to the layman. To display a bit-pattern as something readable—as well as to transmit and store it—requires a huge amount of remarkably advanced software and hardware. The sheer complexity of this technology means that it remains a mystery to most of us, who deal with the computer as a “black box,” considering little and knowing less what actually goes on inside the machine (as long as it is working anyway), something enabled by the now ubiquitous graphical user interface (GUI). As Sherry Turkle (2004) notes, while the first generation of enthusiasts understood personal computers “down to the bits and bytes,” able to “‘open the hood’ and poke around,” we today are far more used to “taking things at (inter) face value.” The increasing intricacy of the technology makes us ever more reliant upon it, and while knowing how to proficiently operate computer programmes such as *Word* remains a skilful business, for most non-computer experts such skills never broaden beyond the sketchiest appreciation of the multitude of underlying technological processes at work.

Friedrich Kittler calls the stacks of programming languages and their underlying hardware a “postmodern Tower of Babel,” whose complexity and inscrutability mean that “[w]e simply do not know what our writing does” (Kittler 1997: 148). Our lack of understanding of this opaque equipment seems to distance us from the objects we interact with when using it and gives rise to a fundamental uncertainty in our dealings with them. We have no phenomenological access to the bit-pattern, being able only to perceive the on-screen representations, and yet most of us simply do not understand how the computer goes about translating the one into the other. Because we have only the re-presentations to rely on, we have less reason to be certain that the object we are now viewing really is the *same* as last we saw it. In physical media like letters, signs are intimately and permanently fixed to the substrate, and it is very difficult to remove or alter them without leaving some indication of having done so—black marks or holes in the paper, for example. The fluidity and ephemerality of digital information, meanwhile, makes it more open to imperceptible revision or deletion.

Moreover, the complex nesting of multiple levels of coding languages mean that minor changes at one level can translate into very large changes at another—a small amendment to a Cascading Style Sheet, for example, can radically alter the look and feel of an entire website. Indeed, such minor changes might be all that is required to render the thing utterly unreadable, something that makes digital preservation particularly problematic. All of which is to say that there are fundamental reasons for uncertainties in our dealings with digital objects. Of course, in most of our dealings this is not a problem. We do not falter in fear and trembling when confronted by computers; we mostly trust the technology as a taken-for-granted and ready-to-hand piece of everyday equipment. Yet something of the uncertainty remains, and it can perhaps be felt most vividly in the gut-wrenching terror experienced when the representations abruptly disappear and the machine just stops working, such as (for Microsoft Windows users) when the “Stop error screen,” commonly known as the “blue screen of death,” appears. Such a moment of breakdown is hugely distressing because, at one and the same time, we realise how very little we know about this equipment and also just how dependent we are upon it.

Next, lacking “substantive duration” (Benjamin 1999d: 215), digital objects are poor in aura. Aura derives from a physical thing’s singular presence in time and space, “its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (Benjamin 1999d: 214). Digital objects are neither singular nor present; they are duplicable, discontinuous, and can be experienced only representationally. Being perfectly duplicable, they lack the authenticity and authority of the physical object, substituting a “plurality of copies for a unique existence” (Benjamin 1999d: 215). The material presence of the letter was a continuity, it was the “scene . . . of [its own] fate” (Benjamin 1999c: 62), and as it passed from hand to hand, it took with it something of the aura of each person and place it came into contact with. Digital representations, meanwhile, have an intermittent existence—they are resurrected each time we run the bit-pattern with the appropriate hardware and software. Even the perceptible endurance whilst on-screen is an illusion, as what seems a stable on-screen object is in fact blinking in and out of existence many times per second as the image frames update (Hayles 2004: 79). Without a continuous spatio-temporal presence, digital objects cannot amass the weight of historical testimony that aura requires. It is difficult to imagine future scholars eulogising a writer’s word processing documents in quite the same way as Larkin and Motion celebrate paper manuscripts. Certainly it will be impossible for them to wonder that “their hand touched it” (Motion 2010: 120), since we never come into contact with digital objects, which remain hermetically sealed in plastic and metal. Representations remain intangible behind the

screen and bit-patterns live invisibly in transistors. Eluding our grasp, flashing in and out of existence, and lacking a unique existence, digital objects eschew aura. Now, this is not necessarily a ‘bad thing.’ Benjamin’s artwork essay is, after all, commonly taken to be an affirmation of the possibilities of technologically-enabled mass culture and the democratisation that mechanical reproduction offers by allowing art “to meet the beholder halfway” (Benjamin 1999d: 214). Similarly, the Internet is often affirmed for its potential to open up access to information, lower educational costs, promote public dialogue, and so on. But while it obviously compensates by way of such interactivity and tractability, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that a major loss wrought by digital technologies is the diminution of what Larkin identified as the “magical value” of paper documents, the “aura.”

Next, there are questions to be asked about the ways in which the insubstantiality of digital messages might diminish perceptions of the substantiality of their contents. Many languages, including Chinese, Dutch, and Spanish, exhibit metaphorical links between weight and importance—in English we use phrases like ‘the gravity of a situation’ and ‘weighing one’s options,’ for example. Recent research into embodied cognition present persuasive evidence that this link is much more than merely linguistic, and that the weightiness of objects can have a very real effect upon perceptions of importance. Jostmann, Lakens, and Schubert (2009), for example, found that subjects holding a heavy clipboard while answering survey questions on a range of issues (including money, justice, and community policy) made higher value judgements, judged issues as more important, and invested higher levels of “cognitive elaboration” than did those subjects holding a lighter clipboard. In a similar study, Ackerman, Nocera, and Bargh (2010) used heavy and light clipboards to test subjects’ reactions to the CVs of job applicants, finding that: “[h]eaviness produced impressions of importance and seriousness” (Ackerman, Nocera, and Bargh 2010: 1714). The authors propose that “experiences with specific object-related tactile qualities elicit a ‘haptic mindset,’ such that touching objects triggers the application of associated concepts . . . even to unrelated people and situations” (Ackerman, Nocera, and Bargh 2010: 1713). Such findings suggest that the differences in affective response to analogue and digital messages might run deeper than auratic associative links, into the very substance of the thing itself. While letters are obviously not very heavy, they do at least have some mass, can at least be held, touched, smelled and so on; digital objects are, as we have said, intangible, transitory and weightless. Such may help explain affective responses like that of Herb, one of Sherry Turkle’s (2011: 271) interviewees, who said: “E-mails get deleted, but letters get stored in a drawer. It’s real; it’s tangible. Online, you can’t touch the computer screen, but you can

touch the letter.” Turkle herself seems to agree: “An e-mail or text,” she says, “seems to have been always on its way to the trash” (Turkle 2011: 168).

## Conclusion

When Heidegger spoke of the “homelessness” entailed by technologies like TV and radio, he was anxious about what he viewed as the migration of the attention from the local to the global. Our “nowhereness” as we communicate via the Internet speaks directly to such a concern. We are experiencing the *digital diffusion* (or perhaps *confusion*) of the spatial presence of ourselves and the things we write with. Extending our perceptual and actional reach, digital technologies help us overcome distance and de-sever what would otherwise remain remote. But in so doing, they diminish the importance of bodily, geographic location (viz., time-space compression). They do not create this phenomenon—transportation and communication technologies from the alphabet to the aeroplane have always aimed in this direction—yet, with the connective power and minimal cost of the digital, there nonetheless seems something of a step-change in the magnitude, if not the quality, of the effect. Mediated communication over distance has never been easier, faster, or cheaper. With Internet-enabled smart phones, we can be continually coupled to a communicative network which allows our attention to wander the globe, exchanging instant messages with people in Beijing one moment and Boston the next. We live an increasingly distributed existence. This extended actional/perceptual presence, though, prompts the question of what Heidegger has called “homelessness” and Borgmann a diminution of “commanding presence.”

Digital technologies make the question of the location of our documents problematic too. Digital documents are ontologically ambiguous; they lead double lives. Where the letter was a material unity of signs etched on substrate, digitalism splits documents into two: imperceptible bits of code ghosting the circuits of hardware and perceptible, on-screen representations which flicker intermittently in and out of existence. While the familiar letter was a singular spatio-temporal object which travelled as “the scene, the stage, of [its own] fate” (Benjamin 1999c: 62), from the hand of the signatory to that of the addressee, carrying with it what Benjamin called the aura and there presenting (“first-hand,” as it were) the author’s handwriting (with all the personality, individuality and authenticity that implies), emails and such present merely impersonal typescript which cannot be touched and, having no mass, may be perceived as less significant. Such points combine to hint at a loss, suggesting that our communicative technologies increase our effective power, but at the cost of a diminution of the affective power of the messages carried.

## Notes

1. Recent psychological work supports such insight. For example, Proffitt et al. (1995) found that conscious perceptions of hill steepness and walking distances is influenced by the wearing of heavy backpacks, while Bhalla and Proffitt (1999) found that the age of the perceiver had a similar effect. See Dennis R. Proffitt, Mukul Bhalla, Rich Gossweiler, and Jonathan Midgett, "Perceiving Geographical Slant," *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 2(4) (1995): 409–28; Mikul Bhalla and Dennis R. Proffitt, "Visual-Motor Recalibration in Geographical Slant Perception," *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 25(4) (1999): 1076–96.

2. As an anonymous reviewer observes, the crux of this debate is captured well by two articles: In their paper *Unreal Friends*, Cocking and Matthews (2000: 224) argue that "within a purely virtual context the establishment of close friendship is simply psychologically impossible." In his reply *Real Friends*, Adam Briggie, argues that the liminal space opened up by distance can actually promote honesty, sharing and (ultimately) friendship, in ways close physical contact might not. Briggie (2008: 73) comments that Cocking and Matthews's paper ultimately presents an "implausible deterministic thesis, because the fate of online friendships depends at least as much on the people involved as it does on the tools used.

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