Introduction: Getting a Grip on *Holding On to Reality*

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In 1999, Albert Borgmann published *Holding On to Reality: The Nature of Information at the Turn of the Millennium*. This book followed two earlier books *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life, A Philosophical Inquiry* (1984) and *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (1992) that established Borgmann as an important contemporary philosopher of technology. In *Holding On to Reality*, Borgmann extends the perspective that he developed in earlier books to provide an analysis of an emerging postmodern culture heavily reliant on digital tools. In a recent comment, he notes that "information technology is currently the prominent and most influential version of the device paradigm" (Borgmann 2000, pg. 352). At the end of the "Introduction" of *Holding On to Reality*, Borgmann says that contemporary culture needs "both a theory and an ethics of information-a theory to illuminate the structure of information and an ethics to get the moral of its development" (Borgmann 1999, pg. 6). His book, which tries to provide both elements, is organized as a threefold account of how in history signs and information have worked to illuminate, transform, and most recently, displace reality. As we move deeper down the path toward digital postmodern culture, *Holding On to Reality* is a call to rebalance the weightings of natural, cultural and technological information. Borgmann's new book is an important contribution both to philosophy of technology and, more generally, to conversations struggling to make sense of the "information age."

The essays collected here are intended to stimulate further discussion of *Holding On to Reality*. There have been some reviews of the book and there are a few comments on the material in the book in *Technology and the Good Life?*, a recent collection of essays published shortly after Borgmann's book. This collection of essays focuses generally on Borgmann's work as well as the problems and promise of the field of philosophy of technology, but most of these essays were drafted before the publication of *Holding On to Reality*.

The authors of the material gathered in this issue of *Techné* were, with one exception, invited simply to comment on *Holding On to Reality*. There were no strings attached to the request, although I knew all the authors had indicated to me, to Albert Borgmann or to friends who knew Borgmann's work that they were seriously interested in Borgmann's philosophical perspective.[1] Hans Achterhuis, the one exception, was asked to provide a general comment on Borgmann's thought and the response it received in *Technology and the Good Life?* Some of the writers included here are scholars who work primarily in the philosophy of technology, while others are scholars whose interests and work focus in other areas, although there is overlap with Borgmann's interests. Some have written shorter reviews while others have written longer essays that look in more detail at aspects of Borgmann's discussion in *Holding On to Reality*. Not everyone included here offers an extended critique of Borgmann's views, but some authors do. The range of responses in these essays, in fact, shows that there are multiple contexts in which Borgmann is read; this I take to be one of the strengths of his work and of *Holding On to Reality*, for surely it is a book aimed at all thoughtful people who find their world being reshaped by digital devices at the turn of the millennium.

Eliseo Fernandez' essay links Borgmann's new book with earlier discussions of the device paradigm and the importance of focal things. He distinguishes the format and intention of *Holding On to Reality*, however, as different from earlier work in that Borgmann wants to focus on "the relationship between our openness to different forms of information and the ways we experience reality." Borgmann tries to disclose these connections with an "inquiry into the nature of information and of the technologies based on its technological manipulation and transmission." Fernandez appreciates particularly what he calls Borgmann's analysis of "the powers that information-producing devices are able to exert upon us by manufacturing something like an *ersatz* reality." Fernandez suggests that *Holding On to Reality* provides a good point of entrance to Borgmann's "general outlook on technology and the social and ethical dimensions of technology's grip on our world" but he finds that the book as an introduction to history of information offers an "idiosyncratic selection" of themes dictated by the philosophical and ethical agenda. On the philosophical side, Fernandez suggests this book is a bit disappointing compared to its predecessors. Borgmann somewhat confuses the nature of information and its relation to natural and conventional signs. He thinks Borgmann conflates semiotic action and physical causation and he wonders why, in Borgmann's move to semiotics, that he does not make some use of the kinds of refinements in Locke, Peirce and more recent figures who have turned to semiotics. Finally, Fernandez points out that *Holding On to Reality* is written in an engaging prose that reflects Borgmann's depth of conviction; Borgmann's book has something like the powers of focal things and therefore effectively lays "claim to a moral response from us."

Myron Tuman's essay focuses on situating Borgmann's new book in several important contexts in which he thinks it should be viewed. Tuman, like Fernandez, links *Holding On to Reality* with earlier discussions of the device paradigm, but also he is particularly attuned to Borgmann's earlier writing about nature. Tuman argues that Borgmann is a poet-philosopher and is at his best when treating his adopted Montana: he "still relies heavily and most effectively on the pristine Western landscape as his eschatological frame of reference." Borgmann wants to restore to modern life two key elements now being lost: he recognizes "the value for the individual in having a real, implacable world against which to strain" as well as "the value for a society as a whole in being able to organize society itself around such efforts..." Tuman suggests that even more important than seeing the continuity of Borgmann's thought in his several books is the matter of situating Borgmann's philosophical perspective in a broader and deeper stream of thought critical of the modern world. His essay begins with a comparison of Borgmann and Thoreau and ends with a comparison with Vico. Tuman thinks that Borgmann needs to identify himself more profoundly with this stream of modern thought deeply opposed to progress... If he did so, Tuman ventures, Borgmann could more clearly articulate that one of modernism's great achievements is the critique of progress and modernism itself. Tuman also thinks that Borgmann's analysis of some elements of postmodernism is lacking. Borgmann's liberal social values don't fit well with his conservative account of the family and community. He pays too little attention to "the traditional anti-intellectual edge of community celebrations." Tuman thinks that Borgmann is somewhat confused about the role of - and what happens to - intellectuals "in combating the modernist tradition of domination." About *Holding On to Reality*, Tuman summarizes his view by saying the book is a "retelling a single story - that of the morality of limits;" what he finds weakest philosophically in this story is "the lack of a keen dialectical sense of just what it is that we may be losing with the revival of traditional or neotraditional communities, what new revanchist dangers we may be courting by privileging communal celebrations over individual critique." What he senses is missing in Borgmann is a "dialectical tension, the turning back on one's own position that one associates with the great texts on limits." Tuman holds up Vico as a model of a thinker who always embodies this tension.

Charles Ess characterizes *Holding On to Reality* as an "epochal book" whose theory and ethics of information decisively counters a recent obsession, "an uncritical cultural enthusiasm for 'information'". Ess suggests that Borgmann establishes a taxonomy that distinguishes natural, cultural and technical information and uses this successfully to argue for a view that the good life requires a better balance of these kinds of information. His essay focuses on bringing into the foreground certain religious elements of Borgmann's analysis and approach. Ess contends that Borgmann's criticisms of consumerism and his affirmation of human embodiment might be read as prophetic: Borgmann "both attacks the idols of the present and affirms the goodness of *this* life as suffered and enjoyed by embodied beings in human, natural and divine community." Particularly, he thinks that Borgmann does a solid job of pointing to the embodied character of human life. He suggests, however, that Borgmann should have a more balanced response to the free market: not only the powers of the market which Borgmann acknowledges but also its dangers for the world-dangers such as monoculturalism - need to be recognized. Ess notes that there are also certain apocalyptic notes in Borgmann's argument that he finds troubling. The end of *Holding On to Reality* seems to offer a "dichotomy between the danger of losing our moral gravity, character, and definition in cyberspace, and salvation in the form of inscription in the book of judgment and embrace in the bosom of Abraham." Ess finds this dualism odd and, in strange ways, akin to the dualist inclinations of those Borgmann criticizes so sharply, the postmodern enthusiasts seeking final liberation in cyberspace.

My own essay focuses not on criticism of Borgmann's account of information technology, but on a peculiar way of interpreting Borgmann's project. I read *Holding On to Reality* as a book about meaning and its loss and recovery. I examine Borgmann's treatment of this subject in the general context provided by two other thinkers who have written about the problem of meaning, Michael Polanyi, who wrote a book with Harry Prosch titled *Meaning*, and Charles S. Peirce, the father of pragmatism, which is an account of meaning. I argue that it is significant that Borgmann shifts to a semiotic perspective in *Holding On to Reality*. Although the continuity with Borgmann's earlier work is clear, the semiotic envelope that Borgmann develops works nicely to situate his historical-cultural account of meaning. Particularly important is Borgmann's exploration of the implications of information theory that he suggests lies behind much of the unbridled enthusiasm for information technology. Information theory extols the electron as the ultimate sign and holds out the hope that reality can be rendered fully transparent. Borgmann's discussion focuses upon the sharp contradiction between the ways in which signs work on a human scale and the ways in which information theory construes signs. Borgmann's semiotic account of meaning in *Holding On to Reality* is an account in which important metaphysical claims are embedded. The second half of my essay tries to unpack these claims, although I recognize that Borgmann's book is not intended as a systematic treatise on metaphysics. *Holding On to Reality* is, as Borgmann says, both a theory and an ethics of information but a metaphysical analysis makes clear that Borgmann's semiotic approach is also a path around many of the dilemmas of modern thought. Borgmann's semiotic model focuses on the person. He articulates a socio-personal account of representation. Borgmann's semiotic perspective is a realist account that provides a double emphasis upon the way in which human beings exist as skilled agents who are both shaped by the natural and social environment and who shape the natural and social environment. Borgmann presupposes a real world in which persons are real instantiations of that world. The realist foundation of the semiotic perspective in *Holding On to Reality* is, I suggest, anti-nominalist. A skilled but fallible person binds together signs and things; meaning, for Borgmann, is not merely the infinite play of signification understood as a function of a system. Borgmann's semiotic account stresses that the environing world is more than structural information; human beings are always already creatures engaged with the world and thus the world always must have significant structure. The historical course of technological development has, however, made us myopic

about this elemental human participation in the world; we have pursued a path of separating mind and matter and have assumed that material things must be mapped and shaped. Now, Borgmann argues, in emerging digital culture the proliferation of digitized artifacts threatens to transform the world into a hyperreal domain. Borgmann thus provides a theory and an ethics of information to right the balance between types of contemporary information. But this theory and ethics is very much bound up with a particular metaphysics.

While Borgmann's new book offers insights about information technology, Peter-Paul Verbeek argues Borgmann's preoccupation with the threatening aspects of technology keeps him from thoroughly analyzing all aspects-some positive-- of the way technology helps to shape the human relationship with reality. Verbeek shows how the device paradigm's approach emphasizes the ways in which technology creates a pattern for living. Technology promises to disburden and enrich, but it diminishes engagement with reality and therefore impedes true enrichment. Borgmann stresses the importance of focal practices centered on focal things as a counterbalance. Borgmann argues in *Holding On to Reality* that technological information is not truly capable of engaging humans with reality since such information "does not contain any tie to actual things." Technological information does not provide access to reality, but it replaces reality. Nevertheless, technological information is becoming dominant in our society. The promise of technological information to enlarge our engagement with reality is unfulfilled, since it simply offers a new, alluring hyperreal substitute for reality. Verbeek sees that Borgmann's claim that information technology estranges and his device paradigm approach are closely akin to classical philosophy of technology with its emphasis upon the thesis of alienation. Verbeek argues that the thesis of alienation is a romantic thesis that is especially problematic "because it makes an empirical claim that is at odds with empirical reality." Borgmann's discussion of the pattern of technology proposes that focal practices get displaced by technological devices because people become "entirely submerged in the consumptive attitude that has come about by using technology." Verbeek contends, however, that this is often not the case. Devices may be vehicles for persons to become engaged in focal practices. The student who must travel light can develop or maintain musical skills by acquiring and using a synthesizer. Verbeek goes on to show that in many ways "engaging devices" provide opportunities for cultural enrichment for those with limited resources. He concludes that technology's role in the relationship between humans and reality is more ambiguous than Borgmann sees: "technology does not only create distracted consumption, but also new possibilities for engagement." Verbeek argues that Borgmann's discussion of information technology attributes too much power to technological information. He fails to see that "the role information technology actually plays in our culture, does not consist in offering a *substitute* for reality, but in *mediating* our involvement with reality and with each other." Verbeek proposes that philosophy of technology needs a broader phenomenological vision of how technology mediates reality for human beings and this ultimately will require "a modification of Heidegger's and Borgmann's analyses of the way in which devices are present for people." Such a broader account can accommodate both Borgmann's criticisms formulated in the device paradigm argument as well as the ways in which technology opens new possibilities for human engagement. Technological devices play an ambivalent mediating role; sometimes they substitute consumption for focal engagement, but sometimes they enhance engagement. Technological mediation "always has a structure of amplification and reduction..." In the case of information technology, Verbeek thinks that Borgmann's emphasis upon "information as reality" inadequately represents this mediation. Most electronic communication technologies do not mediate human-world relationships but human-human relationships; Verbeek argues that the ways and places in which humans are present to each other is shaped by technologies, but he finds in many ways "engagement between humans comes about through them." In the case of virtual reality, Verbeek suggests that virtual entities are present-at-hand, but they too "are explicitly intended to add

something to people's life in actual reality." Hyperrealities do not necessarily estrange but are "a detour" which, nevertheless, "always have actual reality as their final destination."

Hans Achterhuis's essay both comments on Borgmann's thought and on *Technology and the Good Life?*, a book that in part is about Borgmann's work. His views complement the criticisms that his colleague Verbeek provides for *Holding On to Reality*. Achterhuis begins by acknowledging that, like some of the writers included in *Technology and the Good Life?*, he continues to be drawn to Borgmann's work, even though his own work is shaped by other influences. Borgmann is a thinker whose work resonates for many: he resembles classical philosophers of technology but, when he describes such activities as running, he takes an empirical turn to matters concrete and this makes his views better connected with contemporary culture. The problem, Achterhuis has come to believe, is that a truly vibrant philosophy of technology (of the sort the editors of *Technology and the Good Life?* seek) demands a more radical break with classical work. Borgmann is a step along the way toward a more empirical philosophy of technology but only a step. Achterhuis thus finds in Borgmann's work an "intriguing quality" that is a "combination of attraction and the necessity of breaking away." Classical philosophy of technology, and secondarily, Borgmann, is occupied more "with the historical and transcendental conditions that made modern technology possible than with the real changes accompanying the development of a technological culture." Classical technology and Borgmann ultimately think of human nature in terms of the priority of the linguistic rather than the productive (to use Mitcham's distinction). This leads such philosophers to "refrain from addressing concrete technological practices and developments" and this means that they fail to "appreciate how these can rapidly alter the actual normative frameworks of culture." Achterhuis contends that the classical philosophers of technology, like Borgmann and many of the contributors to *Technology and the Good Life?*, fail to look empirically at technology and contemporary culture because their vision is dimmed by certain habits of thought. Their imaginations are captive to what Achterhuis dubs a very influential "cultural syndrome, the syndrome of the realised utopia/ dystopia..." This interpretative syndrome always insistently proclaims that utopian dreams of early modernity are realized as dystopian nightmares at the end of modernity. Achterhuis affirms that in part we are living in a realized utopia in the contemporary period, but that it is only by undertaking "social research concerned with the way people are experiencing our technological culture" that will reveal the true state of things. Philosophy of technology remains a prisoner of its own language as long as it simply and repeatedly proclaims that modernity is the story of utopian dreams realized as dystopian realities. Achterhuis argues that "utopian promise plays the same part in Borgmann's philosophy as it does in the classical philosophy of technology." Further, Borgmann's account of the device paradigm is primarily old wine in a new vessel: the device paradigm "furnishes us with the kind of spectacles that color our technological culture with a specific dystopian light." Achterhuis suggests that most of the contributors to *Technology and the Good Life?* like Borgmann, are captured by the prevailing interpretative syndrome that is the heritage of classical philosophy of technology. Like Andrew Feenberg, Achterhuis calls for an empirical approach that will show in a more discriminating way how technology is integrated with natural and social environments. He argues that "users of technology are not passive captives in the maze of the device paradigm" but, instead "they can appropriate technical instruments and systems in a myriad of creative and innovative ways."

References

Borgmann, Albert. "Reply to My Critics," *Technology and the Good Life?* Eds. Eric Higgs, Andrew Light and David
        Strong. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Borgmann, Albert. *Holding On to Reality: The Nature of Information at the Turn of the Millennium*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999

Endnotes

[1] Particularly, I want to thank Pieter Tijmes who not only advised me about possible writers, but also read through some draft materials and provided editorial advice.