Towards a Phenomenology of Computation

Having suggested how the materiality of code might be subjected to critical analysis, I now want to focus on the experience of ‘forgetting’ technology. This raises the question of whether the experience of ‘back-grounded’ computational technology is as complete as we might think. Indeed, I want to explore the idea that technology is actually only ever partially forgotten or ‘withdrawn’, forcing us into a rather strange experience of reliance, but never complete finesse or virtuosity with the technology. Indeed, this forgetting, or ‘being that goes missing’, is for Heidegger ‘the very condition of appearance (vanishing) of worldhood (Stiegler 1998: 244). Whilst I will go on to argue that there is something specific about the relationship that is set up between our use of digital devices and our experience of the world, I want to be clear that this is not merely to argue for a vulgar technological determinism. Such an approach was criticised by Raymond Williams (2003) who argued that,

We have to think of determination not as a single force, or a single abstraction of forces, but as a process in which real determining factors – the distribution of power or of capital, social and physical inheritance, relations of scale and size between groups – set limits and exert pressures, but neither wholly control nor wholly predict the outcome of complex activity within or at these limits, and under or against these pressures (Williams 2003: 133).

Taking this into account, I want to develop the argument that we should not underestimate the ability of technology to act not only as a force, but also as a ‘platform’. This is the way in which the loose coupling of technologies can be combined, or made concrete (Simondon 1980), such that the technologies, or constellation of technologies act
as an environment that we hardly pause to think about. This is what Bertrand Gille calls the technical system, which ‘designates in the first instance a whole play of stable interdependencies at a given time or epoch’ (Stiegler 1998: 26). Gille explains,

a technical system constitutes a temporal unity. It is a stabilization of technical evolution around a point of equilibrium concretized by a particular technology (Stiegler 1998: 31, emphasis removed).

For example, think of the way we use our mobile phones to manage our friendships through extensive database lists of numbers and addresses. Whilst we have the phone at hand, we can easily find where our friend lives to send a letter, or call them to have a chat. But should we lose the phone then we have lost not just the list of numbers, but also the practised habits of how we used to find information about our friends. Certainly this is the experience when one is then forced to upgrade to a new mobile phone, often complete with new software installed and frustrating new methods of interacting with it. This is a common experience with everyday digital technology to the extent that the constant revolution in interfaces is something that we have learned to accept, even if it is extremely frustrating, as we want the latest mobile phone, with all the perceived advantages of the latest technology. Further, when leaving Facebook due to the closed nature of the technology it is very difficult to extract your contacts, in effect meaning that Facebook attempts to hold onto your friends in order to hold onto you. Code is therefore used as a prescriptive technology.

I want to keep in mind that many previous thinkers have been overtly critical about ‘new’ technologies and their perceived effects on the minds and habits of human beings. For example, Plato, in Phaedrus, wrote that Socrates denounced the use of reading and writing, because those that use writing ‘will introduce forgetfulness into the soul of those who learn it: they will not practice using their memory because they will put their trust in writing’ or ‘they will imagine that they have come to know much while for the most part they will know nothing’ (Cooper 1997: 552). For Hieronimo Squarciafico, an Italian Humanist writing in 1477, ‘printing had fallen into the hands of unlettered men, who corrupted almost everything’, and he argued that an ‘abundance of books makes men less studious’ (Carr 2008). Similar arguments are being made today with regard to the deskilling of the mind that is purported to be the result of search engines, social media, and mobile technologies. Indeed, Nicholas Carr goes as far as to imagine