Marshall McLuhan’s famous reference to media technologies as “extensions of man” served as a catalyst for “Technologies of Knowing,” the 8th Annual Critical Studies Graduate Student Conference that took place in Los Angeles, October 24-25, 2014 at USC School of Cinematic Arts. Bringing together and putting in dialogue scholars and graduate students across different disciplines, this conference provided a platform to think critically about the ways in which technology intervenes in modes of knowing and being in the world. Some of the driving questions that brought the panelists together were: How has technology impacted and framed our subjectivity and the way we think? How do different modes of thought influence the development and application of technologies? What is the relationship between knowledge, technology, and the archive? In what ways do media technologies produce or obscure certain knowledges? What are aesthetic, philosophical, social, methodological, and pedagogical aspects of media digitalization?

As Heather Blackmore emphasized in her opening remarks on the first day of the conference, humanities scholarship often concentrates on the cultural while ignoring the technological. Consequently, media studies research that confronts the issues of technological potentialities and limitations is comparatively small in number. The diversity of topics and fields of study represented at the conference reflects the desire to overcome this gap in scholarship, as well as the rigid humanities-sciences binary. Building on and expanding the previously established format of ZdC conferences, the 8th Annual Critical Studies Graduate Student Conference was a two-day event that featured a roundtable discussion “Techknowlegy and Pedagogy”; a keynote address by Professor Erkki Huhtamo; and three panels consisting of young media scholars from University of Southern California (School of Cinematic Arts and Annenberg School of Communication); University of California, Santa Barbara; New York University; Claremont Graduate University; University of Washington; and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The “Technologies of Knowing” conference and this issue of Spectator can be situated within a well-established tradition of scholarship that questions the ever-increasing role of technology in the world. Some of the most compelling and timely work on technology gestures toward rethinking subject/object relations and the decentering and reconceptualization of the human. Hinting at this move toward what can be characterized as the emerging theoretical construct of the post-human, the essays in this volume help to map contemporary shifts in technology’s role in perception and...
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knowledge production.

Erik Stayton’s essay “Sensing, Seeing, and Knowing: The Human and the Self-Driving Car” examines how the relationship between human subjects and autonomous vehicles is defined by the ways in which knowledge is generated, circulated, and reproduced. Building on his analysis of how self-driving cars interact with and alter human subjectivity, Stayton considers the legal and ethical implications of this technological innovation. Also taking up an ethical and theoretical consideration of technology’s influence on the role of the human subject, Maria Zalewska’s “Holography, Historical Indexicality, and the Holocaust” offers up the stakes of the USC Shoah Foundation’s holographic project ‘New Dimensions in Testimony.’ In this piece, Zalewska gestures toward the potentials and limitations of this project which seeks to document and memorialize witness testimony through the technological spectacle of 3D holograms. Panpan Yang’s “Rotoscoping Body: Secret Dancers, Animated Realism and Temporal Critique” resonates with Zalewska’s interest in the ways in which technologies intervene in our perception and experience of the past. Yang elaborates on how the technique of rotoscoping gives expression to immiscible temporalities that complicate our everyday experience of clock time and allow us to rethink the temporal dimensions of perception and human subjectivity. Isaac Rooks’s essay “Pandopticon: The Panda Cam & Animal Surveillance” pushes the theoretical boundaries of the human subject a step further by shifting focus to the ways in which surveillance technologies like the Panda Cam help us think through and redefine the ethical dimensions of human-animal relations. The final piece in the volume, Michael LaRocco’s “The ‘Film Look’ as Semiotic Decoy: Slow Frame Rate as Cinematic Code,” returns us to a more traditional discussion of medium specificity in which he investigates the evolution of video technology and the epistemological effects of frame rate.

The cover of this issue of Spectator, designed by a San Francisco-based artist Ania Troszkiewicz, reflects the conference’s concern with our contemporary relationship to technology, surveillance, and privacy. In Ania’s words, “the binary code shadow of the woman becomes an unsettling digital and visual artifact that speaks to her being ‘followed’ by her own digital identity.”

The Conference

The conference began with a USC Faculty roundtable discussion on the integration of technology into pedagogy. Moderated by Professor Henry Jenkins, the panel consisted of Professor Vicki Callahan (School of Cinematic Arts), Professor Alice Gambrell (English), Prof. Andreas Kratky (Media Arts + Practice, School of Cinematic
The second day of the conference consisted of three panels: “Theories of the Digital,” “Case Studies: Media and Technology,” and “Information Gathering: Social Media, Surveillance, Viewing Bodies.” Professors Nitin Govil, Laura Isabel Serna, and Anikó Imre, respectively, moderated the panels. The first panel focused on the problem of theories and representations of technology and featured three papers: “New Media and the Social Hermeneutic Turn” by William McClain (USC Annenberg School of Communication); “Towards an Epistemology of Digital Distribution Technologies” by Juan Llamas Rodriguez (University of California, Santa Barbara), and “Visitors: Bodies of Knowledge” by Bree Russell (USC School of Cinematic Arts). The second panel of the day emphasized the relationship between media and technology with an emphasis on economic, social, cultural, psychological, and material nature and the impact of the digital. It featured four papers: “Old Formats Die Hard: The Turn of the (21st) Century Video Masquerade” by Michael LaRocco (USC School of Cinematic Art), “Private Dancers, Forgotten Technologies: Criticizing Technological Determinism Through the Rotoscoping Process” by Panpan Yang (New York University), “Holography, Historical Indexicality, and the Holocaust” by Maria Zalewska (USC School of Cinematic Arts), and “Technologies of the Real, Technowledge of Love: On Anime, Fetishism, and Hyper(Real)ism of the Lacanian Gaze” by Jung-Hsien Lin (Claremont Graduate University). Finally, the last panel of the conference zoomed in on the problem of information gathering and cultural impacts of technological developments. It featured “The Incidental Discovery: Technological Anxiety in the Age of DIY Innovation” by Justin Shanitkvich (University of Washington), “Pandopticon: The Panda Cam and Animal Surveillance” by Isaac Rooks (USC School of Cinematic Arts), “Vehicles of Ideology: Knowing and Being Known by the Self-Driving Car” by Erik Stayton (MIT), and “The Media and Internet Presence of Mexican Drug Cartels” by Sophia Serrano (USC School of Cinematic Arts).

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