The Uses of Compulsion: Addressing Burke’s Technological Psychosis [Keynote Address]

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I’m so pleased to be here, not least because now I feel like I’ve come full circle with Burke and technology—writing this paper reminded me that back when I took Jack Selzer’s seminar on Burke at Penn State in 2001 or so, I had initially proposed “Kenneth Burke and technology” as the topic for my seminar paper.* Jack said “eh, I don’t think you want to do that. Why don’t you write about Burke and this guy Korzybski instead?” Well, now I understand why he said that. I have to confess - about a third of my way into the research for this talk, I said out loud, “Why would ANYONE use Burke as a way to talk about technology?” But, as always, I’ll be damned if I didn’t come away understanding the human-technology relationship differently thanks to the depth of Burke’s thinking about symbolic action and the function of language.

If the thinly veiled autobiographical protagonist of his short story “The Anaesthetic Revelation of Herone Liddell” was “haunted by ecology,” then Burke himself was haunted by technology. Or perhaps it would be more proper to say that he was “goaded” by technology, judging by his repeated attempts to both theorize it and uncover some sort of symbolic action that might serve as a corrective. Beginning with “Waste—The Future of Prosperity,” a prescient satirical essay from the late 1920s, the problem that Burke later termed the “technological psychosis” turns up again and again over the course of his career. But his later writings especially reveal what Ian Hill describes as “full apocalyptic overtones,” an intensifying dread of technologically based environmental destruction that Burke, with comic ambivalence, viewed as the perfection, the logical, entelechial outcome of the rational animal’s rationality.

Burke’s pervasive anxiety about humanity’s terrible, inevitable final goal manifests in these later works as an incessant hashing and rehashing of ideas. William Rueckert and Angelo Bonadonna characterize the Burke of the late essays as staging a “[relentless attack] on hyper-technologism” (On Human Nature 1), the essays rife with signs of his “late compulsion to refer back to earlier and other works of his, and to quote himself often” (6). Indeed, Burke himself likened his odd obsessiveness about technology to a compulsion. In one late essay, he admits to his “fixations about the problems of what I would call either ‘technologism’ or the ‘technological psychosis’” (“Realisms, Occidental Style 105). In another he writes, “for several years I had been compulsively taking notes on the subject of technological pollution - and I still do compulsively take such notes.” Burke actually loathed this compulsive note taking and longed to shut the door on the issue, “even,” he wrote, “to the extent of inattention by dissipation. But it goes on nagging me” (“Why Satire” 72). If, as we can glean from reading this account, Burke took to drink in order to get shut of his obsessive attention to technology (not that he really needed that as an excuse), then certainly it must have had quite a grip on him.

Rueckert and Bonadonna suggest that Burke’s obsession as it shows up in the redundancy of his later writings may have been the result of his advancing years combined with a loss of the desire to produce new work after the passing of his wife Libby. But further reading in Burke suggests that his language of compulsion in connection with technology warrants more sustained attention. Burke’s own compulsions in regard to thinking about technology were also reflected in the way he talked about technology itself, to the extent that technology could be said to occupy a special third term in the nonsymbolic motion/symbolic action distinction that some scholars have marked as central to the whole of his philosophy. But more than this, I think pushing further on this idea of technology as compulsion actually suggests an avenue of response to the problem of technology as Burke sets it up. In my talk today, I want to dig a little deeper into Burke’s attitudinizing of technology as compulsion and obsession; to think about what it means for Burke to characterize technology in this way, and the possibilities for action inherent in such a formulation. My talk is in two sections, the first being...

Haunted by Technology

For Burke, technology and language are deeply interconnected. In the afterword to Permanence and Change, he writes, “Technology is an ultimate direction indigenous to Bodies That Learn Language, which thereby interactively develop a realm of artificial instruments under such symbolic guidance” (296). Since for Burke as goes language, so goes technology, thinking about his treatment of one helps us understand the other.
Despite his language of "instruments," Burke's depiction of the human relationship to both language and technology deeply troubles, if not reverses altogether, the typical understanding of control and agency. To wit, while the "Definition of Man" posits humans first as "symbol-using animals," reading a bit further clarifies that by this Burke doesn't mean that language is actually under our control, or that we can just use it in some instrumental fashion. He asks, "Do we simply use words, or do they not also use us? . . . An 'ideology' is like a spirit taking up its abode in a body: it makes that body hop around in certain ways: and that same body would have hopped around in different ways had a different ideology happened to inhabit it" (LSA 6). Likewise, since technology for Burke is inextricably bound up with symbol systems, he conceives of it less as an instrument than as a force that subsumes us, or at least a force that is not subject to our command.

As he suggests in the above passage, technology isn't simply neutral or passive, but has an inbuilt directionality - an "ultimate direction," to use his language. He writes, "I am but asking that we view [technology] as a kind of 'destiny,' a fulfillment of peculiarly human aptitudes" (296). Burke's mention of "destiny" and "fulfillment" here, of course, alludes to his appropriation of Aristotle's notion of entelechy; for Burke, entelechy is the "perfection" of language, such that the establishment of a particular terminology or nomenclature carries within itself its own "perfection" or inevitable end. And because of technology's inextricability from symbol systems, this entelechial drive is hence also inherent to technologies. As Burke explains in the afterword to Permanence and Change, human history has involved the turn from an early mythic orientation to what he writes is "our 'perfect' secular fulfillment in the empirical realm of symbol-guided Technology's Counter-Nature, as the human race 'progressively' (impulsively and/or compulsively) strives toward imposing its self-portraiture (with corresponding vexations) upon the realm of non-human Nature" (336). Note here Burke's language of impulsion and compulsion - the fulfillment of the technological imperative isn't just a passive happening of directionality, but an active drive. Thus, enmeshed in his notion of entelechy is this idea of an impetus or compelling force (i.e., something that's pushing through the perfection of symbol-guided technology). The language of compulsion, which crops up frequently in Burke's discussion of technology, appears most overtly in this passage from his satirical essay "Towards Helhaven": "Frankly, I enroll myself among those who take it for granted that the compulsiveness of man's technologic genius, as compulsively implemented by the vast compulsions of our vast technologic grid, makes for a self-perpetuating cycle quite far beyond our abilities to adopt any major reforms in our ways of doing things. We are happiest when we can plunge on and on" (61).

If entelechy comes from Aristotle, Burke borrows the language of compulsion from Freud, specifically the idea of the repetition compulsion developed in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. For Freud, the compulsion to repeat an originary psychic trauma across time and in differing circumstances was perhaps the most fundamental human instinct, albeit one that calls into question traditional notions of agency and freedom. Indeed, Freud suggested that the feeling of dread experienced by many people who are just beginning analysis might have its origins in the realization that they may not be as in charge of their lives as they'd like to believe. He writes, "what they are afraid of at bottom is the emergence of this compulsion with its hint of possession by some 'daemonic power'" (30).

David Sedaris's essay in the New Yorker called "Living the Fitbit Life" provides a comical, though pretty accurate portrait of such "possession by daemonic power." For those of you who don't know, a Fitbit is one of the new gadgets called "activity trackers," and it basically is like an amped-up pedometer. Sedaris writes, "$to people like...me, people who are obsessive to begin with, the Fitbit is a digital trainer, perpetually egging us on. During the first few weeks that I had it, I'd return to my hotel at the end of the day, and when I discovered that I'd taken a total of, say, twelve thousand steps, I'd go out for another three thousand." His dismayed partner asks, "Why? Why isn't twelve thousand enough?" to which the narrator Sedaris replies, "Because my Fitbit thinks I can do better." Soon, the narrator finds himself walking more and more, driven by what he refers to as the "master strapped securely around my left wrist": first 25,000, then 30, 45, and finally 60,000 steps a day. He writes, "At the end of my first sixty-thousand step day, I staggered home with my flashlit knowing that I'd advance to sixty-five thousand, and that there will be no end to it until my feet snap off at the ankles. Then it'll just be my jagged bones stabbing into the soft ground."

Of course, Sedaris's description of the logical end of Fitbit wearing also happens to perfectly demonstrate Burke's definition of the entelechial function of satire, namely, "tracking down possibilities or implications to the point where the result is a kind of Utopia-in-reverse" ("Why Satire" 75). By the rationality of Sedaris's Fitbit, you must continue walking until you've worn your legs down to nibs. But while I agree with Burke that the Fitbit's symbolic framework is essential here for setting up this kind of logical end, I want to focus more specifically on the mechanisms of this compulsion. It's by the study of these mechanisms, I'll argue, that the "solution" for the technological psychosis diagnosed by Burke actually lies. To do that, I want to turn to an exchange that Burke had with Father Walter Ong, who, as you may or may not know, happened to teach at Saint Louis University for thirty years. The exchange between Burke and Ong provides some insight into the mechanisms of the technological psychosis.

This particular exchange of letters happened around an essay that Ong had sent Burke entitled "Technology Outside Us and Inside Us," in which Ong critiques instrumentalist notions of technology as "things 'out there,' in front of us and apart from us, belonging to and affecting the world outside consciousness" (190). Rather, Ong argues, we should think of how technologies also claim our insides, reorganizing our bodies through habit and reshaping our consciousness. Using the example of actual (musical) instruments, Ong points out that in learning to play, musicians must in a very material sense give themselves over to their instruments - as he writes, they "[appropriate] this machine, make it part of [themselves], [interiorize] it, gather it into the recesses of [their] consciousness" (190). Rich Doyle in Wetware similarly articulates the human-technology relationship as a "grafting" that requires a hospitality of sorts to an inhuman form. This hospitality, writes Doyle, "relies intensely on forgetting; one must be capable of responding to the new action of a body...a capacity linked to a forgetting or an undoing of the old arcs of eye, hand, and memory" (5). In other words, we don't use technologies (including the ecologies that they come bundled with) so much as we are enticed or thrown into alliances that in return necessitate a reorganization of our bodies and our consciousness. Repeated encounters between human and technology in the light of purpose and scene prompt bodily reorganization in the form of new habits of action and perception, and new capacities. We might think of the regular user of Facebook, for instance, who starts to filter all of his experiences through the lens of their potential as written or photographic status updates; or the computer word processing program habituée, who, searching for a physical book on a shelf, finds her fingers reflexively attempting to use the Ctrl-F function; or the Fitbit user who becomes so accustomed to seeing his daily activity as the blinking number, seeing every run, swim, or photographic status updates; or the computer word processing program habituée, who, searching for a physical book on a shelf, finds her fingers reflexively attempting to use the Ctrl-F function; or the Fitbit user who becomes so accustomed to seeing his daily activity as the blinking number, seeing every run, swim, or 2.5-mile run as a measure of her "productivity." The technology has been designed to control "the astounding powers of technology." "Hence," he says, "mankind has a tiger by the tail." His Definition of Man reveals his lack of faith in
Amplifying Obsession - Responses to Technology

Despite his anxiety about what he sees as the inevitable, terrible conclusion of the technological psychosis, Burke failed to secure a truly satisfactory solution to the problem as he defines it. As Rueckert and Bonadonna write, “Burke never developed a final vision beyond defining humans as bodies that learn language, establishing the link between language (symbol systems) and technology, and determining that technology was our entelechy” (272). Judging from the number of apocalypse narratives that currently populate screen, novel, and newspaper, there are many who would agree with Burke’s fatalistic vision about the inevitable tragically perfect end of humanity’s current rationally guided course. But I want to suggest that in Burke’s very language of entelechy and irresistible compulsion there is a compelling framework for “solving” the problem of technology.

Because for Burke the human relationship with technology was thoroughly bound up with language, symbolic action was therefore the thing necessary to adequately address it. But what kind of symbolic action is the question. Perhaps because for Burke technology is so rooted in the idea of entelechy, both Burke and his critics assume that what is necessary to address the technological psychosis is a symbolic corrective - i.e., something that could serve to block or put the brakes on technology lest it continue rolling along to its disastrous finale of environmental apocalypse. James Chesebro summarizes the essence of this view in his argument that rhetorical critics must adopt a “decisively skeptical” role when it comes to the symbolic constructions of technology; everything must be put on hold until “dramatists have determined how a symbolic perspective can be used to counter technology” (279).

For some, such a corrective could only be grounded in human consciousness. Even Rueckert and Bonadonna, glossing Burke’s take on the technological psychosis, fall into the consciousness trap. In their introduction to one of Burke’s late essays, they write, “What you have at the ‘end of the line’ is a vast human tragedy which might have been averted if humans had paid heed to their own knowledge of what more and more technology might bring. We are not talking about pollution here, but about foreknowledge and the ability to fail to act on it. The other factor is the failure to foresee the consequences of an action or development” (4). With the language of knowledge and foreknowledge, we might hear in Rueckert’s summary echoes of Ong’s faith in human consciousness as the thing that might protect us from technology’s disastrous consequences and preserve human freedom - that if we just knew enough or had enough knowledge about an issue, we could rationally discuss it and come up with a solution. Indeed, raising awareness about technologically induced environmental problems is what many environmentalists rely on to spur the public to action. But it’s clear from even a cursory glance at the landscape of current public opinion and legislative wranglings over science and technology that mere awareness of problems (or even the provision of mountains of information and evidence) ultimately matters very little when it comes to decision-making or policy creation about environmental matters like, say, climate change.

Using tactics that are more recognizably Burkeian, T.N. Thompson and A. J. Palmeri recommend that rhetorical critics and dramatists develop what they call a “poetic psychosis” in order to counter Counternature. Psychotic poets would, they say, “exercise the resources and range of symbols, giving wings to ‘agitating thoughts’ so that they might enlist the action of others” (280), in countering technology. They write, ominously, “Poetic and comic correctives are needed to counter the rapid mutation of counternature before it reaches the ‘end of the line’ - its perfection - where the merger of mind and machine will leave no need for a poem” (283). But while I like this idea of fighting psychosis with psychosis, I still want to call into question the author’s frame of rejection of technology here. [Problem with saying no - does Burke say anything about this in his ideas of the negative?] Satire was Burke’s own solution for coping with the technological psychosis. As he explained in the essay “Archetype and Entelechy,” satire can help reveal the terminological choices that lead to entelechies, but in a way that provides different possibilities for action. He writes, “satire can so change the rules that we have a quite different out. The satirist can set up a situation whereby his text can ironically advocate the very ills that are depressing us - nay more, he can ‘perfect’ his presentation by a fantastic rationale that calls for still more of the maladjustments now besetting us” (133). Burke employed this symbolic strategy of amplification in both his earliest satire on technology “Waste - The Future of Prosperity” and one of his final ones, “Towards Helhaven.” With tongue in cheek, Burke suggests in the early essay that rather than people maximally waste in order to better the economy, he improves upon this amplification strategy in “Towards Helhaven” by “recommending” an action proposed by a certain gentleman who suggested that if a lake has been polluted, rather than turning backward or countering this action by asking how to undo or mitigate the destruction, to rather “affirmatively” address the issue by continuing to maximally pollute the lake, ten times as much - thereby, Burke writes, either converting it to a new form of energy or “as raw material for some new kind of poison, usable either as a pesticide or to protect against unwholesome political ideas” (61). The image is bitterly hilarious.

But even though Burke’s approach to satire works mechanically by amplifying or pushing a particular notion through to its logical end, it still ultimately (as Thompson and Palmeri point out) is a frame of rejection. It hopes to counter technology, to say “no” to it. But, using Burke’s notion of satire as a cue, what if we were to think of a form of symbolic action that uses this same strategy of amplification as a frame of acceptance - one that says “yes” rather than “no”? I want to suggest Burke’s own concept of technology as irresistible compulsion as a candidate for this idea of amplification or pushing through. In other words, we might take the final words of the Helhaven essay - “No negativism. We want AFFIRMATION - TOWARDS HELHAVEN” (65) more seriously than Burke meant them - perhaps not in a directly material, technological sense, like adding maximal pollutants to a lake, but in a symbolic sense, whereby we amplify the concept of compulsion to its logical conclusion, by thinking of technology as a compulsion over which we have no control. What if we literally could not help ourselves when it came to technology? That we had to, as Burke says, “perpetually tinker” until we blew up the world or sank ourselves in a horrific misma of pollution from which only the lucky rich few could escape? How could we use this very idea of compulsion not as a corrective to technology, but as a way to push it through? If nomenclatures, as Burke argues in his essay “Archetype and Entelechy,” are formative, or creative, in the sense that they affect the nature of our observations, by turning our attention in this direction rather than that, and by having implicit in them ways of dividing up a field of inquiry” (Dramatism and Development 33), then naming and treating technology as a compulsion will reveal certain possibilities for responding, and foreclose others.

Consider, for instance, the range of responses by environmentalists to the problem of climate change, a convergence of factors that Burke would certainly have read as the moment before the apocalypse. Most mainstream environmentalist approaches - a perfect example being Al Gore’s An Inconvenient Truth - rely on maximizing consciousness about climate change, the inherent assumption being that if people just understood or had enough information about the problem, they would change their behavior and their voting strategies. And while there’s certainly nothing wrong with attempting to combat misinformation, one only needs to do a quick survey of the majority of Western attitudes to see that even if people...
have the "correct" information, it doesn't mean they'll automatically change their behavior or even their beliefs, thanks to factors like identification. (Along similar lines, X has an excellent article showing how, despite mountains of evidence for evolution, creationists still refuse to believe it).

Far more interesting approaches to the problem of climate change, I think, are those that amplify the idea of technology as compulsion by literally metaphorizing the Western relationship to oil as an addiction. Rather than setting up a frame of rejection, as do the strategies that rely on maximum consciousness, amplifications using the metaphor of oil addiction turn the attention affirmatively toward particular kinds of solutions. Those who adopt the nomenclature of oil as addiction can (to use more traditional rhetorical terminology), argue at the stasis of policy rather than fact or definition. They bring different sets of questions into play - like what is the most effective way to treat an addiction? For instance, Larry Lapide, the Research Director of MIT's Supply Chain Management 2020 initiative, argues that most American supply chains are "addicted to oil." The oil-as-addiction metaphor allows Lapide to move past arguments about whether there is a problem and who caused it to more pragmatic issues like identifying the most oil-heavy aspects of supply chains and encouraging businesses to analyze their own supply chains in order to make themselves less dependent on the fraught resource of oil. Lapide actually relies on a sort of petroleum-based Pascalian wager, recommending what he calls a "no regrets" risk management strategy when it comes to oil - namely, "Decrease your supply chain's dependence on oil to make it less vulnerable to price increases and supply chain disruptions." ("Is Your Supply Chain?).

An even more interesting example is the Transition Network, an organization aiming to respond to the realities of climate change that was designed from the beginning around the concept that Western society is literally addicted to oil - in fact, the subtitle of The Transition Handbook, a bible of sorts for those who want to start a "Transition Initiative," is "From oil dependency to local resilience." In its pragmatic materials for guiding towns and other areas begin what Transition refers to as an "energy descent," lessening their dependence on oil, the Transition Network is grounded in metaphors of addiction. Arguing that generally speaking "the environmental movement has failed to engage people on a large scale in the process of change," (84), Rob Hopkins writes in the Transition Handbook that it is critical to understand how change actually happens, which led him to a model well known to addiction psychology called the Transtheoretical Change Model. The "Stages of Change," as the TTM model is popularly known, identifies a number of stages (like pre-contemplation, or the awareness of the need to change, through action, and maintenance) that addicts incrementally move through in treating their addiction. According to advocates of this addiction treatment model, understanding which stage one is in offers opportunities for understanding what might be blocking change (or, conversely, what pitfalls one needs to be aware of in the treatment of one's addiction). In applying this model to entities beyond an individual, Hopkins encourages potential Transition Initiatives to think of themselves as addicts and (like the supply chains above) apply the model to understand the specific nature of their dependence. As Hopkins says, "Recognising oil dependence makes it easier to understand why it might be difficult to wean ourselves off our oil habit, while also joining us towards proven strategies from the addictions field that might help us move forward" (87). A strategy of information—a strategy that says "yes."

Owing to his own tragic vision of technology, Burke ultimately could only view it through a frame of rejection. But while his writings specifically having to do with technology may not themselves offer to a productive response to technology, considered in a broader context - especially in terms of technology's enmeshment with language and all that entails in a Burkean sense, I find that they offer a way of thinking around the back door of technology, but one that says Yes rather than No, that affirms attitudes and hence pushes actions. Of course, I'm not suggesting that thinking of oil as addiction (or technology as compulsion) is the answer to all our environmental problems. But the general notion of looking for strategies of affirmation. I'll end here with an idea from Guattari that speaks to how I think Burke would have wanted to see technology were it not for this peculiar blind spot.

"This new logic - and I wish to stress this point - has affinities with that of the artist, who may be induced to refashion an entire piece of work after the intrusion of some accidental detail, a petty incident which suddenly deflects the project from its initial trajectory, diverting it from what may well have been a clearly formulated vision of its eventual shape. There is a proverb which says that 'the exception proves the rule'; but the exception can also inflect the rule, or even re-create it" (140).

The assignment according to Guattari is figuring out how to "promote a true ecology of the phantasm - one that works through transference, translation, the redeployment of the materials of expression - rather than endlessly invoking great moral principles to mobilize mechanisms of censure and contention" (141).

* This is an unrevised version of a keynote address at the Triennial Conference of the Kenneth Burke Society hosted at Saint Louis University in 2014. The revised version, "The Uses of Compulsion: Rewriting Burke's Technological Psychosis as a Posthuman Program," appears in Ambiguous Bodies: Kenneth Burke and Posthumanism, edited by Christopher Mays, Nathaniel Rivers, and Kellie Sharp-Hoskins. Penn State University Press.

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