

U C L A

School of Film and Television

Technology and praxis

Mattia Miani

In Ihde's phenomenological exploration of the technology one could easily find a number of interesting points about the relationship between technologies and praxis. In this paper, we are going to show how this relationship can be articulated and their main theoretical implications for the study of new technologies.

The relationship between praxis and technology is shown to be twofold: on the one hand, Ihde shows that "virtually every area of praxis implicate a technology"¹, even human burial practices or sexual behavior; on the other hand, technology is said to be structurally ambiguous. This means that the function of a technology is not determined but it is a consequence of the social uses applied to that technology. For example Ihde argues that "the adaption of a transferred technology depends upon its being able to fit into an extant praxis"² and draws the conclusion that an "artifact 'is' what it is also in relation to a cultural field"³. To some extent it could be said that the meaning is the use. However, at the same time, this position does not imply any conception of technologies as neutral tools.

This idea can be made clearer if we think in semiotic terms. Every technology, as a word, has a signifier and a meaning. The signifier can be seen as the hardware of the technology, while the meaning can be conceived of as the uses and the functions that the technology performs. However a technology, like many words, tends to be ambiguous, that is its meaning is mutable. As a consequence, in order to make sense, a technology calls for a cultural context where to be embedded. The context helps defining its meaning. In order to complete the picture of Ihde's theory, we must add that word meaning even if mutable is not completely passive. Each meaning carries a set of possibilities that tend to select or influence the main context. For example, as a hermeneutic device, a clock clearly has a multidimensional set of possibilities, which in turn may fit easily into a number of cultural, multistable structures. In that respect the

¹ Don Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld* (Bloomington – Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990) p.20.

² Idem, p.127.

³ Idem, p.128.

clock is a paradigm example of the essential, although non-neutral, ambiguity of technology”⁴

One could argue that this idea is of much interest for the study of new technologies. Indeed, it carries a set of important theoretical implications.

1) This conception, at once, rules out every deterministic conception of innovation and technology. Traditionally there are two opposite view of the technology. One the one side, many authors point out that technological innovations are the culture-driven. According to this view, technologies are only a result of a cultural process. On the other side, other scholars argue that innovation is technology-push. According to this view, a new technology determines its success and acceptance. These views of innovation are both deterministic and do not take in account more complex social and cultural process as they are depicted by Ihde. Actually, the acceptance of an innovation depends on internal as well as external factors. On the one side, technologies that fit existing praxis are more likely to be accepted, but, on the other side, even the opposite can turn out to be the case: for example, in response to technologies carried by a foreign group, “there are cultures that adopt, sometimes even enthusiastically, what is new from the incoming group, and modifies themselves in some approximation of that group’s cultural shape”⁵.

2) There is a second interesting consequence of Ihde’s conceptualization of the relationship between technology and praxis. According to some theories, technologies determine their uses. Actually, historically, this has never been the case. For example, it is well known that when first the telephone appeared, it was supposed to serve for listening opera at a distance. Nobody figured out its implications for interpersonal communication⁶. Ihde provides a theoretical framework for understanding this situation, pivotal point of this framework being represented by the concept of the ambiguity of the technology. Since technologies

⁴ Idem, p.131.

⁵ Idem, p.151.

⁶ This conception of the telephone can be seen in some cartoons dating back to the World Exposition in Paris in 1889.

represent a mutable system that reach a balance only with praxis in a given context, it is entirely logical to suppose that they uses are not determined. At first sight this position could be consistent with the idea that technologies are neutral tools. However, the assumption that technologies can interact with their ambient and influence the perception of the world rules out this possibility. This approach is particular useful for understanding new technologies because their digital base is very open to different uses and it is very flexible.

In conclusion, this discussion should have made clear that the relation between technology and praxis represents a crucial aspect of any theory of innovation and technology. We also have shown that Ihde approach can be particularly useful when applied to new technologies and that it runs counter many deterministic views that are diffuse in this field of studies.