

## Embracing Technophilia – Should We Really?

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In “Technophilia,” Kevin Kelly states that technology has become such a part of the way we live our lives that “our creations are now inseparable from us” (Kelly 289). He shares an anecdote of a teenage girl who became “physically sick” when her mobile phone was taken away from her. Kelly aims to show that technology is becoming more and more a part of who we are every day, and how we are actually becoming attracted to technology and constantly long to interact with it.

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Kelly uses Erich Fromm and E. O. Wilson to ground his theory surrounding technophilia in already established scientific theories. First, he introduces their idea of *biophilia*:

[H]umans are endowed with biophilia, an innate attraction to living things. This hard-wired, genetic affinity for life and life processes ensured our survival in the past by nurturing our familiarity with nature (Kelly 289).

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This idea of biophilia is essential to our understanding of Kelly’s idea of technophilia. Kelly gives us this background so we understand this theory that our attraction to other living things is not a choice but a subconscious, “innate attraction” that is “hard-wired” into us. Kelly goes on to explain how numerous things we do, including keeping potted plants and owning pets, are examples of how this innate attraction to living things is manifested in our daily lives (Kelly 289-290).

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Kelly then goes on to explain how we experience technophilia in much the same way we experience biophilia:

But we are likewise embedded with technophilia, the love of technology. Our transformation from smart hominid into Sapiens was midwifed by our tools, and at our human core we harbor an

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innate affinity for made things. We are embarrassed to admit it, but we love technology (Kelly 290).

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Kelly sees technophilia as the technological equivalent of biophilia, each being a love for the thing they describe. He shows how over time we have changed the way we live our lives, and our innate affinity for made things (technophilia) is how we made that transformation. At first I had trouble making the leap from a love for living things to a love for made things, because when I was thinking about seeing things as alive – something that might move, eat, respire, or perhaps grow – I had trouble making the leap to loving technology and how our love could be based on the same thing. I realize now that Kelly is not trying to say we love technology because it has a similarity to living things. What he is saying is that we hold the same kind of love for made things as for living things, and that these feelings are a natural part of us.

Kelly also explores our embarrassment to admit that we love technology. I think until recently, it wasn’t seen as such a good thing, to have such an affinity for made things, so many people tried to hide this. However, in the new technological era in which we are living, people with the most technological affinity tend to be the most successful, so people are starting to be more willing, as Kelly is, to admit their love for technology.

Kelly also makes a good connection to how we can feel an attraction to technology when he zeros in on evolution. Kelly uses the example of cities and says that:

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[E]volution...creates a deeply satisfying esthetic. The most beautiful places are those that reveal layers of time. They accrue forms uniquely fitted to that place. Every corner in a city carries the long history of the city embedded in it like a hologram, glimpses of which unfold as we stroll by it (Kelly 298).

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This example helps us see how history can create beauty. When Kelly shifts our thoughts into a mode where he describes how beauty can make us love things, and how technology can be seen as beautiful, he very effectively leads our minds to one of his points: to show us that humans can

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have real technophilia (a love of technology) as well as biophilia. If biology is to teach us anything, it is that natural life evolves. Our innate affinity to be around life is enhanced when we feel we can put on "layers of time", and we feel we are a part of a technology's evolution. When we feel the technologies around us are evolving and becoming thus more beautiful, we are able to love them more and more.

I think that if we say we have a love for technology, then we must have a reason for this love. We as humans love things that are beautiful. So how does technology become more loved as it evolves? Kelly puts it like this:

Technology does not want to remain utilitarian. It wants to become art, to be beautiful and "useless." Since technology is born out of usefulness, this is a long haul. Robots will proliferate in a million different varieties and levels. Most will never be as smart as a grasshopper, and only a few droids will surprise us with their intelligence. But the goal of every robot, and every machine and tool, is to exist for its own sake. To exist not only because it is useful, but because its existence is beautiful. (Kelly 296-297).

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Furthermore, I believe that we have an even greater love for things that we have a role in helping to evolve. Much like a dog that we have had since he was a puppy whom we have raised and shaped, I think that if we have a part in the evolution of technology, if it is happening all around us during our daily lives, if we can feel that we put on "layers of time", we will appreciate that object's evolutionary beauty all the more. Kelly says that our past survival was ensured by "nurturing our familiarity with nature." (Kelly 289) If biology is to teach us anything, it is that natural life evolves. Our innate affinity to be around life is enhanced when we feel we are giving life to something, when we feel we can give life to the technologies we use and love every day.

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So what Kelly is saying is that while we design technology to be useful, the goal of that technology is to exist because its existence is beautiful. Now, I don't think of technology as living, so I don't think it itself longs to be beautiful. But I think we as humans do long for our technologies to exist because they are beautiful. We want to be surrounded by beauty and elegance, so we ourselves work to evolve technology so that it can become something more. Through its evolution we make it more beautiful. Thus, as technology evolves, we are more and more likely to keep technologies that we may not even need. "We don't 'need' a lot of what we maintain." Kelly says. "We keep specific technology around not only because it may be useful, but because we like to have it around...we have a technophilia for its survival." (Kelly 297).

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So we keep technology around even when it is no longer useful as a tool? We keep it around because "its existence is beautiful?" Well yeah, we do. For example, take the corner of

my bedroom at home. There, sitting on a small rolling cart, is the epitome of evolved (yet now mostly unused) technology: a Smith-Corona SL 470 electric typewriter. Is it still a useful tool? Not really. Imagine if I had to retype this entire essay every time I noticed a change I needed to make – ugh! But it is kept because I love it – it has real beauty. And that beauty comes from exactly where Kelly says: evolution. I look at that electric typewriter and see an evolved machine, one that can type as fast as I can and never get jammed (due to its rotating wheel vs. the separate arms of older manual typewriters). It can set margins, it can automatically double space, it can even correct my mistakes (it actually lifts the mistake ink right off the page with a correction film). And so in its evolved beauty it sits, loved by me, even though it almost never even has its dust cover removed. No longer a tool, but existing because it is beautiful. It is art.

So why does it matter that we are finding technology to be more attractive? Why should we care that we have an even greater love for things that we have a role in helping to evolve? I think this is important because there is a big shift coming. Right now, it is generally accepted that technology is a tool – something that allows us to do things faster or more accurately, or maybe in ways that were not even possible before certain technology came along. But what happens when technology is no longer just a tool? This is the shift that is coming. When technology is no longer just a tool, that means that we will be around it and exposed to it all the time, not just when we need it to do something for us. With this ever-increasing availability, the negative effects of technology upon us will be compounded. We will become more and more reliant on their presence, even as the technologies we actually put to use continually change.

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For example, take my brother. I often go to talk with him and he has his headphones on, so I will tap him and say his name, so he knows to turn off his music so he can hear me. What amazes me is the amount of times he says "What? Oh, I'm not listening to anything, I just have them on." Why would that be? Because we grow used to the things we use all the time. He is so often listening to music that he now wears his headphones whenever he sits down at his desk, regardless of whether he gets to turning on the music or not. And so it goes with all of us – we have a deep affinity for our technology, and we find it to be attractive.¶

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What if technology becomes something, as Kelly says, that we "rhapsodize about?" What happens when we start to "marvel at its subtlety, travel to it with children in tow, [and] sit in silence beneath its towers?" (Kelly 301). I worry that Kelly is correct, and this is where we are

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heading. We will go to an Apple Art Showcase displaying *iPods Through the Ages*, marveling at how something that started so "utterly blah" could become the most beautiful and inseparable accessory of all time.

So I think Kelly is correct, that technophilia is an innate attraction for made things and that we all exhibit this trait. I think the "iPod Showcase" isn't a too far-fetched prediction of future art. But why is this bad? What negative effects am I worried about? Well, I worry that our dependence upon technology is growing every day. Every day that passes, every time a new child is born into this technology-saturated time period, we become more and more dependent upon technology to live our lives, *even with technologies that are beautiful, and still exist only because they are art*. Look again at the example given at the beginning of this piece about the teen girl who became physically sick after her cell phone was taken away. This is a negative effect of our technology dependency. And her experience is not an uncommon one. "According

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to a new ICMPA study, most college students are not just unwilling, *but functionally unable*, to be without their media links to the world (emphasis added)" (The International Center for Media and the Public Agenda). I worry that we, as humans, will begin to feel the negative effects of our technology dependence creeping into our daily lives. Like a smoker who *needs* a cigarette, we all will feel both physical and psychological pain if we can't have our technologies, even if just for a short period of time.

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We must remember that we create technology and we control it. We must also work harder to never let that change.

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