

In Memory of Albert Borgmann
written May, 2023 – Tucson, Arizona.

(Folks at the University of Montana asked me to write something for a memorial notice. I was travelling to start my New Mexico CDT hike when the invitation came. I was to draft something to send to Carl Mitchem for edits and additions. I had no resources, just my hiking gear. So, I rented a hostel bed in Tucson, Arizona and wrote, then typed out on my phone for a day. The draft has errors I'll keep here for the memory.)

In a brief autobiographical essay, Albert Borgmann writes that he was born in Freiburg, Germany in 1937, “raised in the shadow of the gothic cathedral, of the Black Forest, and of the university where Husserl and Heidegger had been teaching.”¹ Readers of Borgmann’s larger works may appreciate the way his opening lines eloquently communicate the entire message of each book as a whole. This opening about his own life is no different. The three parts mark the largest themes of Borgmann’s philosophical career. First, the tangible setting and shape of our lives - our cities, buildings, and our everyday modes of life - matter a great deal and ought to be a central subject of philosophical concern. Second, the commanding presence of the natural world offers an important contrast and critique of much of our technological age. And lastly, he places his work in line with his philosophical forbearers’ focus on everyday life and the rise of a uniquely technological age.

Borgmann began his college career, still in the shadow of his gothic cathedral, at the University of Freiburg. He attended Heidegger's lectures in 1957, but later transferred to the University of Texas, blending continental and analytic philosophy at a time when they were perhaps most opposed. He went on to earn an MA in German Literature from the University of Illinois, Urbana and a Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Munich, focusing his dissertation on the work of Catholic theologian Cardinal John Henry Newman.

Borgmann then returned to the United States, marrying Nancy Jo Quasthoff. He briefly taught German Literature at the University of Illinois, and philosophy at DePaul University and the University of Hawaii. Although happy in Hawaii, his correspondence reveals that he missed the cycle of northern seasons, and hoped for his young children to experience winter and spring. In 1970 he settled with his family in Missoula, Montana. There he taught philosophy to generations of students at the University of Montana, publishing widely, and becoming Regents Professor in 1996, the third person to receive the honor in the university's history.

Early during his time in Montana, challenged and encouraged by colleagues such as Henry Bugbee in Montana and Carl Mitchem from the Society for Philosophy and Technology, Borgmann began to develop his own philosophical account of technology. This work resulted in his 1984 publication of *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* (TCCL), which immediately became a landmark text in the philosophy of technology. This work presents Borgmann’s understanding of how technology shapes everyday life, a pattern he calls “the device paradigm.” This pattern is not neutral, and it has led to shallower, less happy lives of consumption. Understanding this pattern of technology, however, allows us

¹ I can’t find this reference. I’m typing on my cell phone. But it is in the archives. I quoted it in a brief bio I wrote for the archives years ago.

to constrain and direct technology in ways that preserve the goods and practices that constitute a good life, what Borgmann calls “focal things.”

Borgmann’s later books take up more specific topics, but each works to present an understanding of the influence of technology and the importance of focal things to a public audience. *Holding onto Reality* (1999), for instance, provides an in-depth history of information technology. Here Borgmann notes that the Information Age is distinct in that information, instead of merely telling us about the real world, has come to displace reality. For instance, recordings of music in our headphones become what music is, while the reality of performing live becomes sidelined to the perfection of the recording. The book is worthwhile simply for its history of the information technologies, but it’s greater message endures in the reminder that regular, skillful engagement with reality - the focal practices that make life uniquely fulfilling - is irreplaceable by a digital world.

Borgmann’s *Real American Ethics* (2006) is again written for a popular audience, focusing on how the physical setting of our lives - the ways we choose to build, move, and inhabit space - has profound moral implications for the kind and quality of lives we live. Instead of building in haphazard, uncritical ways that are inevitably dictated by the values of the device paradigm of our technological age, Borgmann encourages reflective, democratic decision-making that will work to physically shape our environments in ways that foster the enjoyment of those practices and relationships that are most important to achieving good lives.

The enduring value of Borgmann’s work has been its ability to offer readers around the world, from all walks of life, clarity and comprehension of both how technology has shaped their society and why the preservation of focal practices is so vital for human happiness. Although critical of technology as an often impoverishing moral force, Borgmann’s work never succumbs to cynicism or hopelessness. Instead, he offers the strongest reasons and encouragement for readers to defend and renew their love of the things that matter most. It is not a philosophy of despair, but a guide for the celebration of reality.

Although Borgmann published widely at the highest levels of philosophy, his central passion was for a philosophy that focused on the most pressing issues of everyday life and were accessible and useful to the public at large. Aside from teaching and publishing, Borgmann has been an influential force in state and local politics as well as the administration at the University of Montana. His legacy to come will surely be the immense work he is inspiring in generations of philosophers dedicated to addressing the most pressing public problems of their time in ways that aid and improve their communities at large.

Albert Borgmann passed away peacefully on May 7, 2023, surrounded by family at his Montana home bordering the Rattlesnake Wilderness.

(The summary below is something else, not to be included in the Memoriam. I wrote it at the same time, also typed up on the phone, when I thought I should explain more of Borgmann's actual philosophy. This turned out to be too much for a memorial notice, which I noticed a few paragraphs in and stopped. It's worth keeping only because most summaries of the Device Paradigm are needlessly complex. This might be the start of a better one.)

A very basic intro to the Device Paradigm...

The first move in Borgmann's philosophy of technology is to expand beyond a focus on technological artifacts - computers, automobiles, cell phones, social media, etc. - and try to understand technology as something akin to a worldview. We live in a technological age because we experience our world *technologically*. This experience is not merely due to our various technological artifacts (glowing screens, etc.), but by virtue of a widespread and most often uncritical acceptance of a set of *values and assumptions* that our society employs in its everyday engagement with the world.

Before outlining what these values and assumptions are, Borgmann's philosophy already distinguishes itself from the most common understanding of technology, namely, that technology is simply the morally neutral abilities provided by various devices. It is often said that, e.g., nuclear power, or the internet, or even a knife, is neither good nor evil; each technology merely offers a neutral ability that can be put to good or less good ends. Borgmann rejected this shallow take, first because it fails to account for the way devices dramatically shape everyday life in a technological society, but even more so because it fails to account for a consistent pattern behind technological advancement. To understand technology as a whole, and the dramatic transformations that have brought about our technological age, Borgmann argued one must see that the creation of all these devices follow a shared pattern of judgements and actions that are not at all neutral, but constitute a value system that distinguishes our age from past ages. Borgmann described these underlying values and assumptions, and this is the theory for which he is best known, as "the device paradigm."

From his initial formulation in TCCL (1984) through his last writings, Borgmann's core understanding of the device paradigm remained unchanged, though he continually reworked the presentation of these thoughts to be accessible and relevant to the many different public audiences for whom he wrote. He often summarized the device paradigm as a process of economic and moral commodification, stemming from some basic value assumptions.

The first assumption is that the world consists of goods that are separable from their original contexts of engagement, as commodities to be consumed. With this way of seeing in place, the next assumption follows that whenever a good is made more available - that is, when it requires less work or training to enjoy, when I can enjoy it whenever and wherever I choose, when it becomes safer, cheaper, etc. - then this is a positive development.

Borgmann's perennial example of these assumptions at work was *music*. Consider a time when enjoying music required learning to play an instrument, perhaps when the context of enjoyment was with my music instructor, or my church choir, or my community orchestra. New technologies in music share in the

process of abstracting the music from these particular social contexts, recording it, and making it *available* (most often for purchase) to enjoy in headphones more or less wherever I choose. This is the basic pattern of technological advancement, stemming from the values and assumptions of understanding music through the device paradigm.

This process of commodification has two significant results: as technology advances (1) Goods become increasingly separated from their original contexts of engagement and (2) the devices that deliver these goods - the cell phone, mp3 player, the automated ordering and distribution center, etc. - become increasingly inconsequential and invisible to the consumer. The conclusion of these assumptions is that the context of engagement ceases to matter, so long as the good is made increasingly *available*.

At this point the device paradigm is a descriptive theory. Borgmann has simply (but, I think, very perspicuously) *described the pattern* that underlies technological advancement - the pattern by which goods are abstracted from thick contexts of engagement. This pattern, in itself, is not necessarily objectionable. "I'm not a luddite," Borgmann was keen to remind his audiences. He praised a great many technological advancements that fit this pattern, especially medical technologies.

Borgmann's criticisms of technology and his prescriptions for shaping a better technological future begin with this basic observation: many times, the separation of goods from their original contexts of engagement involves a significant impoverishment of the original good.

In the case of music, the digital song in my headphones does deliver the music - or does it? We might say it delivers the music even better; it delivers it with better sound quality, fewer distractions, no mistakes, etc. *But what can't it deliver?*

It doesn't provide the practices and relationships that were a central part of the original good, the pride of practicing and playing well, the work of maintaining a community to play along, the importance of the church and the concert hall as a place to listen, and many more. *And in many cases, these other goods of that original context prove to be the goods that mattered most.* These kinds of impoverishments, Borgmann argues, are so severe that we, as individuals and as a society, increasingly deprive ourselves of the kinds of goods - the practices and relationships - that constitute a good life. And this is the pattern behind the all-too-common, rueful observation that the affluent technological society is far from the happiest.