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Organic Interfaces; or, How Human Beings Augment Their Digital Devices

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Home > Vol. 16, No. 6 (2013) > John C. Hunter

Organic Interfaces; or, How Human Beings Augment Their Digital Devices

[John C. Hunter](#) | [Volume 16](#) | [Issue 6](#) | [December 2013](#) | ['augment'](#)

In many ways, computers are becoming invisible and will continue to do so. When we reach into our pockets and pull out our cell phones to find a place to eat or message a friend on Facebook, we are no longer consciously aware that we are interacting with a user experience that has been consciously designed for our computer or device screen—but we are.

— Andy Pratt and Jason Nunes, *Interactive Design*

In theory, cell phones and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) are just a means for us to interact with people, businesses, and data sources. They have interfaces and, in a larger sense, *are* interfaces between their users and the networked world. Every day, people spend more time using them to perform more different tasks and find them more indispensable (Smith). As the epigraph above suggests, however, their omnipresence makes them practically invisible and has all but erased any feelings of awe or mystery that their power once generated. There is both a historical and functional dimension to this situation. In the historical advance of technology, it is part of what Kevin Kelly calls the “technium,” the ever-more complex interactions between advancing technology, our cognitive processes, and the cultural forces in which they are enmeshed; ICTs *are* measurably getting more powerful as time goes on and are, in this sense, worthy of our admiration (Kelly 11-17). In the functional dimension, on the other hand, many scholars and designers have observed how hard it is to hold on to this feeling of enchantment in our digital devices (Nye 185-226; McCarthy and Wright 192-97). As one study of human-computer interfaces observes “when people let the enchanting object [ICTs] do the emotional work of experience for them . . . what could be enchanting interactivity becomes a paradoxically detached interpassivity” (McCarthy *et al.* 377). ICTs can be ever more powerful, then, but this power will not necessarily be appreciated by their users. This paper analyzes recent narrative representations of ICT use in spy thrillers, with a particular focus on the canon of James Bond films (a sub-genre with a long-standing and overt fascination with advanced technology, especially ICTs), in order to explore how the banality of ICT technology has become the inescapable accompaniment of its power (Willis; Britton 99-123; 195-219). Among many possible recent examples: recall how Bond uses his ordinary cell phone camera to reveal the membership of the sinister Quantum group at an opera performance in *Quantum of Solace*; how world-wide video surveillance is depicted as inescapable (and amoral) in *The Bourne Legacy*; and how the anonymous protagonist of Roman Polanski’s *Ghost Writer* discovers the vital piece of top secret information that explains the entire film —by searching for it on his laptop via Google. In each of these cases, ICTs are represented as both incredibly powerful and tediously quotidian. More precisely, in each case human users are represented as interfaces between ICTs and their stored knowledge, rather than the reverse. Beginning with an account of how the naturalization of ICTs has changed the perceived relations between technology and its users, this essay argues that the promotional rhetoric of human empowerment and augmentation surrounding ICTs is opposed by a persistent cinematic theme of human subordination to technological needs. The question it seeks to open is why—why do the mainstream cinematic narratives of our culture depict the ICTs that enhance our capacities to know and communicate as something that diminishes rather than augments us? One answer (which can only be provisionally sketched here) is the loss of pleasure. It does not matter whether or not technology augments our capacities if it cannot sustain the fantasy of pleasure and/or enhancement at the same time. Without this fantasy, ICTs are represented as usurping position as the knowing

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subject and users, in turn, become the media connecting them— even when that user is James Bond.

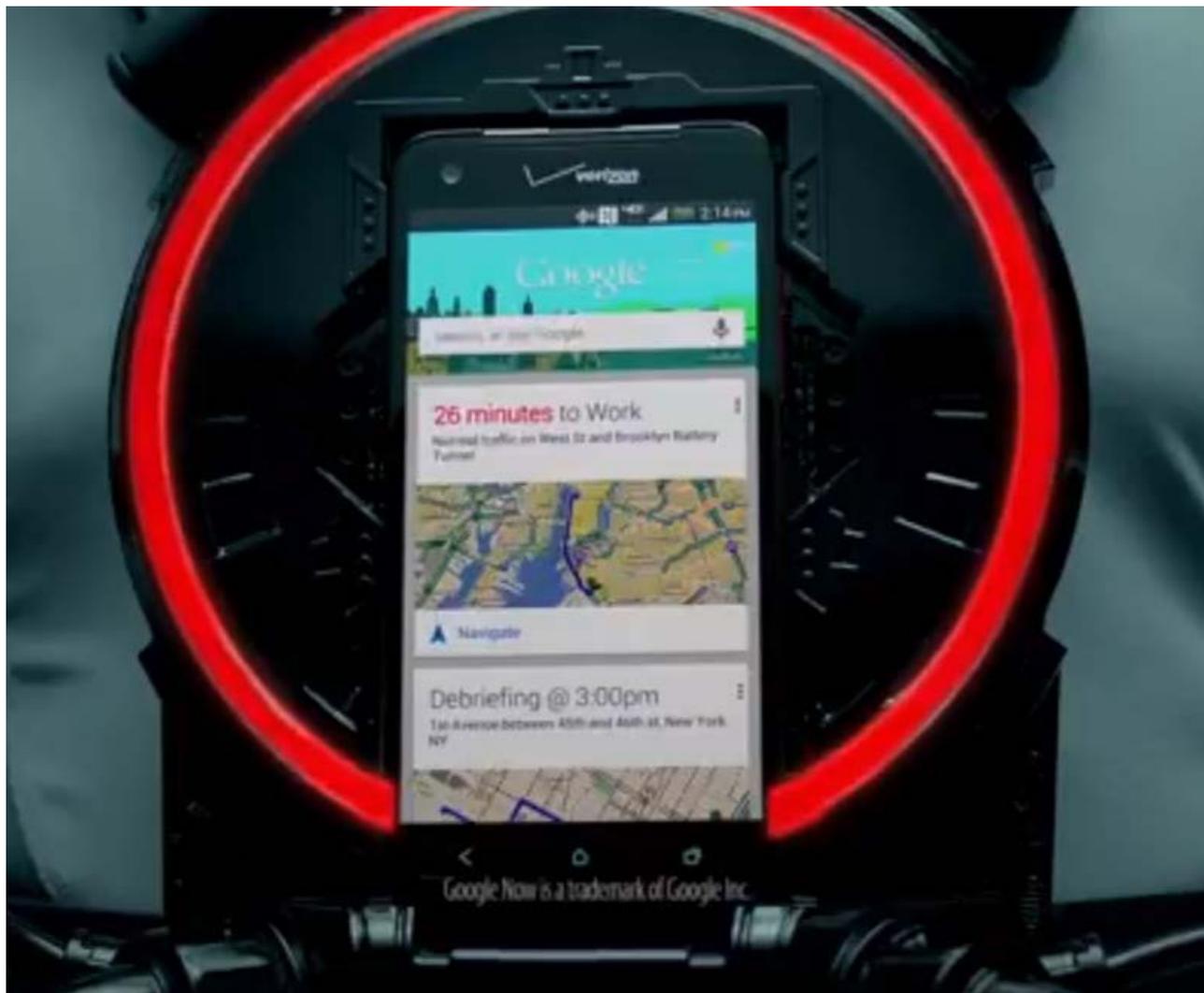
The Rhetoric of Augmentation

Until the past five years or so, the technologization of the human mind was almost always represented in popular culture as a threat to humanity—whether it be Ira Levin’s robotic *Stepford Wives* as the debased expression of male wish-fulfillment (Levin), or Jonathan Demme’s brainwashed assassins with computer chip implants in his remake of *The Manchurian Candidate*. When Captain Picard, the leader and moral centre of the television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, is taken over by the Borg (an alien machine race that seeks to absorb other species into its technologized collective mind) in an episode from 1990, it is described as “assimilation” rather than an augmentation. The Borg version of Picard says to his former comrades that “we only wish to raise quality of life, for all species,” and it is a chilling, completely unemotional threat to the survival of our species (“Best of Both Worlds”).

By 2012, on the other hand, the very same imagery is being used to sell smart phones by celebrating the technological enhancements that allegedly make us better human beings.



In Verizon’s Droid DNA phone promotions, the product is depicted as an artificial heart for its user, one that enhances memory, “neural speed,” and “predictive intelligence” (thanks to Google Now). The tagline for the Verizon ad claims that “It’s not an upgrade to your phone; it’s an upgrade to yourself”, echoing Borg-Picard’s threat but this time as an aspirational promise (“Verizon Commercial”). The same technologization of the mind that was anathema just a few years ago, is now presented as both a desirable consumer goal and a professional necessity—the final close-up of the Verizon artificial heart shows that this 21st century cyborg has to be at his job in 26 minutes; the omnipresence of work in a networked world is here literally taken to heart. There is, notably, no promise of pleasure or liberation anywhere in this advertisement. We are meant to desire this product very much, but solely because it allows us to do more and better work.



Not coincidentally, the period that witnessed this inversion in popular culture also saw an exponential increase in the quantity and variety of digitally networked devices in our lives ("Mobile Cellular") and the emergence of serious cultural, scientific, and philosophical movements exploring the idea of "enhanced" human beings, whether through digital tool use, biomedical prostheses, drugs, or genetic modifications (Buchanan; Savulescu and Bostrom; "Humanity +"). As the material boundaries of the "human" have become more permeable and malleable, and as the technologies that make this possible become everyday objects, our resistance to this possibility has receded. The discourse of the transhuman and extropian is now firmly established as a philosophical possibility (Lilley).

Personal augmentation with the promise of pleasure is still, of course, very much present in the presentation of ICTs. Launching the iPad 2 in 2011, the late Steve Jobs described his new product as a "magical and revolutionary device" with an "incredible magical user interface on a much larger canvas with more resources" and gushing that "it's technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the result that makes our hearts sing" ("Apple Special Event"). This is the rhetoric of augmentation through technology and, as in the Verizon ad, it is very careful to position the consumer/user at the centre of the experience. The technology is described as wonderful not just in itself, but also precisely because it gives users "a larger canvas" with which to create. Likewise, the lifelogging movement (which encourages people to use small cameras to record every event of daily life) is at great pains to stress that "you, not your desktop's hard drive, are the hub of your digital belongings" (Bell and Gemmell 10).

But do users experience life with these devices as augmented? Is either the Verizon work cyborg or the iPad user's singing heart representative of how these devices make us feel? It depends upon the context in which the question is asked. Extensive survey data on cell phone use shows that we are more attached than ever to our phones, that they allow us to be "productive" in otherwise dead times (such as while waiting in queues), and that only a minority of users worry about the negative effects

of being “permanently connected” (Smith 9-10). Representations of technological augmentation in 21st century popular cinema, however, offer a very different perspective. Even in James Bond films, which (since *Goldfinger* in 1964) have been enraptured with technological devices as augmentations for its protagonists and as lures for audiences, digital devices have (in the three most recent films) lost their magic and become banal in the same way as they have in the lives of audience members (Nitins 2010; Nitins 2011; “List of James Bond Gadgets”). Rather than focusing on technological empowerment, the post 2006 Bond films emphasize (1) that ICTs “know” things and that human agents are just the media that connect them together; and (2) that the reciprocal nature of networked ICTs means that we are always visible when we use them; like Verizon phone users, our on-screen heroes have to learn that the same technology that empowers them simultaneously empowers others to know and/or control them. Using examples from the James Bond franchise, the remainder of this paper discusses the simultaneous disenchantment and power of ICT technology in the films as a representative sample of the cultural status of ICTs as a whole.

“We don’t go in for that sort of thing any more..”

From *Goldfinger* until the end of Pierce Brosnan’s tenure in 2002, technological devices were an important part of the audience’s pleasure in a Bond film (Willis; Nitins 2011). James Bond’s jetpack in *Thunderball*, to give one of many examples, is a quasi-magical aid for the hero with literary precursors going back to Aeneas’s golden bough; it is utterly enchanting and, equally importantly, fun. In the most recent Bond film, *Skyfall*, however, Q, the character who has historically made Bond’s technology, reappears after a two-film hiatus, but in the guise of a computer nerd who openly disdains the pleasures and possibilities of technological augmentation. When Bond complains about receiving only a gun and a radio from him, Q replies: “What did you expect? An exploding pen? We don’t really go in for that sort of thing any more.” Technology is henceforth to be banal and invisible albeit (as the film’s computer hacker villain Silva demonstrates) still incredibly powerful. The film’s pleasures must come from elsewhere.

The post-credit sequence in *Casino Royale*, which involves the pursuit and eventual death of a terrorist bomb-maker, perfectly embodies the diminished importance of human agents as bearers of knowledge. It is bracketed at the beginning by the bomber looking at a text message while under surveillance by Bond and a colleague and at the end by Bond looking at the same message after having killed him.



Significantly, the camera angle and setup of both shots make it impossible to distinguish between Bond’s hand and the bomber’s as they see the same piece of information on the same phone. The ideological, legal, racial, and other differences between the two men are erased in pursuit of the data (the name “Ellipsis” and a phone number) that they both covet. As digitally-transmitted data, it is there for anyone, completely unaffected by the moral or legal value attached to its users. Cell phones in these films are, in many ways, better sources of information than their owners—after killing a phone’s owner, his or her network traces can show exactly where s/he has been and to whom s/he has been talking, and this is how Bond proceeds. The bomber’s phone contacts lead Bond to the Bahamas, to the next villain in the chain, whom Bond kills and from whom he obtains another cell phone, which allows the next narrative location to be established (Miami Airport) and the next villain to be located (by calling his cell phone in a crowded room and seeing who answers) (Demetrios). There are no conventional interrogations needed here, because it is the digital devices that are the locus of knowledge rather than people. Even Bond’s lover Vesper Lynd sends her most important message to him (the name and cell phone number of the film’s arch villain) in a posthumous text, rather than in an actual conversation. Cell phones do not enable communication between people; people connect the important information that cell phones hold together.

The second manifestation of the disenchantment of ICT technology is the

disempowering omnipresence of surveillance. Bond and his colleague are noticed by the bomber when the colleague touches his supposedly invisible communication earpiece.



With the audience's point of view conflated with that of the secret agent, the technology of concealment becomes precisely what reveals the secret agent's identity in the midst of a chaotic scene in which staying anonymous should be the easiest thing in the world; other villains identify Bond by the same means in a hotel hallway later in the film. While chasing the bomber, Bond is recorded by a surveillance camera in the act of killing him on the grounds of a foreign embassy.



The secret agent is, as a result, made into an object of knowledge for the international media, prompting M (Bond's boss) to exclaim that their political masters "don't care what we do, they care what we get photographed doing." Bond is henceforth part of the mediascape, so well known as a spy that he refuses to use the alias that MI6 provides for his climactic encounter with the main villain LeChiffre on the grounds that any well-connected master criminal will know who he is anyway.

This can, of course, go both ways: Bond uses the omnipresence of surveillance to find another of his targets by using the security cameras of a casino.



This one image contains many layers of reference—Bond the character has found his man; he has also found an iconic image from his own cultural past (the Aston Martin DB V car that is the only clearly delineated object in the frame) that he cannot understand as such because *Casino Royale* is a "reboot" and he has only just become 007. But the audience knows what it means and can insert this incarnation of James

Bond in its historical sequence and enjoy the allusion to a past of which Bond is oblivious. The point is that surveillance is omnipresent, anonymity is impossible, and we are always being watched and interpreted by someone. This is true in the film's narrative and also in the cultural/historical contexts in which the Bond films operate. It may be better to be the watcher rather than the watched, but we are always already both.

By the end of the film, Bond is literally being framed by technological devices and becomes the organic connection between different pieces of technology.



The literal centrality of the human agent in these images is not, in this disenchanted landscape, an indication of his importance. The cell phones to which Bond listens in these images connect him (and us) to the past, the back story or context provided by his masters that permits the audience to understand the complex plot that is unfolding before them. The devices at which he looks represent the future, the next situation or person that he must contain. He does not fully understand what is happening, but he is not there to understand – he is there to join the information held in the various devices together, which (in this film) usually means to kill someone. The third image in this sequence is from the final scene of the film, and the assault rifle marks this end—the chain of cell phone messages (direct and indirect) that has driven *Casino Royale* from its outset has been stopped. The narrative stops with it.

Bond's centrality amid these ICTS and their messages is simultaneously what allows him to complete his mission and what subjects him to their needs. This kind of technological power can be so banal precisely because it has been stripped of pleasure and of any kind of mystique. The conclusion of *Skyfall* reinforces this by inverting all of the norms that Bond films have created about their climaxes: instead of the technologically-empowered villain's lair being destroyed, it is Bond's childhood home that is blown up. Rather than beating the computer hacker at his own game, Bond kills him with a knife in a medieval Scottish church. It could hardly be less hi-tech if it tried, which is precisely the point. What the Bond franchise and the other films mentioned above have shown us, is that we do not rely on ICTs for enchantment any more because they are so powerfully connected to the everyday reality of work and to the loss of privacy that our digital devices exact as the price of their use. The advertising materials that sell them to us have to rely on the rhetoric of augmentation, but these films are signs that we do not experience them as empowering devices any more. The deeper irony is that (for once) the ICT consumer products being advertised to us today really do what their promotional materials claim: they *are* faster, more powerful, and more widely applicable in our lives than ever before. Without the user fantasy of augmentation, however, this truth has very

little power to move us. We depict ourselves as the medium, and it is our digital devices that bear the message.

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