

## POET AS RADIO: WEEK 3

### Ancient Technologies

The standard narrative of the history of the computer and the internet stresses that the origin of this tech came out of the Scientific and its consequent Industrial Revolution. These are discussed as tools that evolved directly from mechanized looms and census card sorting machines and Henry Ford-style modes of factory production. Mechanization as we're often told is humanity's liberation from the limitations of our feeble minds and the threats posed by the natural world. This fits very neatly into a worldview that sees all living things as corrupted and inefficient and in need of a savior to set it straight and obedient, be that a deity, natural selection, or algorithmic corrections. Indeed, most of the "technologies" that drive our current moment are designed to ward off the natural living world by eliminating unpredictable activity and difference, creating marginal comfort through repetition and sterility. However, that narrative is a little too neat and convenient.

The history of Math and Science is littered with [metaphysical pursuits](#) from the [Mayan calendars](#) to the [Pythagoreans](#) to [Albert Hoffman](#). Take for example, [a device found in an ancient shipwreck in the Mediterranean Sea in 1901](#). Archaeologists and Engineers have been baffled for over a century by this remnant of what appeared to be some kind of analog prototype of a computer, only they couldn't seem to discover what it's purpose was. The common consensus was that it had to be used for navigation (despite the fact that it was far more complex than most of the tools used at that time). Recently, CT scans revealed some of the inscribed text that made it obvious that the machine was more likely cosmological in nature, used to track celestial movement through time for the purpose of divination.

This is probably a good point to beg the question of what we're talking about when we talk about technology. The root of the word comes from the Greek words τέχνη (pron. Tek-nay) meaning skilled or artisanal production or practice and λόγος (pron. low-goes) meaning word or speech or idea (where we get the word logic from). When you bring them together it's more about a methodical practice, one that can apply to mechanical production and computers, if we limit the technical to merely precision of detail and forget all that nonsense about skill and craft.

If you find that disconnect interesting, you might take a look at the work of Walter Benjamin (Pron. Ben-ya-mean), a German Jewish scholar from the [Frankfurt School](#), who died by suicide after being denied entry to Spain from Nazi-occupied France. His essay "[The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction](#)" is too long for us to take up in this short lab but is very illuminating as to what happens to society when production is separated from skill and creativity. Along with Marshall McLuhan's [Gutenberg Galaxy](#), which explores how the introduction of printing press altered the human sensorium toward visuality, Benjamin's work helped provide a framework for grappling with how the tools we use to mediate our connection with the larger world, are both shaped by us and re-shape us.

abstract idea like capitalism or Trump or cancel culture. You get the picture). Fold it up and put it somewhere on you (a pocket works well) and be sure to keep it on you until you're done. A day or two later, go to your bookcase and grab a number of books. The actual number doesn't matter but should be at least 3. Try to see if a number pops in your head once you start or if you experience a feeling that says you've got enough. Stack the books in a random order and put the stack near your writing space. Wait another day then sit down to write. Take out your slip of paper and read it to yourself. Then, take the first book in your stack and turn to page 26. Scan the page until a word or phrase (best if it's 9 words or less) jumps out and write it down as a single line. Then pick up the 2<sup>nd</sup> book and repeat the process until you've used all the books. Read the poem out loud and take some notes on what the poem says about your vexation. DO NOT REVISE!!!!!! If you really want to have fun with it, have someone else write down the vexation and read the poem back to them and see what jumps out to them.

I bring all this up, because we live in a moment of extreme disconnect with a past world organized around orality/aurality. If you close your eyes to experience your environment solely through sound, you lose the separation with what's not you. This can be a frightening experience. When visuality provides the source of truth, our experience of the world is filtered through a Looking Glass (a binocular peephole) that separates our private self from the Outside, to borrow Spicer's terms. The self becomes a ghost unable to touch the real world. On the one hand this provides some (false) security that allows us to be more active, but it also comes with a desensitization to the aliveness of the Outside.

And we are in the beginning of another major shake-up of the collective sensorium with the widespread adoption of digital media and the internet. How do we get our bearings when all existence can be reduced to code, repeatedly broken apart and rearranged (ala Star Trek or The Matrix)? From the sharp increase of suicides and divisiveness and conspiracy theories, we can already get a sense of the effects this is having on people, not to mention the natural world which does not take too kindly to our attempts to virtualize it.

It should come as no surprise then, that there is another resurgence of interest in pre-industrial technologies among the younger generations like this now-decade-old satirical number from [Purlandia](#) lampoons. But along with this almost cartoonish interest in artisanal crafts, there's also been a shift away from organized (monotheist) religion toward more ancient spiritual practices. Covens are becoming more mainstream, as is alchemy, magic, astrology, and divination. Even poetry is making a comeback.

I should stress here, that much of this is happening below the conscious level, causing conflict around appropriation, exploitation, and commercialization of the cultural practices of oppressed peoples who see much of this interest as a continuation of the virtualization or erasure of their practices and cultures. And in that regard, they are not wrong. Spend any time on Tik Tok or Instagram, and you may realize how extremely shallow and un-intentionally disrespectful most of this unconscious practice is.

But let's [not throw the baby out with the bathwater](#) (as Johannes Kepler, an astronomer AND astrologer, cautioned back in the early 15th century). These pre-scientific practices have value if we honor the "tekné" of them and not just use them as props for identity cosplay. When we look at [divination practices as technologies](#) in the skilled, artisan sense, a few helpful and timely things might immediately jump out.

First, we might see a concrete manifestation of those children's blocks or furniture that Spicer referred to in his lecture on dictation. Whether the diviner is using a geocentric chart of the cosmos, a deck of cards, tea leaves or coffee grounds, dice, animal bones, coins, yarrow sticks, bird flight formations, cracks in the earth, or lines on the palm of a hand, there is a concrete physical body involved. If William Carlos Williams's dictum "no ideas but in things" comes to mind, that's not a mistake. Divination, as with poetry, requires a radical embodiment. The metaphysical can only be encountered as it intersects with the physical.

That encounter is crucial. For a message to come through, the physical body or object must be perceived by the diviner. It's not just that the Queen of Swords is pulled or that the roll of the die turned up as 4+2 or 6. Rather, the perception of that action triggers an association or memory for the diviner. If the diviner can keep from letting their own preconceptions interfere, that association or memory creates an image (in Ezra Pound's sense of a complex of emotion) in the mind of the questioner that must be wrestled with.

What this means is that the act of divination must always be grounded in a radical presence – a spontaneous activity of the mind grounded in a particular time and place. This is where divination as technology and the scientific method part ways. Because the encounter is time/place bound, and relies on spontaneous perception, it CAN NOT be repeated, and consequently, cannot be abstracted or idealized.

If you find that fascinating, you may want to check out Carl Jung's writing on Synchronicity, through which he tries to articulate a method of inquiry that doesn't rely on a reductionist concept of cause and effect. Here's [a video](#) that, while it underplays Jung's research into ancient cultures and spirituality, does a good job of explaining Jung's idea and how it's distorted by the cosplayers, and here's the transcript of [a lecture by Marie Louise Von Franz](#), a depth psychologist who looked at how Jung's principle harkens back to ancient practices of divination.

My hope, at this point that you're beginning to see some similarities between the way knowledge and insight about the world is gained through divination and the types of knowing we engage with as poetry. With the proliferation of writing programs that treat poems as objects that need to be standardized, stylized, and polished, and the simultaneous viral craze of 21<sup>st</sup> century Hallmark sentiments as poems, it's pretty important to remember that poetry too is an ancient technology that stretches back well before the written language and can provide a means of interfacing with the vast mystery of the cosmos.

For this week:

Read Hoa Nguyen's short essay "[Divinatory Poetics](#)" adapted from a panel talk at AWP in Kansas City earlier this year (if you have time, here's [a recording of an online version of that same panel](#) from Sept of 2023), a 3-way conversation on [Poetry and Tarot](#) with Hoa Nguyen, Airea Matthews and Trevor Ketner from Catapult Magazine in 2017, and at least one of these samples of divinated poetry by:

[Hoa Nguyen](#) from *Violet Energy Ingots* (Wave Books, 2016),

[Noah Eli Gordon](#) from *The Source* (Futurepoem, 2011),

[Cedar Sigo](#) from *Royals* (Wave Books, 2017),

[Losarc Raul](#) (aka Carlos Lara) from *No Material* (Black Sun Lit, 2023).

Try your hand at writing a poem by divination. Bibliomancy, or divination by text, is an ancient form of this. To prepare, on a small slip of paper write down a word or phrase that stands for something that is personally vexing you – it should be something in your everyday experience (i.e. not some