

The Ring,

The Stone,

&

The Pool

**Exploring** the nature of **technology** through the **magic** within Tolkien's **myth**.

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*Echoes: Three Warnings*

*As the servants of the machines are becoming a privileged class,  
the Machines are going to be enormously more powerful.  
What's their next move?*

-J.R.R. Tolkien (in a letter to his son, at the close of WWII)

*Jesus said to his disciples:  
'Things that cause people to sin are bound to come,  
but woe to that person through whom they come.'*

-Luke 17:1

*It is easy for me to imagine that the next great division of the world  
will be between people who wish to live as creatures  
and people who wish to live as machines.*

-Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, 55

**I Never Opened My Hand**, a short intro poem

I wrote it on a piece of paper

I lost the scrap

I wrote it in my schedule

I forgot to check the thing

I wrote in on my palm

**I never opened my hand.**

I wrote it on my mirror

Within a day, I saw... right...through...*it*

I typed it into my new digital palm

Set an alarm, a buzzer

Had it play a recorded message,

flash a symbolic image

The battery went dead.

I just couldn't seem to nail it down...

***What Is This All About?***

The previous mix of images and words from the popular media<sup>1</sup> were an attempt to show what the reader is probably already all too aware of: that technology is playing more and more of a role in our daily lives and that we are doing more and more of our playing through technology.<sup>2</sup> However, the question that gets closer to the point of this paper is - *is technology actually playing more and more with us?* Some of us are concerned that this might be the case; that as we increasingly use technologies, we are actually increasingly being used *by* them as well.

If the connections between an increase in technological dependency and many of the problems facing our modern society<sup>3</sup> are not already obvious to the reader, I hope that by the end of this paper they will be. Yet not only do I hope to heighten our awareness of the seriousness of the situation at hand, I also aim to help the reader better understand the very nature of technology, and in time, to be more thoughtful about choosing which technologies to embrace and in what manner their powers can best be used. Lastly, I hope to point towards another type of power, an alternative ‘magic’, that I believe can better meet many of the needs and desires which we have tried in vain to meet through technological means.

In order to accomplish these goals we will need to traverse what may seem strange or unrelated territory; for what do technology, magic, myth, and art have to do with each other? By drawing upon the mythic literature of J.R.R. Tolkien, the relationship of these subjects will

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<sup>1</sup> Original version included cutouts from various advertisements, etc. showing technologies pervasiveness.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper, by referring to “we”, “us”, and “our”, I am referring to the majority of people in industrialized societies –which is gradually becoming the whole world.

<sup>3</sup> For example: environmental disasters, increased mental disorders, mass boredom and depression, breakdowns in every level of human relationships, and not least, a major confusion about human identity and purpose.

become clearer as we examine the nature of three magical artifacts found in Tolkien's trilogy: the One ring, the Palantiri stones, and Galadriel's Pool.<sup>4</sup>

After briefly telling a story about my relationship with technology, and after briefly summarizing the core plot of Tolkien's trilogy, I will use each of these magical artifacts to provide the basic structure of this paper. In looking at the One ring, I will be critiquing various myths of modernity and exploring the nature of technology in general. Next, the Palantiri stones will provide for us what I believe to be a helpful analogy to our modern technologies, and so here I will also propose a more holistic approach to technological assessment. Finally, by looking into the pool of Galadriel, I will conclude by examining the nature of another kind of more artistic magic that exists in both our own world and Tolkien's Middle Earth. But first I would like to share with the reader why this topic is so important to me.

### *My Story*

As early as about 1978, when personal computers were just beginning to make their way into many North American middle class homes, I was already spending a lot of time with them. Using a computer was one of the few things my step-father and I did together. In fact, I learned to type by playing computer adventure games: hunting and pecking for the right letters, I would give my computerized character commands like "g-o n-o-r-t-h" and "p-i-c-k u-p s-w-o-r-d" and "a-t-t-a-c-k t-r-o-l-l". I was entertained and fascinated, enchanted, and soon became quite proficient with these magical boxes. But with time, as they and I each developed in complexity, previously unseen problems and concerns about their nature and my use of them began to arise. I was unsure how to begin trying to understand how technology was affecting me and the rest of the world. Thus the research for this paper has primarily been to help me wrestle through my

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<sup>4</sup> I think Tolkien would be okay with these analogies. He wrote "I dislike Allegory—the conscious and intentional

very ambiguous feelings about technology. And, in my own unusual way, the writing of it is an attempt to increase awareness of what seems to be the crucial questions involved with technology and to offer any answers I have found along the way.

So last week I decided to go for a long walk in the woods to think over what I've learned thus far and to put together some kind of outline in my head. But before I left my house I started gathering things for my backpack –a few snacks, a book or two, a journal and pen, and my new 'Revo' –a gadget that is basically like a laptop computer, except that it is only the size of a wallet. "I had better take this to capture my ideas" I thought to myself. However, in light of the topic at hand, I eventually reconsidered and left the *Revo* in my office. Actually, I decided to leave the pen and paper there too –for aren't these types of technologies as well? In the end I left everything at home except a tuna-fish sandwich that I had made for lunch, which I put in my coat pocket before heading out the door –and if you're one of those who would consider my tuna sandwich a type of technology, well, I'll have a word or two for you later. Anyway, I left the house feeling a little less burdened than my initial attempt.

The woods were quiet and refreshing. Eventually the trails of the UBC endowment lands take one away from the sounds of rushing cars and other city noises. Slowly, as my mind settled and I became immersed in the beauty of the woods, I began to mull over much of what I've read, and soon 'brilliant earth-shattering revelations!' (or so *I* felt) began to rain down upon me. "Oh, I hope <read: fear> I don't forget these ideas" I thought to myself, "I wish I would have brought my Revo –or at least the pen and paper. Maybe I was being too legalistic. Should I go back and get it? I'd hate to forget all this." This type of chatter and more of its kind looped through my mind for a few minutes before finally submitting to the silent whispers of the trees.

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allegory – yet any attempt to explain the purport of myth or fairytale must use allegorical language." *Letters, 145*

And now I wonder: was my Revo, like Tolkien's One ring, calling out for me?

### ***Tolkien's Story***

J.R.R. Tolkien created a massive work of the imagination, a fantastic meta-narrative some might say, that is working its literary 'magic' on millions of readers to this day. I was one of these enchanted readers, and made my way through his trilogy probably only a few years after my exposure to the magic of computers –which, for a young and infrequent reader, was quite a feat (around a couple thousand pages if you include the Hobbit!) His primary *works* (*The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings trilogy*, and *The Sirmarillion*) have sold well over 100,000,000 copies, have been translated into at least thirty languages, and are frequently at the top of various national 'top ten book' surveys.<sup>5</sup> They have clearly been influential in the lives of many many people –and there is no sign that this trend will be ceasing any time soon. In his myth, the basic plot runs so:<sup>6</sup>

An ancient and magic ring has been unexpectedly found by a member of a simple and somewhat humble race, a hobbit by the name of Bilbo Baggins. He knows not the ring's true nature or powers, but there is a powerful enemy that does. In time, a wise old wizard named Gandalf and other wise men from various races –elves, dwarves and such –come to conclude that this ring is none other than the One Ring, from the sayings of Lore;

*Three Rings for the Elven-kings under the sky,  
Seven for the dwarf-lords in their halls of stone,  
Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die,  
One for the Dark Lord in his dark throne  
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.*

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<sup>5</sup> Patrick Curry, *Tolkien: Myth & Modernity*, 12

*One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,  
One Ring to Bring them all and in the darkness bind them  
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.*

A High Council is called in which, after many disagreements and struggles, it is painfully admitted that there is only one thing that must be done with this powerful ring –it must be destroyed. The council realized that even if one were to try and use the ring to war against the Dark Lord Sauron (for a great war is stirring at the time of this story, and many tragic victories have already been won by Sauron), it would eventually turn to ill, for its use would ultimately corrupt and enslave the wearer. (The reason for this will be explored in more detail later, but for now recall Acton’s famous phrase “Absolute power corrupts absolutely”). Yet the matter of destroying this ring is not so simple: it must be taken by one willing to travel far into the lifeless land of Mordor, and cast into the same mount of fire in which it was forged.

By the time that this council takes place the ring has passed on to another hobbit, Frodo Baggins (Bilbo’s adopted cousin), who reluctantly accepts the heavy burden of bearing the ring to Mordor. The rest of the story, which is the majority of Tolkien’s trilogy, describes the journey Frodo takes with a fellowship of companions, and the adventures that they embark upon to try and destroy the One Ring.

### ***Modernity’s Myth***

In order to understand the relevance of Tolkien’s story to us today, and in order to better understand how technology has taken such a prominent place in our society, we will now need to examine another myth, a myth which wants us to take it a little more ‘literally’. I call it a myth because every worldview is part *system* and part *story*: They are systems because they try to

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<sup>6</sup> Trying to summarize the plot of such a massive and awesome work as Tolkien’s Lord of The Rings Trilogy, especially in light of the fact that Mr. Wilkenson will be reading and correcting this paper, I am *doomed* to failure.

show how the various dimensions of reality are related; they are stories because they try to make sense of human history using language that is inescapably associated with a socio-historical context, and because they make choices that can never be severed from subjective value judgments.

We have a choice of what myths, what visions we will use to help us understand the physical world. We do not have a choice of understanding it without using any myths or visions at all. Again, we have a real choice between becoming aware of these myths and ignoring them. If we ignore them, we travel blindly inside myths and visions which are largely provided by other people. This makes it much harder to know where we are going.<sup>7</sup>

The myth we will now be examining is the worldview produced by unrestrained scientific inquiry and assertions –a way of defining the universe that, when taken in its extreme form, reduces the universe to merely quantifiable material substances. This worldview has taken on various nuances and labels, yet I will be using the term ‘scientific reductionism’ to describe it. Scientific reductionism is the belief that all that exists is ultimately reducible to rationally explicable, mathematically quantifiable materials and laws that can best be discovered and exploited through the scientific method of apprehending reality. While I will not recount here the history of how this worldview came to be so prevalent and so radically misappropriated, its primary point of origin was the Enlightenment’s placing of reason *above* all other sources of truth.

Wendell Berry, critiquing one of the most recent and comprehensive attempts to promote this radically materialist worldview, O.N. Wilson’s *Consilience*, notes in his poignantly titled book *Life is a Miracle: An essay against modern superstition* that

Our daily lives are a daily mockery of our scientific pretensions. We are learning to know precisely the location of our genes, but significant numbers of us don’t know the whereabouts of our children. Science does not seem to be lighting the way; we seem rather to be leapfrogging

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<sup>7</sup> Mary Midgley, *Science as Salvation*. Quoted in Stahl, *God and the Chip*, 1

into the dark along a series of scientific solutions, which become problems, which call for further solutions, which science is always eager to supply, and which it sometimes cannot supply.<sup>8</sup>

A glance at any newspaper (or out most windows) confirms this image of leapfrogging in the dark –drugs that turn out to have devastating side effects; factories that destroy the environment; machines that end up diminishing or creating barriers between relationships; social ‘programs’ that end up dehumanizing people; technologies that promise to bring happiness but only bring temporary entertainment –these and many other examples confirm Berry’s image. We are dramatically confronted by the many problems caused by our previous ‘solutions’, and yet oddly enough more and more scientific ‘miracles’ are advertised, believed in, sold, and all too thoughtlessly consumed. It’s as though we are addicted to technological ‘fixes’ and yet in denial of this addiction and its destructive consequences.

Yet without recognizing these consequences and without admitting the limits of this scientific myth, we have brought about serious problems; problems which may mean a temporary freedom for science, but which actually result in great loss of freedom for the world.

Berry puts it so:

Our present idea of freedom in science is too often reducible to thoughtlessness of consequence...In both science and art there is a principled resistance to any suggestion that the specialist, within his or her work, might be subject or subordinate to anything.<sup>9</sup>

And so the freedom of the originators and exploiters has become, in effect, the abduction and imprisonment of all the rest of us. Adam was the first, but not the last, to choose for the whole human race.<sup>10</sup>

Freedom was never meant to mean the ‘freedom’ to do whatever one desires; it comes when the boundaries and limits drawn by love are respected. Our choices have consequences, and as we

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<sup>8</sup> Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, 33

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 80

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 77

have seen, many of the choices of the scientific-political-technological powers-that-be have resulted in a great loss of freedom for many.<sup>11</sup>

A further problem with this myth is that by reducing the known universe to mere lawfully determined, quantifiable material, we abandon any meaningful belief in the wonderful realities that make life worth living –wonders like free-will, the human spirit, and love. Berry reminds us that, left to itself, this limited way of knowing “would impose the scientific methodology of reductionism upon cultural properties, such as religion and the arts, that are inherently alien to it, and that are often expressly resistant to reduction of any kind.”<sup>12</sup> Since reductionism believes that everything can ultimately be explained, these mysterious realities can only be perceived as puzzles yet to be solved, illusions and superstitions yet to be discredited, or territory waiting to be conquered, quantified, and used. Yet in believing this we deny the mysterious nature of the very realities that enable us to discover and proclaim that any ‘truth’ might exist in the first place. In his book “*The Abolition of Man*”, CS Lewis illustrates this point well,

But you cannot go on ‘explaining away’ forever: you will find that you have explained explanation itself away. You cannot go on ‘seeing through’ things for ever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it. It is good that the window should be transparent, because the street or garden beyond it is opaque. How if you saw through the garden too? It is no use trying to ‘see through’ first principles. If you see through everything, then everything is transparent. But a wholly transparent world is an invisible world. To ‘see through’ all things is the same as not to see.<sup>13</sup>

It is worth noting that one interesting magical property of The Ring is that it makes its wearer invisible. At first, it seems as though these pictures clash –a ring that makes its wearer

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<sup>11</sup> For example: freedom to breathe unpolluted air; to enjoy quiet evenings without the sound of traffic or the telephone; to enjoy personal privacy; to live without cumbersome and anti-relational machines; to enjoy nature unspoiled by interstate highways; to experience life firsthand instead of vicariously through entertainment technologies, etc.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 95

<sup>13</sup> CS Lewis, *Abolition of Man*, 86

invisible and a worldview that makes everything else invisible –but in the end, they are the same. For when we attempt to have power over others, denying their ultimately mysterious nature, we begin the process of dehumanizing them, and we too begin to fade from all that makes us truly human.<sup>14</sup>

Obviously we do not literally disappear (though with foolish creations like the nuclear bomb, the metaphor becomes frighteningly befitting) but that which makes us truly human does. Wendell Berry tells us that by accepting the reductionist worldview, we adopt the idea “that there is no difference between creature and artifice, birth and manufacture, thought and computation”<sup>15</sup> In essence, this way of perceiving the world leads us to see the human as just one more machine –and not a very ‘efficient’ one at that (depending on one’s values). Berry notices that

This machine business may once have had meaning. It may have been a way of asserting a belief in the integrity of Creation and the physical coherence of creatures; it may have been a way of insisting on the indispensability of part to whole. The machine, in other words, had a certain usefulness as a *metaphor*. But the legitimacy of a metaphor depends upon our understanding of its limits.<sup>16</sup>

Surely one of the ways of describing life *is* as an integrated system –there is nothing wrong with that –yet this metaphor has limits that urgently need to be recognized.

<sup>14</sup> What we truly need is magic that helps makes things more visible –that gives sight. In one of my favorite quotes of all time, G. K. Chesterton beautifully illustrates this point (note that by mysticism he simply means the minimal inclusion of mystery in one’s worldview) “The whole secret of mysticism is this: that man can understand everything by the help of what he does not understand. The morbid logician seeks to make everything lucid, and succeeds in making everything mysterious. The mystic allows one thing to be mysterious, and everything else becomes lucid...The one created thing which we cannot look at is the one thing in the light of which we look at everything. Like the sun at noonday, mysticism explains everything else by the blaze of its own victorious invisibility. Detached intellectualism is (in the exact sense of a popular phrase) all moonshine; for it is light without heat, and it is secondary light, reflected from a dead world....For the moon is utterly reasonable; and the moon is the mother of lunatics and has given to them all her name.” G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 25-26

<sup>15</sup> Berry, 6

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 46, underline added.

Taken by itself, the scientific way of knowing is ironically more of a limited and limiting myth (for it reduces reality) than the more traditionally ‘mythic’ ways of knowing –like the artistic work of Tolkien or a more traditional religious worldview –the very spheres that many scientists so often try to discredit in our present age.

We now turn to look at the link between scientific reductionism and the technologies that it produces.

### ***The Ring***

When we see the world in such reductionistic terms as previously described –as a mass of malleable material waiting to be exploited –we will also likely look for the most efficient laws, the *techniques*, that will bring about our desired objectives. One of the earliest and most thorough studies on the nature of technology and the historical development of technique was done by the French sociologist and theologian Jacques Ellul in his classic book *The Technological Society*. Ellul defines technique as “the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency.”<sup>17</sup> Technique is basically the heartbeat of technology.

The first third of Ellul’s book is primarily concerned with helping his readers to understand how technique and technology developed historically to the point where we have become the technological society that we are. Ellul shows us the many major shifts that have happened historically: from technique being applied to only certain spheres of life, to being applied to all spheres; from a small amount of time devoted to using technique to technical activities taking up much of our lives; from slow localized development to rapid universal changes; from a focus on the worker’s craft and skill to the efficiency in tools; from many

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<sup>17</sup> Ellul, *The Technological Society*, xxv

cultures being able to uniquely co-exist and thrive to a spreading monoculture; from refining and perfecting old means to creating new instruments in order to meet the supposed new ‘needs’.

In addition, Ellul affirms the direct parallel between technique and magic that this paper has thus far assumed. He writes that

Magic developed along with other techniques as an expression of man’s will to obtain certain results of a spiritual order. To attain them, man made use of an aggregate of rites, formulas, and procedures which, once established, do not vary. Strict adherence to form is one of the characteristics of magic... There is a relationship between the ready-made formula and a precise result.<sup>18</sup>

Many others besides Ellul have noted this similarity. Indeed, technology is often marketed these days using language that is highly mystical or magical, appealing to the same desire for predictable results.<sup>19</sup> Tolkien himself, in a letter discussing the complicated topic of magic, already had in mind the connection between magic and machines:

The basic motive for *magia*... is immediacy: speed, reduction of labour, and reduction also to a minimum (or vanishing point) of the gap between the idea or desire and the result or effect. But the *magia* may not be easy to come by, and at any rate if you have command of abundant slave-labour or machinery (often only the same thing concealed), it may be as quick or quick enough to push mountains over, wreck forests, or build pyramids by such means.<sup>20</sup>

In this letter Tolkien goes on to give examples from his trilogy in which magic is used for bad and for good motives, though he admits that the topic of magic is clearly a complex issue that he doesn’t entirely understand.<sup>21</sup> In another letter, he describes in more detail the nature of what he would consider the bad kind of magic,

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 24

<sup>19</sup> See William A. Stahl’s *God and the Chip*, Ch. 1

<sup>20</sup> Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 200

<sup>21</sup> He also makes sure his recipient knows that “I do not intend to involve myself in any debate whether ‘magic’ in any sense is real or really possible in the world.”, *Letters*, 199

I intend all use of external plans or devices (apparatus) instead of development of the inherent inner powers or talents – or even the use of these talents with the corrupted motive of dominating: bulldozing the real world, or coercing other wills. The machine is our more obvious modern form though more closely related to Magic than is usually recognized.<sup>22</sup>

By now it should be fairly clear that the most direct analogy in our time to the dangerous magic of Tolkien's One Ring is the modern idolization of technique and its various technological fruits (though its root is the desire to have power –total power—over others, and I imagine that this root can blossom into many other deadly forms). I was pleasantly surprised (and a little envious) to find that I was not the only one who saw this connection. Patrick Curry, a Canadian born scholar and environmentalist who now lives in London, writes in his book *Defending Middle Earth, Tolkien: Myth & Modernity*.

It needs no allegorical special pleading or stretch of the imagination to see that *our* Ring is the malevolent amalgam of the unaccountable nation-state, capitalism in the form of transnational economic power, and scientism, or the monopoly of knowledge by modern technological science. Like Tolkien's Ring, there are apparently no limits to its potential mastery over nature (certainly not those of Mercy), and, once it is on the finger of its collective principal servants –that is, completely removed from any democratic accountability –no way to control it.<sup>23</sup>

Curry's excellent book gives much more attention to the environmental, economic, and political factors involved in this topic than I will, but as can be seen, he clearly recognizes the technological connection. Curry recognizes that the machinery of our modern day Ring is not just the things that we would typically call 'tools' –it includes academic, economic, and political machinery (systems of power) as well. All individuals and groups who organize themselves into a system which puts technical efficiency as its primary 'ethical' standard, in effect, become tools themselves –disposable parts of a massive 'megamachine'.

Tragically, it seems that each and every sector of society is gradually, and overall gladly, submitting itself more thoroughly to the promises of 'technique' –quick, predictable results at the

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<sup>22</sup> Tolkien, *Letters*, 146

click of a button that can satisfy our every desire. However, when technique is made a ‘god’, an end in itself and the value by which all else is judged, there is bound to be trouble. Neil Postman, a well known sociologist and cultural critique, gave this process a name, soberly writing that “something has happened in America that is strange and dangerous, and there is only a dull and even stupid awareness of what it is –in part because it has no name. I call it Technopoly.”<sup>24</sup>

### ***The Dangers of Technique***

Technopoly is the state and name of a society that has finally given over to the supremacy of technique over all other values. Yet what is it about technique, the pulse of each technology, that makes it so potentially dangerous? While there are many points that could be said on this, I will highlight what I consider to be two key points shared by Postman, Jacques Ellul and other perceptive cultural critics.

The first is that in relating to various technologies, regardless of one’s own motives or of the varying content carried by them, *we are intrinsically learning a new way of relating to the world*. The following two quotes by Postman may help to explain this principle:

Embedded in every tool is an ideological bias, a predisposition to construct the world as one thing rather than another, to value one thing over another, to amplify one sense or skill or attitude more loudly than another...This is what Marshall McLuhan meant by his famous aphorism “The medium is the message.” This is what Marx meant when he said, “Technology discloses man’s mode of dealing with nature” and creates the “conditions of intercourse” by which we relate to each other...

This is, in short, an ancient and persistent piece of wisdom, perhaps most simply expressed in the old adage that, to a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Without being too literal, we may extend the truism: To a man with a camera, everything looks like an image. To a man with a computer, everything looks like data. And to a man with a grade sheet, everything looks like a number.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Patrick Curry, *Tolkien: Myth & Modernity*, 78

<sup>24</sup> Postman, *Technopoly*, 20

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 14

If this is true, we may rightly wonder: What does this principle mean for a man or woman who can rarely be caught apart from a cell phone, a portable computer, or a television? It seems that the increased use of tools like these strongly influence us to reduce and cheapen life, knowledge, and relationships to a matter of mere information or ‘raw material’ to be processed, used, consumed and entertained by. This helps us to see, as will become even more clear further on, that thinking of technologies as purely neutral instruments is an incorrect and dangerous assumption –for their use, *regardless of intent or content*, undeniably alters our perception of and relationship with the rest of the world.

What this also helps us to realize is that words like ‘*high tech*’ and ‘efficiency’ and ‘productive’ –words that are usually taken to be ‘objective’ and ‘positive’ or at least ‘neutral’ terms –are actually *heavily value laden*. For what one person or group considers efficient, if the calculation does not include what is valued by another, will be considered inefficient by another.

Take Doug for example, the manager of a large logging company. Doug simply considers the maximum increase of wealth in the minimum amount of time to be highly efficient work, no questions asked. Any techniques and technologies that help achieve his goals are to be wholeheartedly embraced (especially before the competition finds out!) John however, a forestry ranger, values old growth forests and a relaxed paced job that allows him to enjoy and care for these forests. To the degree that his work allows him to wisely care for these forests, John considers that it is being run ‘efficiently’. As you can imagine from this simple example, Doug’s and John’s perceptions of productive techniques are bound to clash, their goals remaining totally incompatible with each other until one changes or makes a sacrifice. And until one *voluntarily* changes, *the one with the most clout will jeopardize the freedom of the other*.

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In other words, it is time to stop using words like ‘efficiency’ or ‘productivity’ or ‘high tech’ as if they were somehow free from the subjective value judgments of free (‘response-able’) moral agents. Postman, Jewish by ethnicity yet religiously agnostic, points out that pre-technopoly there was a time when

Medieval theologians developed an elaborate and systematic description of the relation of man to God, man to nature, man to man, and man to his tools. Their theology took as a first and last principle that all must be directed toward the service of God. Theology, not technology, provided people with authorization for what to do or think. Perhaps this is why Leonardo da Vinci kept his design of a submarine secret, believing that it was too harmful a tool to unleash, that it would not gain favor in God’s eyes.<sup>26</sup>

Of course it is only fair to note that the theology of these medieval theologians was likely often fraught with their very human and far from perfect value judgments as well. But they at least admitted to the intrinsic necessity of making value judgments in deciding what tools to create and how to use them, and furthermore, they at least believed there to be a source of authority higher than themselves. Ellul puts it starkly that “the power and autonomy of technique are so well secured that it, in its turn, has become the judge of what is moral, the creator of a new morality.”<sup>27</sup>

The second primary danger of idolizing technique and in too hastily welcoming new technologies is that *each introduction of a new technology into the world ends up affecting every other sphere of life*. This should be seen easily enough by those who lean most heavily on a scientific worldview –for they would be quick to admit to life’s systemic nature. Neil Postman summarizes this point by saying that

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 26

<sup>27</sup> Ellul, 134

Technological change is neither additive nor subtractive. It is ecological. I mean “ecological” in the same sense as the word is used by environmental scientists. One significant change generates total change...A new technology does not add or subtract something. *It changes everything.*<sup>28</sup>

Expanding on this idea and tying it to the previous one Postman points out that

New technologies alter the structure of our interests: the things we think *about*. They alter the character of our symbols: the things we think *with*. And they alter the nature of community: the arena in which thoughts develop.<sup>29</sup>

Again, since it can’t be said enough –the introduction and use of new technologies *changes everything*. Realizing and admitting this fact is a complex and painful endeavor, one that we oddly resist with great effort. We will return to why this is so a little further on, but a tragically ironic example given by Postman of unexpected ecological change is the clock:

The clock had its origin in the Benedictine monasteries of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The impetus behind the invention was to provide a more or less precise regularity to the routines of the monasteries, which required, among other things, seven periods of devotion during the course of the day...the paradox, the surprise, and the wonder are that the clock was invented by men who wanted to devote themselves more rigorously to God; it ended as the technology of greatest use to men who wished to devote themselves to the accumulation of money. In the eternal struggle between God and Mammon, the clock quite unpredictably favored the latter.<sup>30</sup>

Many other examples like this could be given in which a technology was created for one purpose and ended up being used for another –often bringing about consequences that may have deterred the inventors from bringing it about... if they could only have known.

It is hard enough to gauge the immediate effects of introducing new technologies into our environment, let alone the more distant future. And in our day these technological changes seem to be happening at an exponential rate. Jacques Ellul writes that “The interval which traditionally separates a scientific discovery and its application in everyday life has been

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<sup>28</sup> Postman, 18, italics added.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 20

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 14-15

progressively shortened..... The discovery enters the public domain before anyone has had a chance to recognize all the consequences or to recognize its full impact."<sup>31</sup>

One of the primary reasons that the pace of our rapidly changing world is speeding up is because of another factor –competition. Neil Postman helps us to see that each new technology competes with older technologies, for they compete in an all out war “for money, for prestige, but mostly for dominance of their world-view. This competition is implicit once we acknowledge that a medium contains an ideological bias.”<sup>32</sup> Technological competition can be dramatically seen in the frenetic pace of technological change in our day<sup>33</sup> –technologies like the personal computer strive to be faster, more powerful, more portable –shrinking down to the size of a watch...or a ring.<sup>34</sup>

Although the above two key points (that technologies always contain ideological biases and that our rapid adoption of new technologies affects the world’s entire ecology) really can’t be separated, it could be summarized that the first point emphasizes the changes that take place in our *relationship to the world* as we use technologies, while the second point emphasizes the actual changes that happen to the whole *world itself* –using or not. The fact is that technological users, non-users, and the used are all bound up in the same created sphere of nature, and the consequences for one are ultimately consequences for all. If the pace of unreflective technological adaptation continues at its current rate –the consequences will be dire indeed.

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<sup>31</sup> Ellul, 10.

<sup>32</sup> Postman, 16

<sup>33</sup> Needing proof? Why not go check out the most popular retailer of technology, aptly named the “Future Shop”?

<sup>34</sup> And the paranoid, end-times conspiratorialist in me would add...or a Mark like that in Revelations.

### ***Options for Discerning the Nature of Technology***

So now that we have examined the origin and nature of technologies, we can begin asking how one is to go about assessing their nature and use. Is the nature and use of technology always good, always bad, neutral, or is the issue more complex?

To those who are unwilling to believe in anything transcending the realm of scientific reductionism, the answer appears simple: The fact that user, non-user and used are bound up together in one big material package simply confirms the position that *technologies, their manufacture, and their use are necessarily always good or neutral*. Seen through these eyes, everything, including my previously mentioned tuna-fish sandwich, *is* a type of technology – variously reconfigured ‘stuff’ to be used in whatever way the frustratingly unexplainable experience of our consciousness decides.<sup>35</sup>

I think that this view of technology has bought into a half truth –for truly all material in itself, being made by and bearing the image of God, is innately good (or just ‘is’ according to the strictly materialist perspective). However, as we have seen, this position errs in not realizing that by inventing and using technologies (regardless of the original intention) crucial choices are unavoidably made that will affect the world in ways that need to be (and will be) judged as healthy or unhealthy, better or worse. These original decisions and our daily motives for each instance of using a tool will always involve making moral choices –for we *are* moral beings free to choose between good and evil options. There may be many strong forces affecting us, but there is a grave difference between being determined and being strongly influenced –even when

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<sup>35</sup> Though the reality of a ‘decision’ is illusory as well, for each choice must have been predetermined by a previous cause –a cause which the reductionist seem to endlessly answer “we are on the verge of figuring out”. In addition, the question of how to rightly use technology is irrelevant to this position, for there is really no such basis for terms like ‘good’ or ‘bad’ –matter may matter, but how it is used couldn’t possibly matter since all our moral choices turn out to be illusions in light of the forces that *determine* us.

the wind is strong, it can usually be walked against. To not admit this freedom is to believe that one must be blown over by every passing wind –a determinism that is not only frightening, but that is daily denied by those who make decisions while conscious that their decision will result in painful sacrifice. But we will return to this topic of freedom later. Lastly, this position seems to deny the day to day experiences that confirm that we ourselves tend to have an inclination towards selfishness. This fact in itself rules out the oversimplified belief that all technological innovation and participation is beneficial or neutral in itself –for our very nature is complex and biased toward ourselves.

This unreflective position, as radically materialist as it might seem, is not as rare as one might believe, and there are many organizations and publications committed to its vision. The goal of those who make this attitude their home is to speed the uncertain destination of evolution by “helping it along” with more efficient techniques, merging the human machine (made by the “yet to be figured out” cause) with the machines of our making. Dreams of genetically and mechanically enhanced men and women, physical immortality via the transference of individual personality (seen as simply a unique configuration of information equaling ‘memory’) to microchip, a utopia of infinite cybernetic pleasures, and other ridiculous materialist hopes can be found in even the most serious modern scientific periodicals. I say “ridiculous” not in doubt that what is extolled as possible is necessarily impossible, but rather because of the materialist’s totally inflated yet superficial vision of what it means to be human –a tempting vision when other beliefs seem doubtful –yet it is like a thin rubber balloon that can be easily popped. It is tragic how many of us have abandoned more traditional myths which admit to a sharp Sword of objective truth outside the closed balloon system and who are gradually pledging allegiance to

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**Comment:** Need I give support and examples?

technological promises of human fulfillment –promises whose airy center, like the One Ring, is emptiness:

The technopoly story is without a moral center. It puts in its place efficiency, interest, and economic advance. It promises heaven on earth through the conveniences of technological progress. It casts aside all traditional narratives and symbols that suggest stability and orderliness, and tells, instead of a life of skills, technical expertise, and the ecstasy of consumption. Its purpose is to produce functionaries for an ongoing Technopoly.<sup>36</sup>

Indeed it seems as though an evil spell is upon the land dehumanizing us, destroying the rest of the environment, and lulling us into a zombie like sleep. Tolkien seems to have foreseen the casting of this spell, as early as the industrial revolution of his time. Yet, ironically, his book is about to be turned into the biggest budgeted and most anticipated movie ever. Furthermore, there is good evidence that his writings were a major influence on the creation of new technological narratives like computer games and virtual worlds. As Erik Davis puts it in his book *Techgnosis: myth, magic + mysticism in the age of information*, “But though Tolkien had little taste for the modern world, the modern world loved him...Tolkien’s imagery also saturated a counterculture that desperately wanted to bring its own magical perceptions to life...*The Lord of the Rings* didn’t just make you want to escape into another world; it made you want to build your own.”<sup>37</sup> Is technology’s entertaining magic about to demonstrate its dominion over the artistic enchantment of Tolkien? Only time and the Spirit of truth speaking to each of our consciences can answer that question, but to me the evidence thus far is discouraging.<sup>38</sup>

The next question before us now is: If the creation and use of technology is not always good, *is it always bad?* I think this position is fairly easy to answer. If it were always bad, I should stop writing this paper and you should stop reading it as well –for we are both using

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<sup>36</sup> Postman, 179.

<sup>37</sup> Davis, *Techgnosis*, 207-8

technology to communicate. In other words, those who would say that all technologies are bad are left with the burden of trying to define what human creations qualify as technologies and which do not. Yet how could one go about drawing this line?

Intrigued by this question, I wrote a survey about eight years ago in which the participant would mark from 1-5 which of various things one could imagine existing in heaven (representing the ‘perfect place’). A ‘1’ indicated “no way”, a ‘3’ indicated “perhaps”, and a ‘5’ indicated “for sure”. I listed on the page various technologies and activities—a sailboat, a motorboat, painting, computer graphics, flying planes, watching movies, reading books, etc. While I never fully analyzed the results, it was clear that people had an easier time imagining more ‘natural’ items and activities in heaven than what seemed the more technologically advanced items. Yet this didn’t help the matter much, for when is a ‘natural craft’ and when is it an ‘artificial technology’? I’ve tried postulating various criteria; perhaps when a thing is dependent on external power for its use it is a bad technology—but would this standard then include sailboats that use wind, pencils that use lead, or humans that need food? If so, that wouldn’t appear to be a helpful criteria. My attempts at this kind of categorization have thus far failed to produce any clear guidelines for separating the technological wheat from the chaff.

So it seems that the matter of technological assessment is more complex than many of us might have hoped, and it is from this fact that we now turn to the magic of the Palantiri stones, and in turn to a more holistic way of assessing and relating to technologies.

### ***The Stone***

Another magical artifact that appears within the pages of Tolkien’s tale is the Palantiri (“Far-seeing”) Stones. While it would be impossible to recount here the origins and long history

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<sup>38</sup> This topic will be explored more thoroughly in my Arts Thesis Project “Bringing Back the Bard: Restoring

surrounding these strange artifacts, I will briefly describe them, their powers, and a few examples of their use. According to ancient Lore, these magical globes were created in the early days of middle-earth and given as gifts to be used to communicate and gather information from far distances. They are the stones mentioned in the saying “seven stars and seven stones and one white tree”, each one being named after the place of their abiding (i.e. the Orthanc-stone). Palantiri Stones were used in these early days of Middle Earth only by kings and rulers and “Their use involved no peril, and no king or other person authorized to survey them would have hesitated to reveal the source of his knowledge of the deeds or opinions of distant rulers, if obtained through the Stones.”<sup>39</sup> However, it took a strong will to be able to direct the focus of these Stones, otherwise their ‘visions’ were haphazard:

By themselves the Stones could only *see*: scenes or figures in distant places, or in the past. These were without explanation; and at any rate (for) men of later days it was difficult to direct what visions should be revealed by the will or desire of a surveyor. But when another mind occupied a Stone in accord, thought could be ‘transferred’ (received as ‘speech’), and visions of the things in the mind of the surveyor of the Stone could be seen by the other surveyor.<sup>40</sup>

The master Stone of Osgiliath was the only Palantir that could ‘eavesdrop’ on other stones, otherwise, while any two stones were in use, a third would find them blank<sup>41</sup> (or, as we might say, “busy”).

At the time that Tolkien’s story takes place, most people were ignorant of the existence, nature, and whereabouts of these stones. It was Sauron, the dark Lord, who first gained control of one of them, the Ithil Stone. Once his will was involved with the Palantiri, the whole network

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relational creativity to a technologized world.”

<sup>39</sup> Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales*, 403

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 412, n5

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 408

was corrupted and extremely dangerous. He obviously had it in mind from the beginning to dominate his opponents by their eventual use of the other Stones, and this evil intent is what ended up happening –for the most part. The following four sketches describe these episodes in chronological order.

The first to fall prey to Sauron was the greatest and yet proudest of the wizards – Saruman the Wise. Along with his quest for the One Ring, he had eventually found out about the nature of these Stones and attained access to the Palantir at Orthanc. Always eager for more knowledge and power, and pridefully choosing to be independent from the collective wisdom of the White council, “he used his Palantir and was trapped by Sauron; after this time, although he thought himself free, he was actually controlled by Sauron.”<sup>42</sup> Of particular interest to this paper is that in the notes edited by his son Christopher, Tolkien writes that Saruman’s mind “was in contrast to Gandalf’s always more attracted by artifacts and instruments of power than by persons.”<sup>43</sup>

Another encounter with this same Orthanc-Stone takes place after the fall of Saruman, when the Palantir is ‘accidentally’ hurled by Wormwood, the servant of Saruman, at a few of the members of the Fellowship of the Ring. This ‘cheap shot’ hurts no one and the Stone itself is picked up unscathed. None but Gandalf in the receiving party have any clue about the nature of this stone, and he quietly stores it away on his person. Soon after this incident, and late in the evening, a younger Hobbit named Pippin (who is part of the Fellowship of the Ring) finds himself unusually restless, and his curiosity wanders to the stone. After a slight battle with his conscience, he eventually replaces Gandalf’s burden with a nearby stone, and stealthily carries it

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<sup>42</sup> Robert Foster, *The Complete Guide to Middle-Earth*, 437-8

<sup>43</sup> Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales*, 406. I confess that this is often true of me –a grave warning.

away to examine it. Tolkien describes the ensuing scene (it may remind the reader of certain modern parallels):

Pippin sat with his knees drawn up and the ball between them. He bent low over it, looking like a greedy child stooping over a bowl of food, in a corner away from others. He drew his cloak aside and gazed at it. The air seemed still and tense about him. At first the globe was dark, black as jet, with the moonlight gleaming on its surface. Then there came a faint glow and stir in the heart of it, and it held his eyes, so that now he could not look away. Soon all the inside seemed on fire; the ball was spinning, or the lights within were revolving. Suddenly the lights went out. He gave a gasp and struggled; but he remained bent, clasping the ball with both hands. Closer and closer he bent, and then became rigid; his lips moved soundlessly for a while. Then with a strangled cry he fell back and lay still. The cry was piercing. The guards leapt down from the banks. All the camp was soon astir. 'So this is the thief!' said Gandalf. Hastily he cast his cloak over the globe where it lay...<sup>44</sup>

We soon learn that Pippin had experienced a terrible struggle in which he saw many frightening images that he couldn't turn away from, and was then even interrogated by the Dark Lord Sauron himself. The mixed outcome of this incident is too complex to describe here, and yet thankfully Pippin is told that the painful memories and cold shadow of evil will pass, he is told that he is not beyond healing.

A third person to use a Stone is Denethor, the Steward of Gondor. Denethor, unlike Saruman, remained steadfast to the end in his rejection of Sauron's rule, for he was truly a man of strong will and integrity. However, he trusted too much in his own strength and in the end was deceived by information gathered by using the Stone: thinking that his son was dead and that Sauron's victory was secured, he fell prey to despair and seemed to go somewhat insane, killing himself in the process. Tragically, his son was actually not dead nor was Sauron victorious in the end.

There is one last use of the Orthanc Stone that has a totally different outcome than the above three examples; the case of Aragorn. Aragorn is a truly remarkable man whose history is

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<sup>44</sup> Tolkien, *Two Towers*, 251-2.

too intricate to detail here, but in short he was a humble man of deep virtue whose role and true desire (as the hidden and long awaited king) was to serve others well. After the above incident with Pippin, Gandalf asks Aragorn if he is willing to guard the stone, acknowledging that it is a dangerous task.<sup>45</sup> Aragorn replies, "Dangerous indeed, but not to all. There is one who may claim it by right. For this assuredly is the *palantir* of Orthanc from the treasury of Elendil, set here by the kings of Gondor. Now my hour draws near. I will take it." After saying this, to the surprise of the others, Gandalf bows and gives it to him, saying "Receive it, lord!...in earnest of other things that shall be given back. But if I may counsel you in the use of your own, do not use it –yet! Be wary!" to which Aragorn replies "When have I been hasty or unwary, who have waited and prepared for so many long years?" Later in the story we find out that Aragorn does indeed use the Palantir and, with great wisdom, he discovers many things that aid his victory in the great Battle of the Pelennor Fields.

And so in summary we find four people using Palantiri for four different reasons and resulting in four different outcomes:

- Saruman –primarily desiring knowledge and power from the start, became gradually more corrupt by using a Stone, resulting in his directly working for evil.
- Pippin –naïve of the Stone’s power and danger, though not entirely innocent, finds that his ‘mere curiosity’ gets him in a fair amount of trouble, though to no grave end.
- Denethor –rightly desiring to protect his people, but overestimating his own strength, was deceived and ended up bringing about great suffering and tragedy.

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<sup>45</sup> The following comments from Aragorn, to one unfamiliar with the whole story, might make him sound arrogant. However, the context of the story and the character revealed by his actions allow one to hear these words with simple authority.

- Aragorn –having the ‘right’ to use the Orthanc Stone and eventually doing so with patience and caution, brings about great good with no known bad consequences.

The experience of these four characters seems to quite surprisingly reflect the range of situations and experiences we see in our culture. While we all know people whose stories echo each of these four characters, it seems like the majority of us fall the way of Pippin or of Denethor –either naïvely getting involved with tools the nature and consequences of which we hadn’t realized, or arrogantly thinking that we are strong and wise enough to avoid technology’s snares and negative consequences. Consider, for example, a modern parallel.

### ***Our Web***

I have often wondered at how similar this network of Stones is to our modern network of computers: the system we have come to call the Internet or world-wide-web (or really the whole class of information-communication tools, including television, telephones, radio, etc). The main difference is that while there were only a *few* Palantiri Stones in Middle Earth, our world has access to them in just about every home, office, school and public building!

As we have already discovered, simply by using this network of tools we are dramatically altering the structure of the world and the way we relate to and perceive the it. The Internet is a tool that, like the Stones, has great power and yet a great potential for evil as well. The ‘web’, or the power behind it, all too often draws the curious, like Pippin, who usually become fixed to the glare of the screen as hours pass by unnoticed. As we increasingly use technologies like the web, we frail creatures are also often exposed to content that we may well wish we had not been exposed to –becoming the spider’s prey. For example, pornographic websites on the Internet are

by far the most popularly visited sites, and the number of cases of addiction to Internet pornography is exponentially increasing.<sup>46</sup>

I'm also concerned at the superficial form of learning that our information technologies seems to be producing. This concern is an echo of a similar concern voiced by Plato as far back as *two thousand years ago* in a story told by Socrates within Plato's *Phaedrus*: King Thamus, after being shown various inventions by the inventor-god Theuth, critiques his assumptions about the benefits of the technology of writing:

Those who acquire it will cease to exercise their memory and become forgetful; they will rely on writing to bring things to their remembrance by external signs instead of by their own internal resources. What you have discovered is a receipt for recollection, not for memory. And as for wisdom, your pupils will have the reputation for it without the reality: they will receive a quantity of information without proper instruction, and in consequence be thought very knowledgeable when they are filled with the conceit of wisdom instead of real wisdom they will be a burden to society.<sup>47</sup>

The relevance of Thamus' warning should be obvious enough. We would be wise to listen.

My belief is that most of us do not have (or do not seek to have) the strength of character to use with wisdom the kinds of tools that we have been creating. This does not mean that these tools might not be able to be used wisely, as in Aragorn's case –but few of us, if any, are Aragorns. It is time that we grow up and realize how weak we really are and how complex and serious the technological situation is as well. This humble stance will provide a needed strength.

These stories of the Palantiri stones serve to illustrate that the use of a powerful device is never innately good nor is it simply a neutral matter –because the character of the person using it isn't neutral and because each tool has a built in ideological bias that in being used *at all* (particularly on a mass level) will affect all other spheres of human life. So, at first glance, it seems that the answer to our question of how to appropriately use technology is simple: *each*

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<sup>46</sup> See *The Psychology of the Internet*, by Patricia Wallace (Cambridge Press, 1999) for more on internet addiction.

*technology and its use must undergo a complex ecological assessment—from the inside of us to the whole world.* However, it is the painful work of technological assessment that makes this answer an unpopular one, and this for many reasons.

***Bracing for The Difficult Work of Technological Assessment***

First of all, at least according to the Christian tradition (although even the strictly scientific reductionists now speak of the ‘selfish gene’ that helps to spur on evolution), *our nature tends to be rather self-centered* and is usually loathe to make decisions that might mean making a sacrifice for some greater good. This ‘natural resistance’ obviously applies to every sphere of living, but it seems to whine quite loudly when the possibility of needing to give up our technological comforts is raised.

Secondly, when we realize how thoroughly immersed in technology our lives are, to imagine making any number of technological changes can feel utterly overwhelming—for each technology has become integrated into a system that makes up a huge part of our lives. Therefore *to disengage from a piece of this system will likely alter our entire ‘lifestyle’ radically.* For example, imagine if one decided that using the telephone was overall less healthy than healthy—think of how far reaching the decision to stop using a phone would be and how many relationships that would affect!<sup>48</sup> And soon, for the number of cell phone users seems to be increasing exponentially, this exercise in imagination will be even more complex.

Thirdly, there is the looming consideration that if one did decide to stop using various technologies *—one would be swimming against a very swift, strong, and wide current in our*

<sup>47</sup> From Postman, *Technopoly*, 3-4

<sup>48</sup> Some might argue that it would affect relationships in a positive way. Here I am simply referring to the potential dramatic changes of lifestyle that would occur.

*culture*. This would be difficult not only because of the surrounding everyday pressures of the macro-life system of technopoly, but in addition one would likely be misunderstood, seen as strange, or possibly even marginalized or mocked for living so counter-culturally. After thinking about these points, one can better empathize with why the technology-spurning Amish live together in a supportive community, separated from the rest of technopoly.

Yet a final reason that this ‘simple’ answer of assessment is so difficult is *that the actual mental work of assessing the total ecological costs and benefits of a certain technology is an extremely complex and daunting task*. In other words, *how on earth(!)* does one go about assessing the effects of any given technology on one’s own body, mind, emotions, and spiritual well being as well as assessing how it affects our families, neighborhoods, cities, states, countries, environment, global economy and politics, etc? Are any of us adequately prepared or equipped to take on this task? And furthermore, how could we, like the previously mentioned inventors of the clock, foresee all of the potential *future* consequences? Yet I believe the work must be done if we are to escape the grim alternatives of destroying our planet or enslaving all creatures to a hardwired living-death.

By ‘hard-wired living death’ I mean the attempt to politically organize society by totalitarian technological control in a way that robs all of life of what makes it worth living.<sup>49</sup> This dangerous ‘solution’ points to an additional difficulty with technological assessment –as soon as one were to try and provide a universal solution, a ‘technique’ for dealing with the world’s technological problems, one would ironically be promoting the way of the Ring. A

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<sup>49</sup> It is disconcerting to me that there are already signs of this happening –the combinations of social security numbers, cell phones, each person having a WWW homepage, global positioning system detectors that are now being put in many new devices (and I’ve heard can be placed under the skin) –it all starts to sound a little too controlling to me...

fitting image of what this mistake would have looked like if Gandalf had succumbed to its lure comes from a letter of Tolkien's:

Gandalf as Ring-Lord would have been far worse than Sauron. He would have remained 'righteous', but self-righteous. He would have continued to rule and order things for 'good', and [for] the benefit of his subjects according to his wisdom (which was and would have remained great)... [then in the margin]... Thus while Sauron multiplied {illegible word} evil, he left "good" clearly distinguishable from it. Gandalf would have made good detestable and seem evil.<sup>50</sup>

May the church, or any other religious institution, flee from this nightmarish temptation!

Some people believe that our current technological problem is simply that we need more *time to adapt* to these new technologies. These people rightly point out that the majority of our newer technologies have been around for only a fraction of human history and that we will soon learn how to handle them better—that we will mature. Perhaps this is true, but the evidence seems to me to point rather to an increasing immaturity. For example, the quality of television has become poorer and poorer; tools are used whenever they are perceived to make life more 'convenient' (rather than when 'needed'), creating a dangerous technological dependency (read: slavery); our technologies are not 'freeing up our time' but instead they seem to be increasingly filling up our time and creating a frantic pace of life; and entertainment by technological mediums (movies, television, internet, video games, etc) is becoming more and more the standard activity of choice when one does have 'free time'. No, time (by itself) does not appear to be bringing about technological maturity.

All of these conclusions make it clear to me that, while humble and care-full ecological assessment is indeed an intimidating task, there is no other way to relate to technology responsibly. It is a difficult choice to take up this burden of assessing technology and acting on our findings (even if it means a quest into the land of Mordor), yet it can be chosen;

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<sup>50</sup> Tolkien, *Letters*, 332-333

Freedom is not an immutable fact graven in nature and on the heart of man...reality is itself a combination of determinism, and freedom consists in overcoming and transcending these determinisms...The first step in the quest, the first act of freedom, is to become aware of necessity. The very fact that man can see, measure, and analyze the determinisms that press on him means that he can face them and, by so doing, acts as a free man.<sup>51</sup>

I believe that we must first have a deeper hope that can encourage us to go on this quest at all. While I cannot speak with any authority for other religions, those who call themselves Christians can affirm the hope and trust that at the center of reality there is not chance or meaningless emptiness –but that there is actually a loving God, a God who cares about all the ‘trivial’ details of our lives and who draws us into life’s grand purpose. And if at Reality’s center there is a Relational Being, then there is additional help out of this complicated mess: prayer.

While we cannot neglect the aforementioned hard work, we can also open ourselves to the wisdom that comes from outside the system of nature. For those who believe that there is a loving, omniscient Being at the center of reality, it would make sense to ask and to listen to God’s thoughts on the matter. In meditation, in listening prayer, we can be piloted through the complicated mass of questions and data by One who sees the whole span of time and who lovingly knows all of the ‘parts’ of our ecological system. We can and must turn to Him in trusting prayer. The simple wisdom of a trusting child is often wiser than the thick books or lengthy advice of self-important scholars. (Perhaps the best thing that I’ve accomplished by this paper is to illustrate this fact.) The subject of prayer leads us to a third kind of magic found in Tolkien’s Middle Earth, but first we must examine its competitor and possible counterfeit.

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<sup>51</sup> Jacques Ellul, xxxii-xxxiii

### ***Entertainment***

I have avoided one basic question about technology up to now: why are we so strongly *attracted* to the powers of technology, what do they really do for us? It is somewhat easier to answer this question for certain kinds of technologies than others –the ones that seem to give us longer lives; the ones that seem to extend our power of communication over long distances and to large audiences; the ones that enable our bodies to travel quickly to many places; the ones that store, process and retrieve the vast amount of information available in our age; or the ones that quickly manufacture the clothing, furniture, food, etc. that we call our possessions. These technologies, with their results *seeming* to be mostly beneficial, take more effort to assess whether or not their powers are truly enriching our lives. The call to begin this work of assessment has been the main point of this paper.<sup>52</sup>

Yet there are some technologies that, to me at least, seem to be more obviously bringing about a net loss to our experience of life. One category of technology that seems to be guilty of this is our entertainment technologies.

While the other technologies mentioned above are meant to minimize work and thus (so the theory goes) help us better ‘enjoy’ life, entertainment technologies seem to be primarily designed to actually provide the enjoyment of life for us. Entertainment technologies are technologies assigned the duty of technologizing the sphere of the arts and the art of living. They include obvious representational mediums like movies, television, computer games, and

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<sup>52</sup> For example, we may very well conclude that they in fact produce longer but unhappier lives; that they increase the scope and quantity of communication and information while decreasing their quality and relationality; that they may indeed quickly take our bodies to places –yet to places that are becoming all the same Mcplace; and that they surely store, process, and make available massive amounts of information –yet we end up overwhelmed by it all and with blunted mental faculties. But these conclusions may be far from simple to substantiate.

virtual reality –and yet they also include the products that are mass produced by technique, products like novels, travel packages, theme parks, etc.<sup>53</sup>

Why are we so drawn to these entertaining technologies, allowing them to become one of the (and for many *the*) primary ways we experience and ‘enjoy’ life? Why are so many of us unaware or unconcerned about trading a real life for a ‘virtual’ one? I think it has something to do with the fact that the magic of art (which these technologies attempt to harness) is so powerful, so intimately connected with what it means to be human, and so central to our desire for joy.

We all are made in the image of the Creator and therefore have certain creative desires and needs that simply cannot be put to death or ignored. No matter what substitute is offered, if it denies or ignores the true nature of what it means to be human, we will remain hungry, empty, searching for ways to enter into God’s story. Tolkien and other great artists knew this –and that is what makes their magic so powerful and attractive –they echo and point to the truth about Reality: there *is* a king to lovingly serve, there *is* treasure to seek, there *are* battles to fight, there *is* good and bad magic, we *are* princes and princesses who have a unique role in a wonderful tale.

These statements are far more ‘true’ than saying that we are simply biological machines destined to try and fill our life with passing pleasures and meaningless ‘jobs’ within an accidental technopoly. Tolkien, because of his foundational beliefs and how they influence his writing, has provided a magical doorway that can help us *escape from* this modern spin on reality while coming closer to the eternal reality. In other words, our desires and needs need not be met

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<sup>53</sup> Some, like Neil Gabler in his book “*Life the Movie: How entertainment conquered reality*” would go so far as to say that everything (in at least N. American culture) has become a form of entertainment. However, the battle

by technically fabricating a virtual reality –there is a more wholesome kind of creative magic available to help us experience what already exists.

### ***The Pool***

Wendell Berry, in the last quarter of his book, suggests a kind of experiential knowing that goes beyond the kind of knowing gained through science and its technical tools. He writes,

If we are to protect the world’s multitude of places and creatures, then we must know them, not just conceptually but imaginatively as well. They must be pictured in the mind and in memory; they must be known with affection, “by heart,” so that in seeing or remembering them the heart may be said to “sing,” to make a music peculiar to its recognition of each place or creature that it knows well.<sup>54</sup>

This way of knowing other creatures not only makes our hearts sing, it actually brings us *into* a song, into *the* Song of Creation.<sup>55</sup> G. K. Chesterton wittily contrasted these two kinds of knowing as well when he wrote that “The poet only desires exaltation and expansion, a world to stretch himself in. The poet only asks to get his head into the heavens. It is the logician who seeks to get the heavens into his head. And it is his head that splits.”<sup>56</sup> In other words, whether splitting heads or atoms, the merely rationalist way of apprehending reality is dangerously limited. We need to drink from another source, from the fountain of which all poets drink –the same fountain that feeds the magic pool of Galadriel.

We encounter Galadriel (“Lady of light”) towards the end of the first book of Tolkien’s trilogy. She is the queen of the Galadrim (“tree people”), the elves who lived in the realm of

between these relatively new technological artistic mediums and the more relational artistic mediums is to be the focus of my MCS Arts Thesis Project, so I will say little more about it here.

<sup>54</sup> Berry, *Life is a Miracle*, 138

<sup>55</sup> Sam, while in Galadriel’s realm said “I feel as if I was *inside* a song, if you take my meaning.” It is wonderful to realize that Sam was more correct than he knew! –in Tolkien’s book *The Silmarillion*, he portrays the cosmos as first being sung into being by Iluvitar (God). And taken another level –Sam was part of the story-song, the myth, that Tolkien himself created. Taken even further, we readers of Tolkien have been helped to hear and enter into the Grand Song by reading and referring to Tolkien’s work throughout this paper –his magical artifacts helping us to better understand the nature of technologies in our own world.

Lorien. Our traveling company meets her in Lorien and are each immediately astonished by her beauty and graces. One day she takes the hobbits Frodo and Sam alone to a special place. Here there is a basin which is filled by a nearby fountain and stream (which in turn is enchanted by the light of a star named Earendil).<sup>57</sup> When filled with water and breathed on by Galadriel, this pool becomes a magical mirror. She here offers each of the hobbits an opportunity to look into the pool. Tolkien tells of their response

'What shall we look for, and what shall we see?' asked Frodo, filled with awe.  
 'Many things I can command the Mirror to reveal,' she answered, 'and to some I can show what they desire to see. But the Mirror will also show things unbidden, and those are often stranger and more profitable than things which we wish to behold. What you will see, if you leave the Mirror free to work, I cannot tell. For it shows things that were, and things that are, and things that yet may be. But which it is that he sees, even the wisest cannot always tell. Do you wish to look?'  
 Frodo did not answer.  
 'And you?' she said, turning to Sam. 'For this is what your folk would call magic, I believe; though I do not understand clearly what they mean; and they seem also to use the same word of deceits of the Enemy. But this, if you will, is the magic of Galadriel. Did you not say that you wished to see Elf-magic?'<sup>58</sup>

They both accept her offer, and their experiences (though too complex to recount here) are illuminating, enigmatic, and even terrifying—like all encounters with any good art.

As Galadriel's pool is fed by an ever-flowing stream from a mountaintop fountain and enchanted by a light from beyond, so is the magic we might well turn to. It is described in many ways (enchantment, the creative imagination, wonder, art, etc.) for it is many-faceted and ultimately mysterious. Like the silver basin of Galadriel, its power comes from the faculty or capacity within us that can open up to, experience, and respond creatively to that which always

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<sup>56</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 13

<sup>57</sup> I was delighted to find out that the phial of light given to Frodo by Galadriel is filled with this same water.

<sup>58</sup> Tolkien, *Fellowship of the Ring*, 427

escapes the grasp of the Ring wearing hand –the inspiration and light of the Spirit.<sup>59</sup> I was delighted to recently find a quote (after assuming this connection) from Tolkien’s letters confirming the connection between magic and art:

I have not used ‘magic’ consistently, and indeed the Elven-queen Galadriel is obliged to remonstrate with the Hobbits on their confused use of the word both for the devices and operations of the Enemy, and for those of the Elves. I have not, because there is not a word for the latter (since all human stories have suffered the same confusion). But the Elves are there (in my tales) to demonstrate the difference. Their ‘magic’ is Art, delivered from many of its human limitations: more effortless, more quick, more complete (product, and vision in unflawed correspondence). And its object is Art not Power, sub-creation not domination and tyrannous re-forming of Creation....<sup>60</sup>

It is my belief, though I am not alone, that this kind of magic can better meet many of the needs and desires that we try to meet through technology. While technology may be increasingly dominating the arts<sup>61</sup>, delivering some seemingly impressive new artistic forms (movies, television, computer games, virtual reality, etc), these technological artistic mediums seem to mostly foster passivity, solitary entertainment, dependence, and a detachment from living. However, when the arts are not dominated by technique and its magic boxes, the result is quite different.

This liberated kind of magic, and the art that it produces, has much more room for relationship, for imagination, for interaction with the artist and interpretation of her art, and for experiencing life without technological appendages. Art and the infinite beauty it expresses confounds the mind enslaved to technique –for it is not bound to one ‘most efficient’ way. Questions like “What texture and shape is the most efficient chair?” or “How do you define blue

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<sup>59</sup> Though the basin itself (which I’m using as a metaphor for our capacity to receive this inspiration) may not escape the corrupting power of the Ring.

<sup>60</sup> Tolkien, *Letters*, 146

<sup>61</sup> Technique and technologies seem to be merging with the art of living as well –the realm of religion or spirituality. High-tech church services, meditation machines, and drugs that offer ‘spiritual highs’ are just a few examples.

to a blind person (or to anyone)?" or "Why tell a story when you can just extract the facts?" remind us of this truth. We need to restore relational creativity to our everyday lives for its ancient power may yet be able to provide us with an alternative to the madness of 'amusing ourselves to death'.<sup>62</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

By now, hopefully, the connections between Tolkien, technology, magic, myth and art are a little more clear. We have seen how our present technological situation is a serious one that affects all aspects of life whether we like it or not. We have discovered how the desire for the Ring of total technological power, individually or collectively, is a dangerous and destructive desire. We have debunked the overly simplified categories of technology being all good, all bad or neutral and replaced it with a recognition that the creation and use of technologies always involves making complex moral decisions that need to take into account all spheres of life. We have seen the importance of drawing close to God and to each other in this time of need, for we are a weak and selfish race. Lastly, we have briefly looked at another kind of artistic magic that can be a powerful aid in these times of increasing technological dependency.

Still, scholarly work must be done by thoughtful people from various religious backgrounds to assess how technologies affect the whole of life. To the degree that their beliefs reflect the virtues and truths at the center of reality, the more helpful their work will be. We have heard from a few authors who have attempted this task –J.R.R. Tolkien, a Catholic linguist and fantasy author; Jacques Ellul, a Christian scholar and sociologist; Patrick Curry, a pluralist and environmentalist; Wendell Berry, a Christian author and environmentalist; and Neil Postman, an agnostic sociologist. Each has contributed a great deal, but there is still so much

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work that needs to be done. I would like to end with a sizable quote from Neil Postman that gives a practical description of what it looks like to resist the spell of Technopoly;

Those who resist the American Technopoly are people: who pay no attention to a poll unless they know what questions are asked, and why; who refuse to accept efficiency as the pre-eminent goal of human relations; who have freed themselves from the belief in the magical power of numbers, do not regard calculation as an adequate substitute for judgment, or precision as a synonym for truth; who refuse to allow psychology or any “social science” to pre-empt the language and thought of common sense; who are, at least, suspicious of the idea of progress, and who do not confuse information with understanding; who do not regard the aged as irrelevant; who take seriously the meaning of family loyalty and honor, and who, when they “reach out and touch someone”, expect that person to be in the same room; who take the great narratives of religion seriously and who do not believe that science is the only system of thought capable of producing truth; who know the difference between the sacred and the profane, and who do not wink at tradition for modernity’s sake; who admire technological ingenuity but do not think it represents the highest possible form of human achievement.

Whether we will choose to treat each other (and ourselves) like machines or like creatures made in the image of God is a choice that all of us will need to make daily as we resist or give into the growing power and lure of the Ring.

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<sup>62</sup>Another poignantly titled book by Neil Postman.

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