Class exercise

When you think of technology now, what comes to mind?

- tools
- computers, internet
- technological systems
- systems for organizing human endeavor, making it more efficient
- systems for mediating human experience
- machines
- mechanical (non-digital/electronic) systems
- human-machine interface
- devices for mediating
- nonnature
- newness, novelty, meets with cultural resistance
- contested, otherness, unfamiliar
- “problems and wires”
- POWER
- specialized knowledge
- proliferation of knowledge
- business, technology & entrepreneurship
- what we use to do magic, miracles
- automation
- moving parts
- electronics
- changing the relationship between humans and nature
- changes in how you view the landscape (e.g. flying in a plane, seeing the world from space)
- changing your sense perception
- something you can’t fully see or touch: a black box, something not fully understood
- artificial information processing systems (as opposed to natural)
- conceptual genius, pre-form

There is no settled definition of technology! As we have proven, it is plastic, amorphous, despite the fact that we use it every day. It is conceptual, social, material, and intellectual.
Reading


Three-Mile Island (1979)
Bhopal (1984?)
Chernobyl (1986)

1. **aesthetics**: the idea of the *sublime* (Kant, Burke)
   - seeing the *beautiful* → order, harmony
   - seeing the *sublime* → disorder, the infinite, boundlessness, fear, awe
   - *the technological sublime* (David Nye) → technology replacing nature as the locus of the sublime

2. **dread**: changes in the prevailing feeling/mood/tone of human life with respect to technology

Responses to the passage:

- adjectives used invoking the sublime
- threat
- the unknown: illuminated by the spotlight, yet not being contained
- sense that things are still intact, clinging to some “structure”
- no sense of terror in the narration
- alienation
- a human-created thing which appears to be a force of nature → is technology a like a force of nature now?
- yet... it is measurable and made in a lab
- technology & science // nature
- seems like a spectacle, a community event, not a disaster
- “the disaster utopia” → sudden bonding of people
- implication that we can control technology (manmade things) but not natural things
- empathetic narration: “our”, “we” → community; in this situation, we understand what everyone else is going through, urgency
- sense that there is a specialized knowledge that they don’t have: “primitive”
- blurring the boundary between technical and natural → at what point have we created a “natural” force?
- nature is blameless, whereas that which is manmade can have finger-pointing
- professionalism → how do we respond to this? act like professionals, act like you know what you’re doing
- authoring technology, idea of the human becoming superhuman → playing with fire, gets beyond your control even though you created it
Hannah Arendt: uncertainty as the description of the new human condition — you can set in motion something you cannot control; unpredictibility

- passage about history: is the implication that “history” is something you can control?
- technology isn’t the only thing that results in unpredictibility... is the expectation that we will be able to control this? a matter of degree of uncertainty, extent of consequences? changes beyond the local? global impact?
- allusions to Hamlet? a postmodern retelling of traditional themes, not history because not a "story of kings," not epic because about us?

What does this say about the central question of the class?

- technology, power, control
- technology as display, spectacle, theater
- physical experience, visceral experience
- accident versus intent, loss of agency
- provides conventional wisdom ("This was a death made in a laboratory, defined and measurable...") and the defies it; doesn’t really offer an alternative
- initial assumption: we aren’t to blame; but then we see that it was us
- when something is so intense that you can’t describe it, it becomes beauty? wear, art...
- juxtaposition of that sort of language with technology
- God acting through priests/kings — technology acting through scientists

— One cannot think about/experience technology without using art.