

# PICTURING THE TECHNOLOGIZED BACKGROUND

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## Introduction

We live immersed in a world technologized, a world of human making, permeated everywhere by the technologies that we ourselves create and employ. Even the making of art depends on technology—the artist engages with special materials and techniques to create a work of art. In his philosophy of technology (that he calls postphenomenology), Don Ihde describes this world as ‘technologically textured’ and examines closely four modes of interaction between humans and their artefacts.<sup>1</sup> He identifies *embodiment relations* (for example, seeing the world through our eyeglasses), *hermeneutic relations* (for example, interpreting the world via a measuring instrument such as a thermometer), and *alterity relations* (for example, when we interact with technology as ‘other’, at the automatic teller).<sup>2</sup> The fourth and final relation, however, is somehow different. As the former three relationships are *foregrounded* in our activities, Ihde then adds the *background relation*, which will be the topic for discussion here.

In his analysis of the background relation, Ihde focuses attention on material aspects, as for example, automatic equipment such as a thermostat that functions unattended while delivering essential services for other human-technology-world interactions in the foreground (for example, providing the comfortable environment in which we read a book). Similarly, utility lines and paving on a city street have this status, as do many other technologies that escape our notice. The manifestation of such components in the background is, in Ihde’s words, ‘present absence’.<sup>3</sup> Artefacts relegated to the technologized background are just as real as foregrounded entities, but somehow resistant to conscious attention. As soon as these elements become the focus of our attention, they stop being ‘in the background’.

Precisely how the background itself is structured remains ambiguous, however. What is at issue here is this question: if we cannot directly perceive this technologized background, might access be gained in some other way? Specifically, *picturing* is our talent for grasping the external world as framed and organized—as if it were a ‘picture’. Philosopher Moreland Perkins makes an important distinction between seeing and picturing, which he defines as: ‘the ordinary material or physical things and states that we see can come to seem, themselves, to comprise an ordinary, material *picture* of things exactly like themselves’ [emphasis added].<sup>4</sup> Dominic Lopes takes this notion further in his philosophy of art, suggesting ‘it is possible that, having internalized picturing as part of our visual conception of the world, we routinely perceive the world as if it were

<sup>1</sup> Don Ihde, *Existential Technics*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1983, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Don Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, pp. 72-112.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>4</sup> Moreland Perkins, ‘The Picturing in Seeing’, in: *The Journal of Philosophy*, 67:10 (1970), pp. 321-339.

<sup>5</sup> Dominic Lopes, *Understanding Pictures*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 31.

pictured.<sup>5</sup> Significantly, picturing is an act of the beholder that applies to the *perception* of works of art, just as it applies to any other part of the ‘world out there’.<sup>6</sup> Picturing *situates* the beholder by creating an artificial point of view that might be otherwise unavailable.

Bringing these considerations together under the umbrella of postphenomenology expands upon the question raised earlier: is it possible to perceive aspects of the background, as re-presented *within* works of art? Might a place to look for traces of the technologized background be in photographs, realistic paintings and drawings? This proposal, that some art could provide a means to study the elusive background relation in more depth, will be central here. In picturing a world ‘out there’, it becomes evident that only part of that world is re-presented, and there is always more. This remainder—present but not attended to either in the human world or in representational art—is of crucial interest here, as will be evident in the following examination of three different works of art.



←fig. 1 Roadsworth, *Taking Back the Street*, (“Footprint”, location: Montreal), 2003. Image courtesy of Peter Gibson.

## Hey, I’m Walking Here!

In 2004, a curious photograph appeared in a Montreal newspaper: a picture of a gigantic footprint painted on a street, replacing the conventional white crosswalk bars with a stylized image (fig. 1). The footprint was an early work of Peter Gibson, also known as Roadsworth, who makes (and has been arrested for) his ‘street art’ using the pavement as his canvas.<sup>7</sup> Gibson creates a region of space with visual instruction to pedestrian and motorist alike, conjuring up the famous Dustin Hoffman/*Midnight Cowboy* ad-lib: ‘Hey, I’m walking here!’<sup>8</sup> While it would be easy to regard the photograph of this footprint and the accompanying story as just human interest, a second look reveals that photographing and publishing the image in news media introduces an additional level of complexity beyond the original work, in part due to a difference in perspective. The newspaper reader has a bird’s-eye view compared to a pedestrian on the street who may engage with the art immediately, or may simply cross the street,

<sup>6</sup> As an interpretive act, picturing is not the equivalent of the act of artistic depiction, however both beholder and artist may ‘picture’.

<sup>7</sup> Sophie Tarnowska, ‘Montreal Diary: “I’m trying to change what I’m known for,” artist Roadsworth says’, *Montreal Gazette*, October 23, 2015. Accessed through [montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/montreal-diary-im-trying-to-change-what-im-known-for-artist-roadsworth-says](http://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/montreal-diary-im-trying-to-change-what-im-known-for-artist-roadsworth-says), on 16 October 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Chris Knight, ““Hey, I’m walkin’ here:” Dustin Hoffman explains his famous *Midnight Cowboy* ad-lib”, *National Post*, September 10, 2012. Accessed through [nationalpost.com/entertainment](http://nationalpost.com/entertainment), on 22 August 2017.

unaware that a work of art is present. How can these three visual experiences be resolved? The first of these being the artificial (and indirect) experience created by the camera; the second, a direct engagement with the footprint, seeing it 'on' the street as art; and the third, the inattentive use of the work by the pedestrian who just wants to cross the street.<sup>9</sup> But there is more to be said, specifically when the background in each situation is examined.

We can make an important identification here. Consider getting around in the urban environment: we walk or drive in cars, focused on and distracted by our immediate tasks, while inattentive to the roadway beneath as we travel. Of course, there are traffic controls to obey and potholes of which to be wary, but mostly we are on autopilot. Roadways are supporting infrastructure and taken for granted; the pavement is just something that we walk or drive on. Likewise, in the photograph of Gibson's work, the pavement is not the central focus but still present everywhere as a dull dark grey. For the photograph, as in the actual encounter, the pavement is just part of the *background*, simply ignored. The challenge is to understand the way in which entities relegated to the background develop this status and then to appreciate the similarities and differences between the background as present in works of art and that manifested in the real world.

In sum: the Gibson example shows that picturing not only applies to the direct visual experience of the material world but also to the photograph as a two-dimensional art form. The camera captures much more than a direct reproduction of Gibson's artwork, however. The photograph re-presents (or reformats) the original work by *picturing*: framing and including additional objects (the bicycle, car, and traffic signals). While the newspaper shows us the image of the footprint against the urban infrastructure and activities in a pictorial mode, the direct perception of the art entails that we adopt a different picturing: that with a scale and viewing angle at street level, as well as a close relation to the passing motorists. Furthermore, as a means of engagement, we can walk on the art if we choose. Finally, what about the pedestrian who simply ignores Gibson's art and crosses the street in the marked space? In this situation, the artwork itself has acquired the background status of infrastructure.

### Background Imaginaries

Our task now is to find other instances of artworks that display a connection to the technologized background, as such. Before proceeding, however, we should expand our understanding of the background to include non-material entities (ideas, states of affairs). Simply thinking in terms of a location for 'things' or imagining a collection of artefacts under-realizes the extent of background mediation. Equally, the background harbours the socio-political concerns of the community (strategies, goals, and choices), in which the built world arises. For brevity, group these latter conceptual entities together as 'ideology' or 'the imaginary'. The most important conclusion here is that

<sup>9</sup> Art historian Michael Baxandall makes a distinction between an *observer* (the beholder distant from the culture in which the art was produced) and the *participant* (embedded, culturally-attuned). Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985, pp. 109-112.

the background is not a place but rather a context in (or against) which foregrounded activities take place.

In his examination of technological mediation, philosopher Yoni van den Eede posits both a *use* and a *contextual* dimension to human-technology-world relations.<sup>10</sup> Although he does not investigate the postphenomenological background specifically, his notions can be extended to involve this mode. Artefacts in automatic service (use) are normally ignored (Ihde's present absence), while the desired living environment created (actual states of affairs) is sensible, but not necessarily actively attended. Attention can easily shift when expectations are not met, as when room temperature becomes uncomfortable.

By contrast, in context, ideologies (or imaginaries) oppose consequential aspects (actualities) resulting from socio-political choices and actions. In *stasis* (normal context), when things are 'humming along', both material and immaterial consequences of socio-political decision making remain in the background, present, but in absence; while the ideological — the cultural view that things are as desired and expected (that is, 'picture perfect') — prevails. As the character of the context shifts from stasis to *change* however, the consequences of socio-political actions and decisions become apparent, as the following artwork demonstrates.

### A Clearing

Philosopher Mikael Pettersson addresses the problem of 'pictorial perceptual presence' in his study of perception, noting that in the real world and for works of art, the common visual experience is to perceive the whole entity, even though some parts may be occluded from direct access.<sup>11</sup> For example, in a painting, a central figure might be posed behind some object. With regard to the background, Pettersson pays particular attention to 'non-localization': the notion that while some particular condition may be apparent in a painting (such as an impending storm), it may not be possible for someone viewing the painting to point to any particular place on the canvas where that condition is located. As is the case for the technologized background in the external world, a 'present absence' associated with the background in a work of art can also be recognized, as the next example shows.

Thomas Cole's painting, *The Pic-Nic* (1846), depicts a leisurely get-together in a glade, set in a forest trailing off towards distant mountains (fig. 2). Significantly, between the beholder and the picnic party is a stump, where a tree would have blocked light into the glade (as well as the beholder's view). Now felled and removed, a clearing — an opening for human activity — has been created. Nevertheless, that tree is still present in its absence; the remaining stump serves as an iconic placeholder. Cole chose not to depict the axe used to cut the tree, yet its presence is felt also as part of a socio-political structure — decisions and actions to open that glade. Art historian Barbara Novak points out that the stump was a common icon in paintings from this period.

<sup>10</sup> Yoni van den Eede, 'In Between Us: On the Transparency and Opacity of Technological Mediation', in: *Foundations of Science*, 16 (2011), pp. 139-159.

<sup>11</sup> Mikael Pettersson, 'Seeing What Is Not There: Pictorial Experience, Imagination and Non-localization', in: *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 51:3 (2011), pp. 279-294.

→ fig. 2 Thomas Cole (American, born England, 1801-1848). *A Pic-Nic Party*, 1846. Oil on canvas, 47 7/8 × 54 in. (121.6 × 137.2 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Healy Purchase Fund B, 67.205.2 (Photo: Brooklyn Museum, 67.205.2\_SL1.jpg). <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>.



She suggests '[t]he stump, then, signifies the community participation that constructs the social fabric.'<sup>12</sup> She continues, '[t]he axe represented subtraction, and left behind the vestigial trace of action — the stump.' The absence of the tree is present evidence of past technological action. Here too, is an indication of 'potential actuality'; there is more texturing to do in the distance.<sup>13</sup>

In *The Pic-Nic*, the socializing group positioned between the last stump and the ostensibly untouched forest occupies a place of tension and conflict. The solitary stump forms an imaginary line of demarcation separating culture and nature — the 'cutting edge', to use a popular expression. The inexorable advance of progress, contrasts with the motif of the picnic, a social activity representing a re-creational turn back towards the natural (or what is left of it). Here is a 'sacred grove', as described by a prominent critic of the American landscape, John Jackson, but without the inconveniences of un-technologized nature.<sup>14</sup> Art historian Angela Miller observes that the placing of the picnic site in the middle of the landscape creates a controlled, pastoral version of nature: 'The artistic depiction of the picnic symbolically resolved a deep-seated conflict in American middle-class values between a lingering veneration for a romantically charged wilderness [...] and an equally powerful instrumentalization of nature.'<sup>15</sup>

Cole's painting represents the natural-artificial divide as ideological conflict: on one interpretation, a foreground celebration of cultural advance while at the same time reflecting on the landscaping imperative. Robert Thayer, in his study of landscape architecture and environmental design, calls this latter sentiment

<sup>12</sup> Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825-1875*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 165; p. 181.

<sup>13</sup> Asle Kiran, 'Technological Presence: Actuality and Potentiality in Subject Constitution', in: *Human Studies*, 35 (2012), pp. 77-93 (p. 86).

<sup>14</sup> John Jackson, *The Necessity for Ruins, and Other Topics*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980, p. 77.

<sup>15</sup> Angela Miller, 'Nature's Transformations: the Meaning of the Picnic Theme in Nineteenth-Century American Art', in: *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 24:2/3 (1989), pp. 113-138 (p. 113).

'technological landscape guilt' which he describes as 'a battle raging in our brains — a war between our genetic predisposition toward so-called natural landscapes and our culturally refined propensity to incorporate useful technology into everyday surroundings.'<sup>16</sup>

*Pic-Nic* might be interpreted simply as a depiction of technological imperative and progress, but Cole often expressed personal conflict and doubt, speaking of the 'ravages of the axe'.<sup>17</sup> He achieves a picturing by representing his own situation. From the perspective of an implied participant, Cole painted himself *into* the picture, figuratively, as the musician, positioning himself and his guitar in an interstitial zone between the technological and (seeming) natural worlds.<sup>18</sup> His action addresses the problem of our technological immersion in a unique manner. A real-world beholder of the painting can imagine themselves in a similar situation, even from their perspective, standing facing the painting hanging on a wall. By representing a part of the technologized background in absence, Cole's picturing places socio-political aspects within the frame. In gathering the attention of a beholder, those messages become readable.

The opening or clearing found in *Pic-Nic* shares some commonality with Martin Heidegger's notion of a 'clearing', the opening in which being happens.<sup>19</sup> In his analysis of Heidegger's concept, philosopher Hubert Dreyfus comments: 'For things and people to be intelligible, there must always be a clearing — background practices containing an understanding of being. These will never be fully accessible to reflection.'<sup>20</sup> Still, these non-material elements can be *indirectly* accessed then, as pictured in Cole's painting.

### The Mythic Wilderness

Can the background still be background if closely examined — as it has been in these examples? In answer to the original question posed, it would seem that picturing offers a means to do just that. There is a duality here, however. After framing and hanging somewhere, in a reflexive shift the physical photograph or painting can become just one of many artefacts left around, mostly unattended, relegated to the background. Yet at any time, any one of us might choose to adopt a viewpoint with respect to the artwork. This action restores the physical picture itself to the foreground but now as a potential *instrument* to reveal both material artefacts and states of affairs, with special relevance to the background context. Thus, physical instances of art can serve as 'artificial aids to indirect perception.'<sup>21</sup> An analogy may help: consider a thermometer hanging outside but visible through a window. By examining the dial, we can access a non-localized feature of the (technologized) background: the invisible, outside temperature. The

<sup>16</sup> Robert Thayer, 'Pragmatism in Paradise, Technology and the American Landscape', in: *Landscape*, 30:3 (1990), pp. 1-11 (p. 4).

<sup>17</sup> Nicolai Cikovsky, "'The Ravages of the Axe": The Meaning of the Tree Stump in Nineteenth-Century American Art', in: *The Art Bulletin*, 61:4 (1979), pp. 611-626.

<sup>18</sup> Op. cit. (note 15), p. 127.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art' (1971) in: *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by A. Hofstadter, New York: Harper & Row, 1971, pp. 15-86.

<sup>20</sup> Hubert Dreyfus, 'Heidegger on the Connection between Nihilism, Art, Technology and Politics', 2004, pp. 1-47, (p. 13). Accessed through [socrates.berkeley.edu/~hdreyfus/](http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~hdreyfus/) on 16 August 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Patrick Maynard uses this expression to describe some photographs. Patrick Maynard, 'The Secular Icon: Photography and the Functions of Images', in: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 42:2, (1983), pp. 155-169.

Oscar Colorado Nates, 'Reading "Mujer Ángel" By Graciela Iturbide', May 27, 2012. Accessed through [oscarenfotos.com](http://oscarenfotos.com) on 26 September 2017.

dial face ‘pictures’ that information for us. In a similar manner, a painting or photograph itself can function as an instrument, by providing us with a perspective from which to interrogate technology, as it presents in the background. The final example elaborates this idea.

A photograph by Graciela Iturbide captures the image of the Angel Woman, moving along a rocky path (fig. 3). Her destination is a barren plain in the Sonoran desert, mountains in the distance. We might anticipate that the Angel Woman’s travel will take her past the rock outcropping and *into* an unexamined, untouched *wilderness*. Absent the stereo in her right hand, the print would be just enigmatic; the incongruous artifact makes this picturing somehow ‘about’ technology.<sup>22</sup> At first glance, it may seem as if the camera situates the Angel Woman at a boundary, somewhat resembling Cole’s clearing.

→ fig. 3 Graciela Iturbide, *Mujer Ángel* (Angel Woman), 1996. Image courtesy of Graphicstudio, University of South Florida and the Artist. Photo Credit: Will Lytch.



But this interpretation cannot be right, since it foregrounds the Angel Woman’s destination. Wilderness is a place, while the background is a condition. The wilderness interpretation derives from the narrative myth of an *errand*—that humans venture out into the wilderness, understood here to be some remote region untouched, free of any technology (yet).<sup>23</sup> Somehow, the background would then result from a ‘make-over’. This visual trope is surprisingly resilient; it lurks in Cole’s painting also.

What then is the source of the technologized background in Iturbide’s photograph? As semiotician

<sup>22</sup> Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956.

<sup>23</sup> Marcel Danesi, *The Quest for Meaning*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007, p. 53.

Marcel Danesi notes, ‘[h]umans seem to be programmed to produce and seek structure in the world on the basis of how they themselves are constituted.’<sup>24</sup> Human dimensions structure the background—measures of space and intervals of time—opening the background to accommodate human needs and goals as well as material artefacts. Measures of space come from the camera perspective—comparing the distance to hills to human scale (footprints). The desert into which the Angel Woman will step is bathed in radio transmissions, a non-localized, present-absence that her stereo will detect as rhythmic intervals of time. What appears to be wilderness then, is not. Every envisioned opportunity already implies situation. Simply put, when we finally get to Mars, we will find a technologized background already present in absence, not wilderness.

In reflection, each of the three examples considered raises a new and puzzling question: who *owns* the background? While the background is always technologized, and we are always immersed in it, the act of picturing is itself possessive. That mythic wilderness becomes ‘our land’, in the picture. Historian David Nye points out that the expansion of North America was preceded by the superposition of a government-mandated, grid coordinate system on land *unexplored* (at least by the new owners).<sup>25</sup> Ownership implies boundaries, real or virtual, which further dimension the background. In a metaphorical sense, the human eye always ‘landscapes’; the slightest intrusion—a snapshot of a seemingly vacant expanse ‘out there’—puts us ‘in the picture’, Heidegger’s World Picture. And so, there can be no perceptible wilderness-as-background except in our imagination, or as suggested here, *as pictured*.

<sup>24</sup> David Nye, *America as Second Creation: Technology and Narratives of New Beginnings*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004, pp. 21–42.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Heidegger, ‘The Age of the World Picture’, trans. by William Lovitt, in: *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, New York: Harper and Row, 1977, pp. 115–154 (p. 129).

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