Adam Camerer

Professor Matthew Goldberg

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Paper 1: Rhetorical Analysis

As humans, technology dictates our existence on the most fundamental level, controlling the way we perceive, interact with, and think of the world. Much like goldfish in a tank, technology entraps us in the environment and resulting incentive structures it generates. In Gary Shteyngart's article O.K. Glass, Shteyngart uses anecdote, foreshadowing, narrative, and symbolism to argue that we are becoming increasingly dependent on digital technology to augment, modify, and enhance our lives, such that a brave new world will soon hatch from the entwinement of man and machine, be it to our benefit, or to our detriment.

To catch the reader’s attention and preface his experience, Shteyngart begins with an anecdote. On a typical “weekday afternoon in June”, we follow a “nondescript forty year old in beige shorts, a blue Penguin sports shirt, and what appears to be a pair of shale-colored architect glasses with part of the frame missing” on a train ride to see his psycho-analyst (Shteyngart 1). We are following an unassuming, mundane appearing man on an otherwise uneventful, mundane day doing a mundane task: commuting. Shteyngart intrigues the reader: what makes this ordinary man so special? His secret superpower: his glasses. With the ability to search information and record anything and everything at a mere voice command or tap, everyone on the train starts staring at him, with it appearing that the man “has some form of mastery of the world around him, and maybe even within himself”(Shteyngart 1). Drawn to him like moths to a light, the subway riders gawk at this otherwise boring man as if he were Tony Stark incarnate. Shteyngart subtly implies that when we first witness a new technology, we gape and marvel at its power, like Oppenheimer witnessing the raw destruction of the atomic bomb. It seems that those who use these technologies live on a higher plane of existence above us mortals: an otherwise mild-mannered man becomes like Superman by putting these special glasses on. Shteygnart even goes so far as to imply the man, at least subconsciously is wowed by its power, recounting how the man had a dream in which he is “given a kind of flotation device armed with Jet Skis that can skim the top of the water while everyone around him drowns”(Shteyngart 2). Couched within the anecdote, Shteyngart is very strongly hinting at how much of a game changer the Glass is while not openly saying it. Effectively being an analogy between having Google Glass and not having it, it is subtly disguised as a ‘dream’. He is showing rather than telling, so as to let the reader come to the conclusion by themselves. In the same way he subtly juxtaposes its power with its deleterious effects: the physical ailments of how it felt like “his right eye is bulging out”, feeling “nauseous”, and having “a throbbing headache”(Shteyngart 2). The omnipresent feeling of being watched, i.e. how “somehow (the glasses) know” what restaurants he enjoys (Shteyngart 2). The constant distraction (Shteyngart 2). Personifying the glasses as this shadowy entity, it is heavily implied that these glasses may be doing more than just analyzing voice commands. He is beginning to set up the idea within the reader’s head that maybe this technology isn’t all sunshine and rainbows: perhaps this ‘power’ is addictive, intentionally or not, and that we may be sucked into its virtual world and no longer be present in the real world.Thus having drawn the reader in and subtly introduced some of the core ideas with the short anecdote, Shteyngart references his own novel Super Sad Love story to establish the themes and plot later in his narrative.

Now having caught the reader’s attention, Shteyngart uses foreshadowing to set up his experience with Google Glass. Explaining how he got the glasses from a tweet about Super Sad Love Story, a near-future book he wrote, he reasons that he wrote the book in the “unspecified near future” because to write in the present would be “to write about the distant past”(Shteyngart 2). Intentionally hyperbolizing, he is trying to make a point about how technology, and society as a whole was (and still is) rapidly changing. Things that seemed impossible only a few years ago are now reality. The predictions he made in his story are coming true, making Shteyngart feel like “a very limited Nostradamus, a Nostradamus of two weeks from now”(Shteyngart 2). Analogizing himself to a famous literary character, he intentionally underplays the significance to underscore the rapid rate of change. Connecting the clause by Anadiplosis, he sets up our expectations, only to shock us with an unexpected devaluation. Shteyngart was similarly just as much shocked when the iPhone entered his life, the phone becoming “a reproving parent that constantly bade me to work harder, a needy lover that beeped and clanged and marimba’d her demands through the left pocket of my jeans, a sadistic life coach constantly reminding me that, whatever I was doing, there were more fascinating things to be done”(Shteyngart 3). Personifying the smartphone as a woman, he highlights how the device had taken control of his life. It is as if a real person was dictating his each and every action. Shteyngart intentionally emphasizes that his smartphone had hyperbolically “run (him) over”(Shteyngart 3) to make it clear that digital technology, and by connection Google Glass can become this semi-sentient appendage to our lives, our free will slipping as we succumb to its power. We lose agency in our lives, becoming “a curator”, rather than “a participant”(Shteyngart 3) by letting this seemingly omniscient device make our decisions for us and tell us whatever we want to see, hear, or read. Truly, it is ironic that a device with so much power causes us to become so powerless.

Continuing to build on his allusion and foreshadow using Google Glass, he contrasts how even in 2008 his story’s Google Glass object was fiction, when iPhones “seemed like they were beamed from future civilization in Cupertino”, but in the present 2013 “having a miniature screen above my right eye tell me about ‘Ashton Kutcher’s new job’” was perfectly natural(Shteyngart 3). Contrasting the past to the present day, he hyperbolizes the primitive state of tech even a few years back to spotlight how big of a shift this new smart lens technology is. Emphasizing that the ‘fiction’ is now reality, he is foreshadowing and solidifying what the Google Glass will be like and connecting it back to the themes and motifs he has set up thus far. With the premise and core ideas constructed, he can now explore and flesh out the ideas in the narrative of his experience.

Having fully established the premise, Shteyngart uses narrative and symbolism to showcase his experience of being among the first to use the Google Glasses. Paralleling the anecdote at the start, he records the reactions passerby have of him, including a group of youngsters with whom he and they were “all squealing, full of childish zeal. We are rubbing up to the future, hearing the first gramophone playing scratchily in the distance”(Shteyngart 4). Symbolizing young people with the new and the future, Shteyngart also metaphorically connects the Google Glass with an early gramophone to emphasize how futuristic this tech is. Though it is just a prototype, it (at least during that time) had the potential to revolutionize the way we live life. Like young people, it was new, fresh out of the womb, scratching out a new existence, like the gramophone scratching out the first sounds. This childish, optimistic outlook for what the future holds is palpable among them. Of course, with more maturity, one can sense some of the shadowy undercurrents as well: Shteyngart exemplifies this darkly optimistic outlook through a fellow Glass Explorer Aray. Mentioning how they both grew up in totalitarian countries, Aray is not overly concerned by the Glass spying on them, given that “I grew up accustomed to knowing that the government knew more than I probably knew about myself and my family”, and that she doesn’t have any qualms on the being digital since “It’s who I am”(Shteyngart 3). Emphasizing their common experience growing up in an environment where privacy is nonexistent, Shteyngart uses her response to symbolize how we will get used to the new status quo, even if new technology may be nebulous. The most intimate details of our lives being publicly broadcasted to the entire world is just something we have to get used to in a digitized world. This is far more true with modern tech now than it is in 2013, in which we show off the dullest details of our life on Instagram and Facebook, say our dumbest thoughts on Twitter and Reddit, or converse with selfies and silly emojis on Snapchat or Whatsapp. But, the hive mind was still not fully formed. Shteyngart makes its prototypical nature quite clear: recording his experience at a “dark optimism” exhibit to his friend Christine, she complains how the video is “like seeing things through the point of view of an elderly person with sight and hearing problems”(Shteyngart 5). Again invoking using a person to exemplify his point, Christine’s imagery highlights the clunkiness the technology has. It still had roadblocks to becoming easily integrated into our lives. The imagery of the ‘elderly man’ accentuates the uncanniness of Google Glass, like trying to use an ancient DOS computer in the modern day. This digital matrix needs more time to fully mold and take shape. Even so, there was already a compulsive attachment to the digital hivemind, as when he passed by a homeless veteran in Union Square and feeling the need to record a picture, there was “a moment of indecision. What am I doing here, exactly? But then I succumb to the fear of not capturing the right pixels, of not documenting something that might someday prove useful”(Shteyngart 6). Like a hoarder afraid to get rid of his garbage, Shteyngart is terrified of letting a single important moment of his life go unrecorded, to be lost into the abyss of forgetfulness. Using language similar to a stream of consciousness, he carefully inspects his internal conflict, showcasing the hectic internal anxiety these devices create. He is no longer the protagonist, but rather the cameraman of his life, carefully organizing, recording and filing away his moments of existence instead of experiencing it. He is fully enmeshed and dependent on such a little screen, hobbling about on it as it rewards him with hits of dopamine for his submission. Shteyngart is but a fish in the aquarium of the Glasses.

Using anecdote, foreshadowing, narrative and symbolism, Shteyngart portrays the contrast between the appearance of absolute power from these digital technologies, to the actual powerlessness and complete dependency of its users. Technology is outpacing man’s own immense power, able to manipulate him like a puppet on drawstrings. Even though we humans molded and formed these devices, perhaps these devices are molding and forming us as well. As Shteyngart references Bloodchild, for better or worse we are now fused with them like the humans to the Tlic, with “the latter’s insect limbs wrapped around the former’s warm-blooded trunk, about to hatch something new”(Shteyngart 6).

Work Cited

Shteyngart, Gary. “O.K. Glass.” *New Yorker* [New York City, NY], no. Aug 5 2013, 29 July 2013, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/08/05/o-k-glass. Accessed 23 June 2023.