

# Is technology a blessing or a curse?

**The Song of the Earth: Heidegger and the Grounds of the History of Being**  
by Michael Haar, *Indiana University Press*, pp 192, £25

**Ray Percival**

MICHAEL HAAR, professor of contemporary philosophy at the University of Paris, struggles in *The Song of the Earth* with the ancient problem of being. Metaphysics is traditionally divided into epistemology (what and how we know) and ontology (what sort of beings there are). Following Martin Heidegger and Georg Hegel, Haar regards ontology as more important and defines truth as the revelation of being. Applying this theory of truth to art, Haar maintains that a work of art reveals aspects of the Earth that would otherwise remain hidden, and he draws many fine examples from the poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin to illustrate this.

In Britain, Heidegger is often referred to as a horrible example of how senseless metaphysics can become. Rudolf Carnap



The ties that bind: tribal-like groupings protect against alienation

(one of the founders of logical positivism) used to quote from Heidegger to illustrate this: "Nihilation is neither an annihilation of what-is, nor does it spring from negation...nothing annihilates itself." To the untutored it must seem that something has gone very wrong here. Heidegger, it has

been said, was trying to break out of stock categories, but if one feels that one understands the text one also wonders whether, like the Rorschach ink-blot test, the meaning comes from oneself rather than from the text. Haar's book is sometimes a recapitulation of this experience, but some things are clear enough.

A pervasive assumption in the book is that the Earth is somehow a place that we humans could not do without, that we could never be at home anywhere else in the Universe, but technology erects a barrier between us and the Earth. The value of art is that it helps to connect us with the Earth by making it manifest. This reveals the unfortunate reactionary and parochial attitude behind this book.

Haar supports the natural, but he fails to see that the drives behind technology—people's curiosity, exploration and desire to control—could not be more natural. They are, after all, part of our evolutionary heritage. As Konrad Lorenz, the famous ethologist, shows in *Behind the Mirror*, these characteristics become increasingly evident as we look along the phylogenetic series leading to *Homo sapiens sapiens*.

Another aspect of this antitechnology stance is Haar's assertion that technology threatens the Earth because "When the world is reduced to a network of interchangeable connections, there are truly no longer any subjects who face objects, but only gigantic circulations of energy, products, information and consumption." This is the problem of alienation. What all writers on alienation since Marx have taken for granted was that alienation was both bad and avoidable.

Friedrich Hayek, the Nobel prizewinning economist, discusses the emergence of the extended society of worldwide markets in his book *Fatal Conceit*. He predicts that there will always be a tension between our instinctive need for the closeness and familiarity of the tribal-like grouping, in which each person knows every other individual and cooperates out of altruistic concern, and the needs of the worldwide system of cooperation between millions of individuals who neither know each other nor could know each other. Furthermore, in *Unfathomed Knowledge, Unmeasured Wealth*, William Bartley points out that the alienation of our products—the fact that we cannot fully predict or control what will happen to them once we have made them—is unavoidable.

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invention, is literally infinite and therefore cannot be completely surveyed by the producer. Who could have seen all the developments predicated on Einstein's theory or the wheel? Alienation is a universal phenomenon, not just of the so-called epoch of capitalism.

This is arguably a far more profound and informative analysis of truth than the

Heideggerian idea that truth is simply the self-disclosure of being. One might at least think it relevant to Haar's project. The fact is, much truth is not only manifest, but unfathomable. But the same applies to works of art. Paintings, sculpture, music and poems have meaning for us because of a tradition of interpretations within which a person makes his or her own limited

and different interpretation. A composer may be pleasantly astonished by an unforeseeable variation in the performance of his score, for example, variations of tempo or instruments. □

**Ray Percival** is organiser and chairman of the Annual Conference on the Philosophy of Sir Karl Popper.

## Delphi in the New World

### Cahuachi in the Ancient Nasca World

by Helaine Silverman, *University of Iowa Press*, pp 371, \$59.95

**Nick Saunders**

ARCHAEOLOGICAL monographs often make for dry reading, though the detail they contain may be necessary for any meaningful interpretation about the period under study. While most such publications

results of excavation with ethnographic analogy, presents a model of Nasca culture that adds significantly to our understanding of the complex societies in the Andes.

Few areas in the world have attracted so much speculation, yet so little serious investigation, as the region around the small town of Nazca, some 500 kilometres south of Lima (to avoid confusion, Silverman advocates the "s" spelling for the Pre-Columbian culture of Nasca, and the "z" for the modern town of Nazca, its river and region). This is mainly due to the discovery in the 1930s of the so-called "Nazca Lines"—a series of lines, plazas and drawings of animal designs etched onto the surrounding desert.



Tony Morrison/South American Pictures

Lines of the land point to use as a hallowed site

are low-key, passably written and poorly produced affairs, *Cahuachi in the Ancient Nasca World* by Helaine Silverman is an ambitious, beautifully produced book. It brings together the author's work on the southern coast of Peru and, by mixing the

landscape where rituals concerning water, fertility and mountain worship were interwoven. Yet, despite the fame of the desert images, very little serious archaeological work has been carried out.

Added to this, the serious investigations that were undertaken concentrated almost exclusively on the startling and beautiful Nasca art style found on polychrome pottery in tombs, and on classifying and dating these ceramics. While this suggests that the culture flourished between 200 BC and 600 AD, it ignores broader questions about the nature of ancient Nasca society.

Silverman has not been sidetracked by these issues but has concentrated on the excavation of the Nasca culture's only large settlement, that of Cahuachi, located on the southern bank of the Rio Nazca. During the 1950s, the American archaeologist W. D. Strong noted that the quantity of monumental architecture and the vast cemeteries nearby suggest that Cahuachi was the capital of ancient Nasca society. Silverman's research built on this insight, and has

attempted to give the Nasca culture a context and to integrate it fully into mainstream Peruvian and world archaeology.

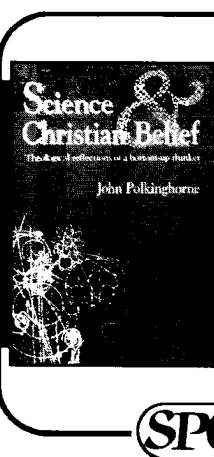
Cahuachi lies about 18 kilometres west of the town of Nazca on a series of river terraces, which face two desert plains on which the drawings of the Nazca Lines are found. Some of these, indeed, appear to be aligned with several of the site's principal architectural features. Significantly in this dry area, the site is famous locally as a place where water appears, although from the air its dry pockmarked appearance indicates only the huge quantity of looting that has taken place.

One of the main issues that the book addresses is the nature of Cahuachi. Was it a ritual centre or a proper town? The lack of domestic refuse and pottery kilns, combined with plentiful evidence of temple construction and cult activities such as the mass sacrifice of llamas suggest that Cahuachi was a religious centre.

Silverman's fieldwork discovered that the site is three times larger than archaeologists had thought, extending over about 150 hectares, of which 25 hectares—the heart of the site—are covered with pyramid-shaped temples. Part of the problem she faced was what she calls the "Cahuachi way" of building. The ancient Nascans built with adobe (mud bricks) on modified natural hills. Rainfall in the region, though sporadic, is torrential, and often obscures the outlines of construction. There were, however, features that aided identification—for example, terraces always being on the north sides of mounds and the open spaces between mounds. "Sacred" space rather than mass construction was a feature of the ancient site's design.

Cahuachi, the author concludes, was not a mere town, but rather a pre-Columbian equivalent of Delphi in the Classical world—that is, a politically neutral and sacred pilgrimage centre. Its society, composed of ethnically homogenous but competitive social groups who shared a single art style, culture and religion, suggests an analogy also with Delphi's Amphictyonic League. This is more than just a specialist monograph, it is also a fascinating and well-illustrated book. It shows the value of detail, and the fruits of interpretation. □

**Nick Saunders** is lecturer in archaeology at the University of the West Indies, Jamaica.



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