

## INTERZONE: post-screening conversation.

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**INTERZONE** (2012) a video work by Dennis McNulty, was commissioned by Fingal County Council in 2007 as part of a series of public artworks. It was funded through the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government's Per Cent for Art Scheme.

What follows is a transcription of the conversation between McNulty and artist and writer, Daniel Jewesbury, which took place on Friday November 16<sup>th</sup> 2012 at the Seamus Ennis Centre, The Naul, Fingal, Ireland, following the first public screening of the piece. Fingal County Council's Public Arts Co-ordinator, Caroline Cowley, who was responsible for the commissioning process and worked with McNulty to produce the project, was present in the audience.

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Daniel Jewesbury:

We've been talking about this piece over the last few days, but one thing I haven't asked you about is the music and how it relates to the visual track. Do you want to tell us something about the relationship between the two and the development of them, one with the other?

Dennis McNulty:

It's hard to know where to start with that one, partly because the process of making the film was such a long one, but obviously, music is something I've thought a lot about over the years. I suppose, one thing to say is that, when I began to edit the film, I looked at the footage we had shot, and had the idea to edit the audio and the image simultaneously. I wanted to try to compose the soundtrack and edit the video at the same time. It had never occurred to me before, but it seemed like something to try out here. Partly because, and this is something we were talking about as I was driving you over from Balbriggan earlier, of this idea about how one thing depends on the other, these formal issues. It seemed like that approach might produce a film with a different kind of flow or fluidity. So I did a bit of research and it turns out that there is no software that allows you to do that. I thought that was an interesting thing to find out.

So, the music at the beginning is by David Donohoe. He's a friend and a musician. He had been doing these improvised tracks with a DX7 synth - I really liked them - I thought that they had a certain quality that was hard to place, so I asked him if I could use some of them and he said yes.

You could say that, sonically, the film is structured in three sections - there's this part at the beginning with Dave's music and then there's a more 'location recordings' part in the middle and then there's a repetitious section at the end, which is something I made myself. It's much closer to the kind of thing I've been making over the last ... it's actually very close to some of the music I performed on the *anti-tours*<sup>1</sup> in fact. Without wanting to destroy what it does or how it operates - it's composed of these simple things just sliding on top of each other. It lacks a distinct pulse. So you move into a very different perception of time. And that does something very interesting in relation to the image. I can say how I think it works, but it's probably not worth saying.

DJ:

I think as we reach that final part, as we come to that section where the time seems to slip in that strange way, we then start to perceive ... we begin to realise that this is not the kind of film we may have expected at the beginning, where there's some kind of end to her journey, some kind of revelation, or some kind of resolution.

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<sup>1</sup> A series of sound-performances in domestic spaces in Brazil, Colombia and Ireland in 2006 and 2007. For more see *Obscure Flows Boil Underneath*(IAP, 2011).

DJ...

But as the space starts to become ... starts to slip as well, we start to realise that these spaces are not necessarily contiguous or continuous, that the whole thing is much more suggestive and associative. And I really like this quality about it, that ... you talked about it being in three parts, but within that, almost at each edit, there's a potential, once we start to look for it, for a kind of rupture between each scene and the next.

Something we talked a lot about is mapping and networks of knowledge. This comes up again and again in the film, in terms of technologies of mapping and surveying and knowing the landscape, and this relationship between the 'gravity mapping' that's referred to at the beginning and something else we were talking about ... this process of 'ground truthing' ... this process where people - I suppose Google, most famously - but anybody working with any kind of digital survey, have to go out into the field, or literally, onto the ground, to check whether their cartographic data matches what's actually there.

I love this relationship between 'ground truthing', 'gravity mapping', the suggestion of an 'out there' that comes back to a 'here and now', and this character who wends her way through it. Maybe you can say a bit more about those layers of some kind of futuristic narrative that's hinted at, at the beginning, and these technologies this character is navigating as she's moving through this space?

DMN:

I guess there are a couple of things there. This idea of mapping, which is ... this seems to have been something that some of the other artists who received these commissions have also struggled with actually, where the commission is not necessarily *about* Fingal, but there's definitely a responsibility to produce something that relates to Fingal. So I felt I needed to find a way to situate myself in relation to Fingal to make the project. I guess it's one of the reasons it took me so long to 'knuckle down' with this, because there was this kind of 'research drift' for about three, or three and a half years, or so, where I was trying to establish that relationship in some way.

That said, it became a kind of mapping almost instantly. I looked at a map of Fingal and tried to figure out where it is for a start, and I realised that it stretches up to here (The Naul), where we are tonight, but then extends out westward as far as Blanchardstown for example ... and I started thinking about the boundaries of Fingal, the edges where it meets one thing and another, how the landscape transforms as you move through it ... I mean, one thing that really struck me is that it's such a heterogenous place. It's super-rural - places like The Naul for example, where there's all this agricultural land. There's that side of things, but obviously, places like Blanchardstown, these suburban areas ... industrial areas, infrastructure ... I began driving through it, doing these *dérives*, but in a car.

DMN...

I did quite a few of these periodically, over a long span of time, and I was repeatedly struck by how, in the space of twenty seconds of driving, I went from one kind of landscape through another and on to another, y'know? So I began with this idea about trying to gather information about the place ... I mean, in a way it's the old question, 'how do you represent a landscape?' How do you represent a place, how do you allude to what a place is, or more importantly, in this case maybe, how do you allude to what a place does as you move through it?



But to get back to these three fragments of text at the beginning ... I was interested in ... in fact, I've always been interested in the relationship between a perception of time and a perception of place. And for that reason I've always been interested in Science Fiction, because obviously Science Fiction is something that, amongst other things, really tests out the edges of those ideas. In the last few years, there have been quite a few reports in the newspapers, they've resurfaced again recently, about 'Earth-like planets' being discovered. Every time I came across an article in the newspaper the source cited at the end was Reuters. It seemed like this kind of thing had been absent from public discourse for a number of years and then all of a sudden, they began to appear again. Initially, it seemed to coincide with the recent economic shifts. It seemed like it might be something that was being put out into the world to take people's minds off things, something distant to aim for. But I also found myself thinking about the books I read when I was younger and my own expectations of what the future would be like.

DMN...

Back then, I expected that these kinds of things, this kind of information, if they were to appear in the newspapers, would be front page headlines. But of course, they're not, or at least, not very often.

It was important for me to try to mark this film deliberately in some temporal way, that it would somehow declare that it was made at this moment in time. So I picked these three fragments of text, which were sourced from the Reuters website, and were literally on the website in the weeks when I was initially editing the film. I also picked these texts because they're temporally quite slippery, and even spatially quite slippery, so that, even though they locate the film time-wise, they do it in a way that alludes to what we might have expected this present to look like twenty or thirty years ago.

DJ:

Some people in the room will have read a book by Graham Robb called *The Discovery of France*, and it's a book about how unlikely it is that France ever came to exist because it pulls in so many different directions historically, geographically ... that the myth that France was always predestined to be this great nation is really just that, a myth. And the first episode in it is this story which is to do with this cartographer going out, doing the Cassini surveys, whenever, the eighteenth century, and arriving in this wild spot in the middle of nowhere, setting up his theodolite and beginning his work. And the people in the village are trying to decide what to do with him, to figure out who he is, what he's here for. They have this democratic process, and they vote, and they decide that what they'll do is ... kill him ... just to be on the safe side. (laughter) So there's this image of this quite rational decision to kill the cartographer, because once he's done it, you can't undo it. Once the knowledge is made into hard fact, or paper or whatever, then ... it's out there, they no longer control it. They talk about it. There are some people who suspect that he's a kind of necromancer of some kind, but regardless, the best thing, probably ... is to just kill him.

And it seems that when you look at all the layers of information transfer, and this relationship between transport, distance and space in the film ... it seems that all the layers of knowledge that are alluded to in this, can become so ... what's the word ... constraining, or constricting. When we've been discussing the space in the film, you've talked about, and you've alluded to it there, in terms of Fingal not being an urban space, but I have this feeling, that all the non-urban space in Fingal is kind-of conditioned by the urban though, y'know? And the kinds of spaces we see in the film are spaces that are suburban or exurban or whatever you want to call them. However you want to describe them, they're all spaces that are conditioned by the urban, by systems that define us and make us into what they want us to be. I wonder is there something in the film that relates to the growth of that kind of space, in the boom and bust years in Ireland, y'know?



DJ...

And whether you wanted to say anything about that, because we talked about how, during the boom, people were propelled further and further away from the centre in order to commute back into it to work, and a space like Fingal really being centrally involved in that. I wonder if there's anything you'd like to say about that?

DMN:

Well, first of all, let me put my cards on the table! I think this commission was awarded in 2007, was it? (Caroline Cowley verifies this from the audience) I remember that the first thing I asked Caroline was, whether there someone in the council who had some function in relation to mapping? Apologies, I'm starting with mapping again. So she arranged for me to meet a guy called Ciaran and at that time, he was actually collating the data from the 2006 census. He showed me the mapping software the council uses, the representations they produce with it. And then when we were doing the shoot last year (2011) ... it was last year in September - this film has been pretty much finished since February, but we've been trying to find the right way to show it since then - but in September last year, there was a census too. So the film is bracketed temporally by two censuses. In my mind, it's really surrounded by this information thing.



DMN...

The piece was commissioned towards the end of this boom period<sup>2</sup>. I remember thinking that things were on a very particular trajectory and I felt that there wasn't anything all that interesting for me about that trajectory - the consumption that was taking place. And then things changed, and there seemed to be something to really think about. Or maybe, it just seemed like it had become possible to assess this previous period. So I found myself spending a lot of time in these spaces that had come to exist during the boom times. It's never really spelled out in the film, but for example, there's this building ... there's a close-up of it at one point ... and that's the Quinn Insurance building, which is located close to Blanchardstown shopping centre. I have photos of that building from two or three years ago, so my interest in it pre-dates what has actually happened to the Quinn empire in the last year or two<sup>3</sup>, but there was something amazing about being in a suburban estate about half a mile away from it, and observing the way that building just literally sits on the horizon in this unsettling way. It's a good example of these spatial relationships that were set up in those times, that are actually quite new for Ireland I think? There's an area called Ongar, which is this *huge* suburban estate. And part of this piece was shot in Tyrrelstown, which is another interesting development in the west of the city. It became apparent to me that it was built in the New Urbanism style, which is a style of planning that Prince Charles promoted, which draws on historical building styles. New Urbanists try to produce developments which have the spatial qualities of a village. I found a document on-line where a British police commissioner had made a report for an American organisation that was about the difficulty and expense of policing these New Urbanism-style developments. So ironically, these kinds of places, which are supposed to foster a certain kind of community, become problematic for the police.

DJ:

Yeah, a really interesting report that's punctuated with illustrations of 'yet another underpass', 'still more bollards' ... really getting into the typologies of space ... really getting into how certain typologies create criminality.

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2 Ireland's economy went through a period of rapid economic growth between 1995 and 2008, after which it fell into recession.

3 In 2008 Sean Quinn was the richest person in Ireland. A week before this screening, Quinn was sentenced to a nine week jail term for blocking a state-owned bank from seizing foreign property assets worth an estimated 500 million euros.

DMN:

Actually, there was a strange situation where ... I just happened into this estate (in Tyrrelstown) while I was doing one of these car-based derives. I was driving around in it, and really, it's just a curving maze. I came to the edge of the estate and there was a row of electricity pylons. This is one of the locations where the film was shot in the end. Just beyond the pylons there's a super-rural landscape, so it's really emblematic of these kinds of juxtapositions that, for me, define this landscape. When I got back to the studio, I tried to find a map so that I could locate myself in the space when I went back, because it was very difficult to get any sense of it in the process of driving around. I found it quite confusing. So of course, I checked Google satellite view and the whole of the estate was covered in cloud. (laughter) It's since been re-photographed, so now it's visible, but at the time, it was invisible ...

DJ:

This is a contemporary version of killing the cartographer ...?

DMN:

Yeah, pretty much!

But, the implications of what's happened spatially to Dublin, or let's say, the greater Dublin area ... I mean, we really don't know ... something really changed in the boom times, I think, and we don't really know where that's going to go. I grew up on an estate ... it was a suburban housing estate in a town to the west of Dublin, which backed onto a load of farming land. It's probably one of the reasons why these kinds of situations have a certain resonance for me. But also, the west of Dublin was subject to some really serious planning corruption back in the day. When I went back to see the house I'd grown up in ten years later, those fields had become housing estates. I think many people have had that experience, not just in Fingal, but also in other parts of the greater Dublin area. Even thinking about the M1 motorway and this final shot of the bridge across it - the housing estate that curves down along the sliproad, which in the end, turned out to have this pyrite problem, which has become a major issue for many housing estates in the Dublin area<sup>4</sup> - there are all these things hidden in the landscape. I deliberately recorded those spaces with this film, but with the intent ... thinking of somebody watching this film in fifteen or twenty years time ... that maybe these spaces will have another kind of significance then, and not really knowing what that significance might be, but thinking that the potential audience for this film might be the people who live in Fingal in fifteen or twenty years time. And this is another motivation for using these 'news story' Science Fiction-ish texts at the beginning of the film.

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<sup>4</sup> Concrete made with aggregates containing above average levels of pyrites was used in the construction of many homes in Ireland during the boom period. The pyrite expands, causing large cracks which have led to many of these properties becoming uninhabitable. Up to 20,000 properties are suspected to have been affected by this issue.



DJ:

And with all of these things that are concentrated or crystallised in the film about past, present, future, that are drawn together by the quite slippery time and place of the film itself.

This might be a good point to explain what this is about (points to still image frozen on the screen behind). We can have a look at this and then maybe there might be several things that are interesting to talk about afterwards?

Maybe you could tell us what this is about?

DMN:

We're going to watch a sequence from a film called *La Notte* by Michaelangelo Antonioni. It's a film from the early sixties which was shot around Milan. I think that's enough information for the time being. We can watch it a bit and then talk about it afterwards.

(show clip from *La Notte*, from roughly 30:40 to 33:40.)



DMN:

(To the audience) We could easily watch another twenty minutes of that, but you get the drift ...

DJ:

That first exterior shot (shown above) ... it is just so overwhelming and alienating, even once you figure out what is going on in the plane of the picture ... once she arrives in the bottom of the screen, dwarfed by these buildings.

Tell us why you chose this then ... I mean it's a female character moving through urban space, but it's a very alienating and ... she looks at everybody and everything in it very much as an outsider.

DMN:

For years people had been telling me to watch these films, and finally, I did start to watch them - this black and white trilogy he made in the early Sixties - *L'Aventurra*, *La Notte* and *L'Eclisse* - and *The Red Desert*, a colour film he made afterwards, which is usually considered alongside them. They deal with, among other things, the landscape of Northern Italy in this period of time, following on from the economic miracle of the fifties. It was just really resonant for me, watching these films, about three years ago - it made a lot of sense in terms of what I was trying to do with this project.

This sequence continues, and Jeanne Moreau ends up in this part of town that she used to know. It's right at the edge of the city. She's just gone on a kind of derive, just randomly wandering through the city space, but she somehow ends up in a place she knows. Her husband comes in a car to collect her and they have this conversation where they're pointing to these marks in the ground, train tracks of some description maybe, and this is how they recognise that this is a place that they both know, but which has been so transformed that there's just this trace left. And, those kinds of processes are very important, very interesting for me.

Another really important point of reference for me, is a book called *What Time is This Place*. It's by, for want of a better word, a geographer called Kevin Lynch. It's quite a sprawling, 'trying-to-solve-everything' kind of a book, which is what's so great about it. There's no real resolution. It just proposes a lot of ideas; frameworks within which to think. So it's an amazingly productive thing to read. He discusses the idea that we have some kind of internal sense of time, and not just some idea of subjective time, but more, some kind of idea of the time that we're *in*, and he's trying to think about how that's reflected in the environment, specifically the built environment. So, it revolves around how and whether things chime with each other, or maybe sometimes they're ...

DJ:

... dissonant?

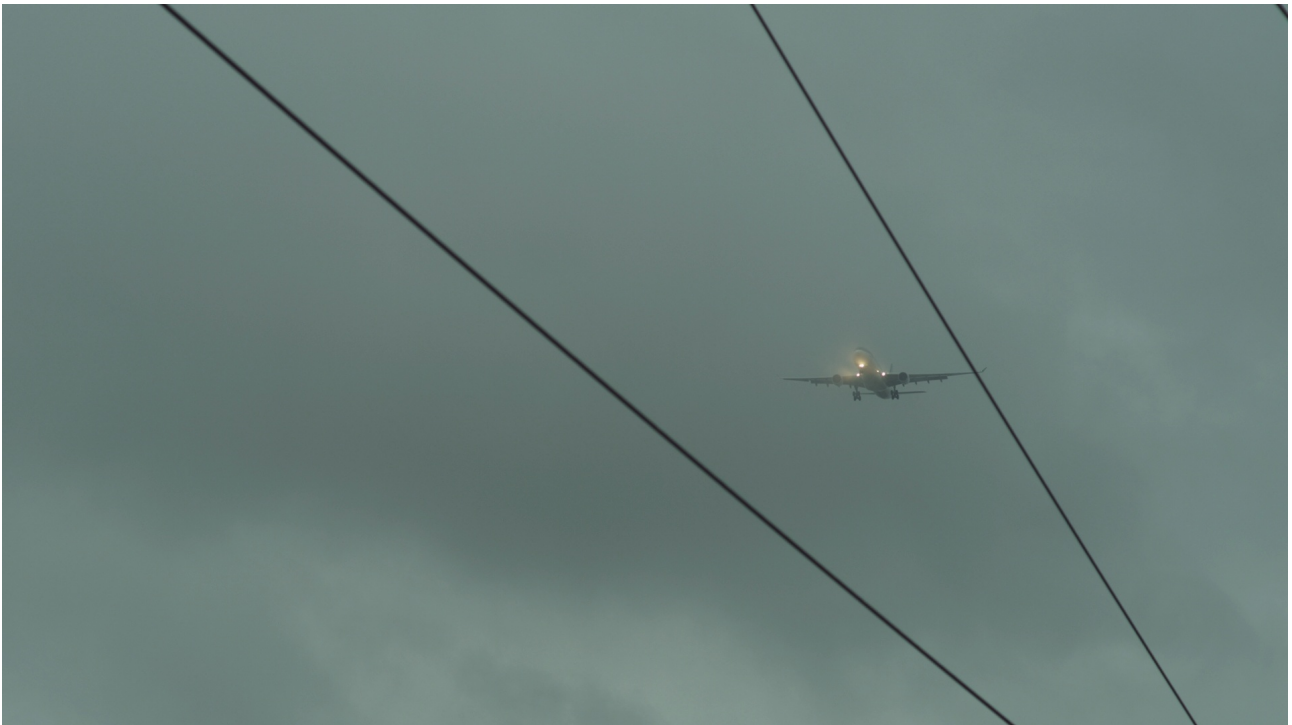
DMN:

Yeah, dissonant. And Antonioni films are full of this stuff, y'know? At certain points in this sequence, she walks up to a metal gate and pulls handfuls of rust off it. She walks past this old woman and then encounters a child. In a way it's almost too heavy handed. But I wanted to evoke some of that temporality somehow. I mean, one thing I think about a lot is ... the way I work tends to be quite research-based, and over the years ... I trained initially as an engineer, so my initial approach to things is pretty rational, I think? Maybe somebody in the room might disagree with me on this (laughter), but I tend to assess things initially in quite a parametric way, and I've ... I've always thought maybe I'm just naturally like that, but I think it's also been reinforced by that engineering education.

DMN...

It produces this particular way of thinking. So since I've started working as an artist, something that's really been at the centre of my practice is the friction between that way of thinking, and then trying to find, or allow myself access to, these other ways of thinking. So, for me the process of researching this project was, in one way, about trying to make a wider definition of what research is. But then there's always the question ... well, you end up with whatever material you *think* you have after researching and then the question is, how do you present that ... how do you produce something? How can you be productive with it? And for me, a lot of the process of making this film was about trying to work through those things as well.

And so I've ended up with something that I think ... something that's strangely alien to me actually. And there's something simultaneously unsettling and kind of exciting about that. So through this process something has been produced, and it doesn't really feel like it's exactly mine in some ways, but I think that's a really interesting place to end up.



DJ:

I've got one more question to ask you. It does relate in some way to what we've just watched, the Antonioni clip. The movement of the camera ... to have the camera given that kind of freedom and fluidity of movement ... it produces something ... it produces a way of seeing and knowing the space, which is unusual, potentially quite jarring, but then y'know, quite liberating in a way, as you watch it. And there are certain moments where the camera crosses a line, crosses a barrier, or where she comes up into the shot, as the camera is swooping around, which reminded me of another Antonioni film, *The Passenger*, where, at the end, you have this completely impossible shot, which was all made possible through ...

DMN:

... magic<sup>5</sup> ...

DJ:

Yeah, through magic ... where the camera starts off, this incredible long shot, where the camera starts off in a room, moves through the bars of the window, keeps moving forward and the bars of the window come closer to the camera, and then, we're outside and before you know it, the camera's turning round, looking back at the room we've just left. And without there being any comment on this, without this being central to the storyline, without this being anything to do with what's happened to the characters in the film, suddenly the space turns from something that we know in a matter-of-fact, rational way, to something that we know in a completely other way. And I think this happens a few times in *INTERZONE*. We see the performer moving through space in a kind of human, 'one step at a time', 'get from A to B' way. We're permitted to swoop and dive around her and through the space in a completely non-human way. I just think there's something really striking about that. Was that type of camera-work something that you'd worked with before, or was it something you deliberately chose for this piece?

DMN:

When I finally settled on the idea of making a film or a video, I went out with a video camera and shot a lot of material in many of these locations. And then I went back to the studio to have a look at it, to see what it was. And I realised pretty quickly that I was absolutely *not* capturing what I thought was interesting about these spaces. So then there was this prolonged period of thinking, 'how on Earth am I going to actually produce something that in some way reflects what I feel is interesting about the experience of being in these places?'

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5 "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic".  
Arthur C. Clarke.



DMN...

I've made soundtracks for films. I've worked with some friends who have a production company called Still Films, and they shot a piece with the DOP who shot *INTERZONE*, a guy called Tim Hood. He uses an apparatus called a jib, which is basically a huge tripod with a counterweighted arm mounted on it, with a motorised camera-controller on one end. He does this amazing 'ballet' with it. As he moves the camera through space, he's watching this screen beside his head and he's doing a sort of dance to control the movement of the camera. The Still Films guys had used this jib in a previous film that they'd produced. They also helped to produce *INTERZONE*. When I saw these jib shots, I thought, ok, this could actually help with this issue of spatial representation I was having. So I revisited all those locations, those spaces, again, to think about how the camera could move if it was on a jib. I was thinking about what the trajectory of it might be, trying to plan it out in some way. When we went there to shoot, of course, it completely changed, because I was trying to imagine what a camera thirty feet in the air was going to see, but obviously I had no idea what that would look like until I could actually see it ... so there was a lot of improvisation on the day too. And a lot of rehearsing with Noreen the performer - a lot of talking through these trajectories in the space and trying to get the timings right. But aside from the nuts and bolts of the rehearsing and all that stuff, it just seemed like, maybe this jib thing offered a spatial solution.

DMN...

And then I found out, which for me was really interesting, that at the end of every episode of *Grand Designs*, or any TV show about making alterations to your house or garden ... there's always a jib shot. So it's in the back garden; it's swooping up to the windows; it's down at the patio, hovering. There was something interesting for me in that resonance with these places I was interested in. There was also a great possibility for experimentation, and Tim was ... the whole crew were great actually. They were really up for it, y'know? They really wanted to try stuff out. Once we settled in and got to know each other a little bit ... I mean, it was a two day shoot, so we settled in pretty quickly! But, then they were really intrigued, because we'd go from one location to the next, and by the third location, they were like, 'How in the name of God did you find these places'? And I said, ...

DJ:

... this is Fingal ...

DMN:

... yeah! (laughs)

The jib produces a kind of motion that is somewhat familiar, but ... it doesn't work in the same way as a steadicam for example, y'know? It still has this feeling of ... 'something's going to happen'. You get the sense that there's going to be some end to this trajectory somehow, it primes you for some resolution. In this case, that resolution never really materialises. I think there's still a lot to explore with it as a technology.