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Reading the Record: Putting Time Back Into the Picture

An important insight from postphenomenology has been the explication of the hermeneutic relation that evolves when humans engage with instruments detecting and displaying information about obscured entities (magnetic fields, electric currents, internal organs, etc.). However, as the analysis presented here shows, perception and interpretation of time-dependent parametric measurements remains an interesting challenge. Instrumentation commonly includes provisions for automatically recording information regarding changes with time for parameters of interest. For instance, during a medical examination, a technician may employ electrocardiography to trace electrical impulses from the beating heart on a paper strip. In addition to visual observation of the display in “real time”, this trace can be retained for later analysis. At issue here is the ontological status of such records as external representations, an extension of the concept of technological mediation. Recording creates a new perspective: time is now represented on the paper strip as a spatial dimension due to the motion of the paper as the trace was recorded, shifting the location of parametric changes from time to space. Absent an egocentric situation in time, the observing agent grasps portions of the record as “picturing” distinct events of interest. Thus, with the electrocardiogram an experienced cardiologist can compare successive beat events, to detect signs of impairment. Interpretation of the trace creates the illusion of reading back and forth in time, suggesting an analogy to reading a narrative. This notion of recording—mapping time intervals and parameter measurements to spatial representation—is further explored for several cases of instrumental perception.