

The Ellul Forum

For the Critique of Technological Civilization

Issue 49

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Art, Technique, & Meaning in Jacques Ellul



“A major section of modern art and poetry unconsciously guides us in the direction of madness . . . only madness is inaccessible to the machine. Every other “art” form can be reduced to technique.”

*-Jacques Ellul,
Technological Society, page 404*

The Ellul Forum

For the Critique of Technological Civilization

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The Ellul Forum is published twice per year, in the Spring and Fall. Its purpose is to analyze and apply Jacques Ellul's thought to our technological civilization and carry forward both his sociological and theological analyses in new directions.

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From the Editor

In this 49th issue of the *Ellul Forum* our long-time friend and Contributing Editor, David Lovekin, not only probes the meaning of art in our technological society, with the aide of Jacques Ellul, Andy Warhol, and others --- he sets a record for the longest article we have ever published.

Far be it from us to quench the musings of our motorcycle-riding, bass-playing, philosophy professor. Ellul's big book on art *L'Empire du non-sens* (1980) has never been translated. Ellul's mother was a painter – I recall vividly a beautiful portrait of Jacques Ellul as a young boy which hung in their living room.

Professor Lovekin has just retired from active teaching, paper-grading, and academic bureaucracy at his long-time academic home, Hastings College in Nebraska. His doctoral dissertation *Technique, Discourse and Consciousness: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jacques Ellul* was published in 1991.

Lovekin's friend and colleague Samir Younés, Professor of Architecture at the University of Notre Dame, contributes a companion article on "Technique and the Collapse of Symbolic Thought." Younés's latest book is *The Imperfect City: On Architectural Judgment* (2012).

Richard Stivers reviews Bill Vanderburg's latest book, as always, delivering important Ellulian insights to our intellectually and spiritually often-impooverished world.

We are closing in on 25 years of publishing the *Ellul Forum*. We will always do some paper but we must also connect with those who rummage through cyberspace so watch for an increased *Ellul Forum* presence on the internet.

But for sure: do not miss our historic gathering in Wheaton/Chicago July 8-10 to celebrate and review Ellul's legacy. See back cover. We want you there!

David W. Gill, Associate Editor

Looking and Seeing:

The Play of Image and Art

The Wager of Art in the Technological Society

by David Lovekin

David Lovekin is Professor of Philosophy at Hastings College in Hastings Nebraska. He is the author of one of the first published dissertations on Jacques Ellul, Technique, Discourse, and Consciousness (1991)

Prologue

This study began with a fascination for the enigma of American artist Andy Warhol (1928-1987). I began to collect his words. I had been intrigued by German philosopher, literary critic, essayist Walter Benjamin's (1892) philosophical snapshots and with the notion of an aura that could be peeled from objects by photography. And I was taken by French philosopher, professor of law, and theologian Jacques Ellul's (1912-1994) claim that religion, philosophy, and aesthetics were mere ornaments that had gone the way of the ruffled sunshade on McCormick's first reaper. Aura, the capacity of the object to look back and to direct the viewer in search for origins, fleshed out Ellul's claim. The symbol had lost its symbolic dimension in the technical process where words became images and images became concepts; this insight informed my reading of Warhol and Benjamin with Ellul.

The Image and the Celebrity

"The Look" is everywhere. Everywhere people look there are people looking back, hoping to see and to be seen. To be is to be seen. Bishop Berkeley's catch-phrase is the logic of celebrity washed America, Andy Warhol's America, and the current America as well. Warhol's America does not go away. Reality TV became possible when TV became reality, when the celebrity became a primary archetype in some fifteen minutes of fame, and when art and celebrity became interchangeable.

Riding across the country in 1963 to his second show—the Liz-Elvis Show at the Ferus Gallery in L. A.—Warhol realized that the countryside was *Pop* and had become a sign, a label. It was there to be seen and consumed. He wrote:

The moment you label something you take a step—I mean, you can never go back to seeing it

unlabeled. We were seeing the future and we knew it for sure. I saw people walking around in it without knowing it, because they were still thinking in the past. But all you had to do was know you were in the future, and that's what put you there. The mystery was gone, but the amazement was just starting.¹

Warhol saw what America stood for. Past, present, and future coincided in the label, the power of the image that was an eternal present, digitized time. The image substantiates being in two directions. It both offers the product and it reveals the celebrity. Before the images, the mystery was gone. Warhol was amazed.

Warhol's last book, *America*, was a chronicle of that amazement. Composed of photographs taken over the last ten years, Warhol revealed the many paradoxes and mysteries that had become America. These mysteries were resolved in the image. In America there was so much wealth and so much poverty. The solution was style. Warhol observed:

One of the great things in American cities today is not having all that much money but having so much style that you can get into any place for free. Free parties, free drinks, free food—you just need the right attitude, the right clothes, and being clean.²

Style was a function of right attitude, right appearance, and proper hygiene. Style was a discipline of mind and body. Poverty and death challenged this discipline, Warhol revealed. He was concerned.

Mystery denied was mystery regained. What was the right dress, the proper hygiene and attitude, when anything goes (Ellul would call it *N'importe quoi*)? Granted, it must be seen, but by and for whom? Moreover, was this propriety not tied to commodity, to consumption? First, the very people needing the free meal, the free drink, the shelter and warmth, were those too poor to purchase it. Second, there was so much to purchase in so many places. Style

was the resolution, the knack to intuit the proper look. Style was what the look was about. Warhol advised:

*You need one kind of look to get into the clubs that the kids go to, you need another to freeload at the Broadway opening night parties, and you need another for the sports parties. It takes a lot of work to figure out how to look so good they'll want you; it's easier to get a good job and buy your way in, which is what most people do. But that's never been the chic way and, in reality, the clubs have more respect for those with style and they treat them much better than those who pay.*³

Style was beyond commodity and yet what commodity addressed. Behind the seeming clarity of the image was another dimension, a place of rest within the flow of products. Americans were offered a blinding choice between this product, this occupation, this style of life, this form of entertainment. Choice, as Warhol saw it, was no longer a matter of traditional wealth and social status, although wealth was likely included. Style involved purchases, the proper purchases.

On the one hand, mass production democratized choice. Warhol said:

Buying things in America today is just unbelievable. Let's say you're thirsty. Do you want Coke, Diet Coke, Tab, Caffeine-Free Coke, Caffeine-Free Diet Coke, Caffeine-Free Tab, New Improved Tab, Pepsi, diet Pepsi, Pepsi Light, Pepsi Fee, Root Beer, Royal Crown Cola, C&C Cola, Diet Royal Crown Cola, Caffeine-Free Pepsi, Caffeine-Free Diet Pepsi, Caffeine-Free Royal Crown Cola, Like, Dr. Pepper, Sugar-Free Dr. Pepper, Fresca, Mr. Pibb, Seven-Up, Diet Seven-Up, orange, grape, apple Orelia, Perrier, Poland, ginger ale, tonic, seltzer, Yoo-Hoo or cream soda?

*And not only are there all these choices, but it's all democratic. You can see a billboard for Tab and think: Nancy Reagan drinks Tab, Gloria Vanderbilt drinks Tab, Jackie Onassis drinks Tab, Katherine Hepburn drinks Tab, and, just think, you can drink Tab too. Tab is tab and no matter how rich you are, you can't get a better one than the one the homeless woman on the corner is drinking. All the Tabs are just the same. And all the Tabs are good. Nancy Reagan knows it, Gloriam Vanderbilt knows it, the baglady knows it, and you know it.*⁴

There seems so much choice, so much freedom, which appears in the hands of the consumer that are truly in the hands of the corporation and the technical system. To consume, however, is to appear to be free, which, in turn, seems to flow from the technical system; joblessness and poverty seem the unfortunate results as well. Even in the pressure of poverty, however, the celebrity may appear as guide for the wisdom of consumption, which is a function of being seen.

The celebrity, then, has become the guide for recovering the many fragmentations and disjunctions that are modern life. The celebrity's visibility illuminates. To be visible, however, is to risk reduction and fragmentation, a fate the ordinary as well as the Platonic Forms might suffer. To be dressed punk one night and to be at the opera in tie and tails is to dare dissolution and that dare is style. To be able to do both is to have style. The celebrity is both moments, knowing that what matters is what happens "now" perpetually. The celebrity is this or that appearance at every moment. To seek coherence and consistency beyond the moment is to not understand the logic of the celebrity, something understood by contemporary politicians as they attempt to become all to nobody and everybody. The celebrity is this peculiar unity, imminently transcendent as a master of the art of the ephemeral. Warhol would agree, having had in mind this specific type:

*I've always thought politicians and actors really summed up the American Way. They can look at the various pieces of themselves, and they can pick out one piece and say, "Now I'm only going to be this one thing." And the piece may be smaller and less interesting than the whole person-ality, but it's the piece that everyone wants to see.*⁵

The politician and actor are inevitable identities. Each presents the real as now with no continuity beyond appearance.

In 1968 at Andy Warhol Enterprises, known as The Factory, Warhol was shot by Valerie Solanis, one of his celebrities. Warhol thought about death, about a possible epitaph. He concluded: "I always thought I'd like my own tombstone to be blank. No epitaph, and no name. Well, actually, I'd like it to say 'figment.'"⁶ Death provided a marvelous focus, a question of what was beyond the here and now? Warhol concluded with celebrity style:

*Dying is the most embarrassing thing that can ever happen to you, because someone's got to take care of the body, make the funeral arrangements, pick out the casket and the service and the cemetery and the clothes for you to wear and get someone to style you and do the makeup. You'd like to help them, and most of all you'd like to do the whole thing your-self, but you're dead and so you can't. Here you've spent your whole life trying to make enough money to take care of yourself so you won't bother anybody else with your problems, and then you wind up dumping the biggest problem ever in somebody else's lap anyway. It's a shame.*⁷

Here we have the major celebrity problems of modern life: detail, appearance, and efficiency. What surrounds the concerns of the here and now is problematic, embarrassing. Death is embarrassing, a nuisance and an

annoyance, and, finally, shame. The shame is that this moment style is ultimately called to question.

Warhol had the look, but his words seem tinged with irony, although of this we are not sure. Are his assembly line portraits of products and celebrities mere replications of consumer-producer products or are they sardonic commentaries on the superficialities of his age? Are they what I will later call bad infinities?

Warhol's style was a concern from the moment he entered the art scene. Irving Sandler in his review of Warhol's work in the 1962 *New Realists* exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York wrote: "In aping commercial art does Warhol . . . satirize its vulgarity or does he accept its value complacently?"⁸ Sandler assumed that art was not commercial, that art adopted a transcendent perspective. Sandler betrayed his hope in Warhol to suggest that Warhol only "apes" commercial style. Presumably, the sin of painting commercially was absolved in ironic intention. Irony is a transcendent pose, but Warhol's irony was uncertain. Did his words and his art match up and for what purpose: did they reflect, question, or abdicate? Or did they mean anything at all beyond their expression and style?

Warhol was an enigma, studied or not. In interviews, for example, Warhol avoided facts and said, "I never give my background, and anyhow I make it all up different anytime I'm asked."⁹ And then, the famous quote: "The reason I'm painting this way is that I want to be a machine."¹⁰ Since the Renaissance it was a commonplace to see the artist as visionary, divinely inspired, rising above time and place, leading society to greater sensibility and awareness. The artist might also appear as a rogue and a charlatan, as long as the artist was clearly astride the social order. Sometimes the artist was both hero and rascal. Erwin Panofsky noted a Venetian forger, who, in his reproduction of a fourth or fifth century BCE Greek coin, could not resist adding a variation of Michelangelo's *David* and the *Risen Christ*.¹¹ Sartre, more recently, recommended the authenticity of Jean Genet as both poet and thief, a true and admirable outsider. The artist as outsider must be clever and not a dupe. Warhol must not be a dupe. But, where does the celebrity as artist stand? The answer, in part, resides in a relation of the artist to the artistic process that is, at the same time, a social process.

The Reproducibility of Art; the Art of Reproducibility

Walter Benjamin, in his 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," argued that the photographic means of reproduction appearing in the nineteenth century required a rethinking of the reality and the place of art. Most notably, the art object as a conveyer of "aura" was diminished. In traditional cultures the art object possessed aura in its uniqueness, in its capacity to unite its audience in a ritual pose, and in its representation of a tradition, which it at once founded and furthered. The gods were named and sacred images produced and rituals

could be followed. The gods were often eaten or celebrated through sacrifice. The "aura" of an art object, like totemic and cave art, projected that object beyond its time and place to engage other traditions that encountered the object's uniqueness, though not necessarily in the same way. Benjamin explained that the stature of Venus for the Greeks was an object of veneration, while for Medieval society, it was ominously regarded as pagan idolatry, but, nonetheless both perspectives revealed "aura."¹² For both societies the aura-laden object extended the powers of uniqueness and permanence. The artist, anonymous or not, shared in those powers. In traditional societies the artist appeared as shaman or hero.

The photographic process changed the notion of the art object and the natural object, both in the photograph's power to copy an "original" art object or a natural object, and in the photograph's capacity to become an "original" art object. In both cases the notion of "original" was transformed. A photograph that reproduced the Eiffel Tower was a copy like a painting or drawing and yet fundamentally different. The photographic process introduced transitoriness and reproducibility that seemed to parallel the worker's condition. In this relationship, the artist and viewer were separated from the "object" like the laborer in the factory. The device did the work, while the artist guided, focused, and snapped the picture. Of course the camera could become a tool like a pencil and brush, (and was more like one with analogue photography mastered in a dark room) and thus separate the photographer from the process, but that is not how the photograph or camera was typically understood and used. The camera took pictures apparently any one could take with the result that the photographer and the viewer became "anyone." This would seem, however, a further alienation. Traditionally, art required an awareness and intention beyond a "technical intention," whereas in the past technique served and became intention. Those relations had been inverted, Benjamin understood.

Benjamin understood that photography had changed the nature and perception of daily life, changes which he understood in political and aesthetic terms. The newsreel served to co-opt the image formed by the unaided eye. He wrote:

*To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose "sense of the universal equality of things" has in-creased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction. Thus is manifested in the field of perception what in the theoretical sphere is noticeable in the increasing importance of statistics. The adjustment of reality is to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope, as much for thinking as for perception.*¹³

Thus, film could bring a level of unprecedented objectivity. In "The Work" Benjamin made two claims worthy of note: (1) The camera, with the aid of cutting, a

variety of camera angles, and other sophisticated techniques, moved the viewer through and beyond the media that supplied the image that made the immediate seem more immediate. As the presence of the camera faded from the viewer's attention, the way the proscenium arch in a theatre never does, the immediate itself appeared: "The equipment-free aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology."¹⁴ That is, as the hitherto invisible was viewed, the miracles of the camera were transferred to the eye itself. The viewer became the miracle. (2) The viewer became an expert, privy to what was only apparent from an otherwise impossible perspective. "It is inherent in the technique of the film as well as that of sports that everybody who witnesses its accomplishments is somewhat of an expert."¹⁵

"The Work" was a work in process going through three editions that differed more in emphasis than in substance. The second edition emphasized the need to free the worker from bourgeois tradition and the cult power of aura through photography and populist art media to help further the cultural revolution. He wrote of two technologies: the first that sought mastery over nature, an aggressive technology, and the second that invited creativity and play: "The origin of the second technology lies at the point where, by an unconscious ruse, human beings first began to distance themselves from nature. It lies. . . in play."¹⁶ The primary goal of second technology was benign and to reintroduce the human to nature. He wrote optimistically:

*The primary social function of art today is to rehearse that interplay [between man and nature]. This applies especially to film. The function of film is to train human beings in the apperceptions and reaction needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily. Dealing with this apparatus also teaches them that technology will release them from their enslavement to the powers of the apparatus only when humanity's whole constitution has adapted itself to the new productive forces which the second technology has set free.*¹⁷

Benjamin was not naïve and understood as well that as long as technology was in the control of an imperialistic and fascist state great evil was possible. He noted:

*Imperialist war is an uprising on the part of technology, which demands repayment in "human material" for the natural material society has denied it. Instead of deploying power stations across the land, society deploys manpower in the form of armies. Instead of promoting air traffic, it promotes traffic in shells. And in gas warfare it has found a new means of abolishing the aura.*¹⁸

Benjamin was quite aware of Fascist and imperialist propaganda that employed technology to aestheticize war

and violence. He wrote "The Work" in exile from Nazi Germany.

The senses of aura were becoming complicated: from ritual to poison gas. Benjamin further observed. The film responds to the shriveling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the "personality" outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the "spell of the personality," the phony spell of a commodity. So long as the movie-makers' capital sets the fashion, as a rule no other revolutionary merit can be accredited to today's film than the pro-motion of a revolutionary criticism of traditional concepts of art. We do not deny that in some cases today's films can also promote revolutionary criticism of social conditions, even of the distribution of property.¹⁹

The "movie star," like the celebrity mentioned above, reclaimed aura paradoxically, only to make the film even more of a commodity. The movie star became the commodity itself. Adorno had criticized Benjamin's sometimes non-dialectical embrace of reproductions that tended to become commodities and fetishes, objects of phony aura.²⁰

By 1939, in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Benjamin had expanded his representation of aura that would complicate his cultural critique. Experience of the aura thus rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between inanimate or natural object and man. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return. This experience corresponds to the data of the *mémoire involontaire* (These data . . . are unique; they are lost to the memory that seeks to retain them.) Thus they lend support to a concept of the aura that comprises the "unique manifestation at a distance." This designation has the advantage of clarifying the ceremonial character of the phenomenon. The essentially distant is the inapproachable: inapproachability is in fact a primary quality of the ceremonial image.²¹

In this essay Benjamin moved back and forth between kinds of art—painting photography, poetry and literature still wondering about a sense of "authenticity" and an "original" that powered artistic expression. Voluntary memory responded to the will and to a present seeking a past, but to which past: a nearby past, a conscious past, or a deeper past? Involuntary memory, credited to Proust, was a past we did not quite see but one that we felt, one that revealed aura. Benjamin, quoting Proust, said, the past is "somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect, and unmistakably present in some material object (or in the sensation which such an object arouses in us), although we have no idea which one it is."²² We are in the presence of the famous "madeleine" and in the power of the word to invoke what was only present as semblance, seeming. Looking and seeing were in tension.

Benjamin will suppose, however, that photography typically plays in the realm of voluntary memory, which, though visual is different from painting. “The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it has already changed. It cannot be arrested.”²³ Apparently, the photographic image does not return the gaze, Benjamin concluded, and remains thing-like on the view of Valéry.

*. . . a painting we look at reflects back at us that of which our eyes will never have their fill. [. . .] What distinguishes photography from painting is therefore clear . . . : to the eyes that will never have their fill of a painting, photography is rather like food for the hungry or drink for the thirsty.*²⁴

“Aura” now becomes an epistemological notion in a metaphysical undertow. The object of the look is not merely seen but is seen and looks back; the viewer’s gaze is returned to provide a sense of an original. We look for and then see the object that exceeds the grasp as both near and far. Aura appears as the object and the viewer meet and confront one another and complete one another provisionally, with the otherness of each intact. The art object with aura presents a totality that overflows the reduction of it to one sense, say to the sense of sight, which tends to distance and abstract. Aura rejects reification and the reduction of even things to things.

The photographic image appears as the complete and real as a painting will not, and yet it does not satisfy. As an extension of voluntary memory, photography “. . . reduces the scope for the play of the imagination.”²⁵ For Valéry and Proust, aura, imagination, and involuntary memory connected in depth. The involuntary memory finds what is not expected and not merely repeated. From these insights the value to the worker and the ordinary person remained unclear beyond the photograph’s capacity to bring the exotic and the inapproachable into the home and marketplace beyond the proliferation of commodities. Nonetheless, Benjamin would try to find a dialectical place for the mechanical image.

In his “Little History of Photography,” in 1931, Benjamin was looking at the photography of Atget’s that advanced art beyond the “stifling atmosphere generated by conventional portrait photography in the age of decline. He cleanses this atmosphere . . . he initiates the emancipation of object from aura. . . [. . .] He looked for what was unremarked, forgotten, cast adrift. And thus such pictures, too, work against the exotic, romantically sonorous names of the cities; they suck the aura out of reality like water from a sinking ship.”²⁶ But, what is sucking? By conventional portrait photography Benjamin understood that the prestige of the poser held aura. Atget’s pictures showed what tourists did not want to see. Atget’s pictures worked against the “sonorous names” of cities, and here we could understand these as the bearer’s of

bourgeois aura. Does Benjamin mean that Atget’s photos leave some measure of aura—good aura, non bourgeois order, if there is such a thing-- intact? Or is he taking the side that photography was simply the death of aura, period? Conventional portraits and romantic picturesque landscapes could be seen as sucking the aura out of nature that had been denaturalized by a first technology. Does Atget’s work reinstate aura as the aspect of surprise working against voluntary merely repetitive memory? Later in the essay Benjamin states: “It is no accident that Atget’s photographs have been likened to those of a crime scene. But isn’t every square inch of our cities a crime scene?”²⁷

In the “Little History” Benjamin asks:

*What is aura, actually? A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be. While at rest on a summer’s noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour become part of their appearance—this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch. Now to bring those things closer to us, or rather to the masses, is just as passionate an inclination in our day as the overcoming of whatever is unique in every situation by means of its reproduction. Every day the need to possess the object in close-up in the form of a picture, or rather a copy, becomes more imperative. And the difference between the copy, which illustrated papers and newsreels keep in readiness, and the original picture is unmistakable. Uniqueness and duration are as intimately intertwined in the latter as are transcendence and reproducibility in the former.*²⁸

Aura meant breath in Greek. In this understanding of natural aura we are in two distances—the distance before the eye on an horizon and the distance between word and origin, with which Benjamin played. The eye moves—not the lens—and shadows further the distance and open to a source of illumination where the received is also the made. This is what is seen in a bodily moment that is named. Aura is the experience, the name, and the breath. The name is a copy too, just as the act of perceiving produces a copy. The photograph would be a further copy. Nonetheless, aura provides in a space an opening in time beyond reproducibility. Here we both look and see. This could be called the aura in perception seeking an aura in the object, although I think this is a false dichotomy. Aura seems to require the inseparability of subject and object at and in that moment when the near and the far combined. Landscape painting and photography would attest to this original power of view that furthers endless reproductions. The photos of Atget, Benjamin continued, furthered the work of the crime scene investigator with the suspicion that:

Every passer-by [is] a culprit? Isn’t it the task of the photographer—descendant of the augurs and

haruspices---to reveal guilt and to point out the guilty in his pictures? "The illiteracy of the future," someone has said, "will be ignorance not of reading or writing, but of photography." But shouldn't a photographer who cannot read his own pictures be no less accounted an illiterate? Won't inscription become the most important part of the photography? Such are the question in which the interval of ninety years that separate us from the age of the daguerreotype discharges its historical tension. It is in the illumination of these sparks that the first photographs emerge, beautiful and unapproachable, from the darkness of our grandfathers' day.²⁹

Here, Benjamin appears to suggest that these images—photographs—could return aura with the power of the word although that aura would be of a different order. Adorno had noted in *The Jargon of Authenticity* that Benjamin's aura labored against an already clichéd status tainted by theosophy and by the neo-classicism of Stefan George.³⁰ The notion of aura was beginning to promote a cottage industry that is still productive today. We could see this notion of an altered order or aura as a response to this problem.

Two deep concerns were in tension for Benjamin—a sense of authenticity and meaning. Atget's photos were suggestive of the surrealist's attempts to call inauthentic society—bourgeois society-- to question. They sought the mystery amid the commonplace: "We penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday."³¹ Benjamin understood Proust, Baudelaire, and Valéry on such a mission. They were to find and to show that the beautiful was ugly and that the ugly—the transformed object—was sublime as it was called to question.

Baudelaire considered the traditional virtue of heroism. What was heroism, if not modernity itself, like? He wrote:

Regarding the attire, the covering of the modern hero, . . . does it not have a beauty and a charm of its own? . . . Is this not an attire that is needed by our age, which is suffering, and dressed up to its thin black narrow shoulders in the symbol of constant mourning? The black suit and the frock coat not only have their political beauty as an expression of general equality but also their poetic beauty as an expression of the public mentality: an immense cortège of undertakers—political undertakers, amorous undertakers, bourgeois undertakers. We are all attendants at some kind of funeral.—The unvarying livery of hopelessness testifies to equality . . . And don't the folds in the material—those folds that make grimaces and drape themselves around mortified flesh like snakes—have their own secret charm?³²

The old aura of heroism was gone. The modern hero was not unique in beauty or courage but suffered a commonality—what masqueraded as political equality—in funereal dress without hope. Even the folds of material offered no pleasure or warmth; perhaps the funeral was for the death of hope and courage and, likely, beauty past. The new beauty—ugliness—ironically framed, iconically repeated the oppressions of the past. Only the old was again new, albeit de-auratized, which, on the other side was the "ever-same." To contend the old and the traditional was new until it was not; then it became tradition in a new guise. This was modernity's fate and its problem, revealed in Nietzsche's notion of the eternal return.³³ This backs up to the notion of the authentic. The authentic had to be re-established by the dialectical optic to look and to further see. Benjamin hoped to learn to read the city like Baudelaire.

Benjamin presented a remarkable series of analogies that linked the striking of a match, invented by the middle of the nineteenth century, to the lifting and replacing of a phone receiver, to the snapping of a photograph, and to other types of ". . . switching, inserting, and pressing. . . . [.] Haptic experiences of this kind were joined by optic ones, such as are supplied by the advertising pages of a newspaper and the traffic of a big city."³⁴ He further considered amusement park rides with cars jolting into one another as training for being in and out of work. Play and work coincided as Benjamin hypothesized in his second technology but it is not clear that the worker was being returned to nature or that the play was anything but distracted habit.³⁵

Benjamin's description of gambling was crucial and remarkable.

Gambling even contains the workman's gesture that is produced by the automatic operation, for there can be no game without the quick movement of the hand by which the stake is put down or a card is picked up. The jolt in the movement of a machine is like the so-called coup in a game of chance. The manipulation of the worker at the machine has no connection with the preceding operation for the very reason that it is its exact repetition. [. . .] The work of both is equally devoid of substance.³⁶

The worker and the gambler were devoid of substance. Did Benjamin think this observation would reinstate an alienated condition?

The crime scene was being investigated and thefts of bodily integrity, grace, and balance were in progress. Citizens lived the fragments that Benjamin translated, finding the true among the ephemeral. The true was then revealed as more oppression and enslavement, freely accepted and pursued in "leisure time." The means of enslavement had become more efficient and over-reaching because less detectable, but it is not clear that aura of any kind was being returned, unless the true would reinstate

the beautiful. But what kind of true, what kind of beauty would this be?

Begun in 1927, but never finished, Benjamin worked on his *Arcades Project* to show how the reifying forces of technology, politics, and economy developed in the nineteenth century and had produced new forms of behavior and new human types—the flâneur, the collector, and the gambler—who were subsumed by the “. . . phantasmagoria of the market place.”³⁷ They were consumers of and consumed by the “new.” Baudelaire had considered himself a *flâneur*, a leisurely walker, and had made many of his observations of the new in the past’s demise. Benjamin remarked that Baudelaire in his later years was pursued by his creditors and his illness and had had little time for a stroll.³⁸ The “new” was nothing to be taken lightly. Benjamin stated:

*Newness is a quality independent of the use value of the commodity. It is the origin of the illusory appearance that belongs inalienably to images produced by the collective unconscious. It is the quintessence of that false consciousness whose indefatigable agent is fashion. This semblance of the new is reflected, like one mirror in another, in the semblance of the ever recurrent.*³⁹

The phantasmagoria were semblances of the true but not true or beautiful semblances if I understand Benjamin correctly, which would be for anyone a difficult task. Much of what he left behind were fragments, which he may have considered essential to his style. Nonetheless, I join the many in taking a stab at a Benjamin, whom some regard as a Jewish atheist, a mystic driven by the *Kabbalah*, a luddite, a Marxist, a de-constructionist.⁴⁰ Etc. would be meaningful.

What was the purpose of art? is the first question to ask. He hoped that it could “redeem” the alienated human condition. Technology one had provided one level of alienation but what was the original world of the human? In *On the Mimetic Faculty* he wrote:

*“To read what was never written.” Such reading is the most ancient: reading prior to all languages, from entrails, the stars, or dances. Later the mediating link of a new kind of reading, of runes and hieroglyphs, came into use. It seems fair to suppose that these were the stages by which the mimetic gift, formerly the foundation of occult practices, gained admittance to writing and language. In this way, language may be seen as the highest level of mimetic behavior and the most complete archive of nonsensuous similarity: a medium into which the earlier powers of mimetic production and comprehension have passed without residue, to the point where they have liquidated those of magic.*⁴¹

The mimetic faculty was the drive to turn experience into language, to name what was not named. How would art then be connected to aura, which would be tied to the

mimetic drive to imitate and to express the unique that would return the gaze? In “On Semblance” he wrote:

*In every work and every genre of art, the beautiful semblance is present; everything beautiful in art can be ascribed to the realm of beautiful semblance. This beautiful semblance should be clearly distinguished from other kinds of semblance. Not only is it to be found in art, but all true beauty in art must be assigned to it.*⁴²

Art is an appearance of what was original and true in that sense but was not the true or even the beautiful. Art would provide semblances of these things. Thus, things should not be reified or fetishized. This would be not appropriate for true or beautiful semblances. The new in commodity form would not be new, as above, but would only be repetitions and mere copies, aping phony aura. This kind of “new” or phony aura is what I will refer to as products of a bad infinity.

In his *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (May 1924–April 1925), which failed to earn him his *Habilitation*, he prophetically said: “The authentic—the hallmark of origin in phenomena—is the object of discovery, a discovery which is connected in a unique way with the process of recognition.”⁴³ And then, “For in the science of philosophy the concept of being is not satisfied by the phenomenon until it has absorbed all its history.”⁴⁴ The result was what Benjamin called a monad that was an idea that revealed the image of the world—the internal logic manifest in appearance.⁴⁵ Aura then pointed to that place of origins and art provided the symbols, the Ariadnean threads. The symbol was the great key:

*For language is in every case not only communication of the communicable but also, at the same time, a symbol for the noncommunicable. This symbolic side of language is connected to its relation to signs, but extends more widely—for example, in certain respects to name and judgment. These have not only a communication function, but most probably also a closely connected symbolic function, to which at least explicitly no reference has here been made.*⁴⁶

That symbolic function I believe was the mimetic function that had been either limited or transformed. Benjamin was hard pressed to consistently say. He mourned the apparent demise of the storyteller where truth and meaning was reduced to information and where mystery was denied: mystery inhabits the nature of the word as symbol.⁴⁷ In “On Some Motifs to Baudelaire,” he noted:

*It is not the object of the story to convey a happening per se, which is the purpose of information; rather it embeds it in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening. It thus bears the marks of the storyteller much as the earthen vessel bears the marks of the potter’s hand.*⁴⁸

The object of Benjamin was to tell a story of mystery that was aura.

Art in the Technological Society

Benjamin committed suicide on the Franco-Spanish border on September 27, 1940. His body was likely dumped into a mass grave. He had been working on “On the Concept of History,” from February until May. It contained his views on the task of the historical materialist who must stay above and yet within the class struggle. He wrote:

The true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again. “The truth will not run away from us”: this statement by Gottfried Keller indicates exactly that point in historicism’s image of history where the images is pierced by historical materialism. For it is an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself as intended in that image.⁴⁹

Sometimes Benjamin wrote as if art should serve no master but at other times he thought it should serve politics.⁵⁰ He viewed art as making and thus saw it as similar in principle to technology although he viewed the making of words on a higher order. He had hoped that art would be able to jump start the people’s revolution but was never clear how such a consciousness could be raised, awash in the ephemeral and the phantasmagoric, which Benjamin could decipher but history would indicate he was alone. Nonetheless he plumbed the depth of aura, the mystery beneath and yet informing the commonplace.

He had hoped that the artist’s heroism could allow for an auratic return, but for which aura?

Warhol, the modern artist, too, was concerned with aura. In *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol* he wrote:

I think “aura” is something that only somebody else can see, and they only see as much of it as they want to. It’s all in the other person’s eyes When you just see somebody on the street, they can really have an aura. But then when they open their mouth, there goes the aura. “Aura” must be until you open your mouth.⁵¹

Warhol stood Benjamin’s notion of aura on its head. “Aura” was reduced to the look, to the viewer’s intention, to an object that did not look back. Aura was relative and ephemeral, not likely the beautiful semblance. Most importantly the viewer lost all control while seeming to be in control, the worst form of enslavement.

Many of Warhol’s images were machine images and his words glorified the process. In 1963 he wrote:

That’s probably one reason I’m using silkscreens now. I think somebody should be able to do all my paintings for me. I haven’t been able to make

every image clear and simple and the same as the first one. I think it would be great if more people took up silkscreens so that no one would know whether my picture was mine or somebody else’s.⁵²

Reproducibility became a virtue while canceling the meaning of reproduce, which demanded some sense of an original. Was Warhol fooling with us? Were his words ironic? What would irony even mean in this context: saying what you don’t mean and meaning it?

For the appearance of an answer, consider critic and biographer Ranier Crone, who wrote:

Warhol, on the other hand, uses the silkscreen, to the exclusion of all other methods, to transfer photographs to canvas, thus adapting as far as possible, to the technical limitations of the easel painting, which is at best outdated communications medium. Through a morally based self-negation, he has suppressed his individuality to such an extent that he has attained a qualitatively new understanding of self and behavior, which is political, or at least, politically relevant. He has transmuted quantity (namely, the exclusive use of one technique) into quality. Warhol’s use of silkscreen represents the most rational way of reproducing a photograph on a scale too large for phototechnical means alone. Reproduction robs the artwork of its uniqueness and authority, imparting significance instead to the image reproduced. In this way, the painting becomes a document—like the photograph—and its political effectiveness increases accordingly: this is “documentary realism” which is subject to other aesthetic criteria than those relevant in the development of easel painting.⁵³

Crone’s assumptions are of great importance for the mission of Warhol’s art: New mediums are better than older mediums; the mediums of art should be rational and sacrifice originality for reproducibility in which quantity becomes quality. Uniqueness and authority are enemies and not politically relevant. Art should deal with the now as it became then, its documentary feature. It is moral to suppress one’s individuality and selfhood. This, on the one hand, seems totally absurd and certainly outside the pale of art traditionally conceived, but on the other hand it would seem a vindication of Benjamin’s notion of power to the collective. This is unfair to Benjamin who likely would not have been in favor if self-negation or the reduction of meaning to being-there; the important historical dimension would be left out. Nonetheless, from Crone’s perspective, the art object assumed secondary importance in a process that was primary. Warhol’s art objects became technological objects, finding theoretical sanction. The object became a concept and a theory.

Consider Lawrence Weiner's typed instructions that appeared in the April, 1970 edition of *Arts Magazine* as a work of art:

1. *The artist may construct the piece*
 2. *The piece may be fabricated*
 3. *The piece need not be built*
- Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist the decision as to the condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.*⁵⁴

Now the artist, like the viewer, need not construct. Only a theoretical intention was needed. Weiner's work was in the words that are not words, words that signaled sheer thereness. Weiner's "words" were procedures and abstract counterfactuals, commands of expertise and legalese.

Tom Wolfe in *The Painted Word* remarked on the unique flatness of modern art, citing Frank Stella as a paradigm example. Stella claimed: "My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there *is* there. It really is an object . . . what you see is what you see."⁵⁵ The canvas was the object and the painting was that specific presence—sheer thereness. To ask what it was beyond that it was there would be to not understand it. Wolfe also noticed that it was the tendency of modern art since cubism to leave the realm of the representation of natural or cultural objects to laboratories of theory. The viewer, not a professional or a critic, stands before the line drawn on a museum floor and asks what it means. The museum-goer thus needs a guide and instructions, the expertise of an authority. In this sense the modern art object is not clearly a part of the viewer's bodily or cultural domain. And yet this "seeming" was not exactly being. A new examination of technology and its role in culture would be needed.

Art and the Empire of Non-sense

French critic Jacques Ellul understood that art completely reflected the technological life world that embraced images and symbols that did not transcend that world, which was the result of technology becoming a mentality. Thus art could not redeem culture, the worker, or the human condition, all of which had become technological. The technical world was/is a world of wall-to-wall media, charts and graphs, power points, blather, and all manner of visual configurations. Technological means—the manipulation of images—had become the ends. As we saw above, modern art extruded semblances with width but no depth. He wrote:

It is obvious that painting traditionally has been spatial, but it has also undergone a modification, rejection all optical illusion, so as to become only "something that is there." The painting is nothing more than itself—the real space it occupies. The discovery of space by painters and sculptors has been endlessly stressed for good reasons: the objects produced or reproduced matter less than the space between them, the meaning, the concentration of forces, the

*distribution of the space. The play of light and color serves only to heighten the value of the space.*⁵⁶

An image portending depth in the technological society bordered on the insignificant. These images meant other images but not other things, objects with independent meaning. The meaning of an advertisement was another advertisement or a command to buy. The image was the object's transformation and to some degree denigration. Benjamin understood this sense of image as an object robbed of aura, over which he troubled but did not explore like Ellul. Benjamin suffered what Ellul would call the political illusion that held that politics was anything other than appearance. Ellul had claimed that *le politique* had become *la politique*, that the techniques of politics had eclipsed the goals and values that had concerned politics with debates over the meaning of the good life.⁵⁷ Art, as all elements of culture, suffered similar change. This change in attitude was reflected or participated in a symbolic language, in words beyond images. A technical mentality denuded language, the symbol, and the corresponding mentality. The image replaced the object by the concept, an appearance with no history, certainly no aura, and no symbolic or dialectical content. Above all else the image was "disembodied" in a process of objectifying concepts.

Warhol had sensed that art had become style, that aura had disappeared with an open mouth, perhaps with the word. Style was more like consumption than creation. As we saw above, an art object need not be made to have art. Apparently, only viewing was important, what I have called looking without seeing. Warhol's words remind us that the traditional art object was subsumed by a technical and rational process that, as Ellul observed in *L'Empire du non-sense*, moved the art object closer to life.⁵⁸ With style, life became art. The rule for this style was "*n'importe quoi*, or whatever."⁵⁹

Considering the origins of the word "style," the *Oxford English Dictionary* indicates that style is likely a "meaningless variant" of "stile," in Latin meaning stake, pale, or pointed instrument in writing, or a style of speaking or writing. "Stilus" was likely also confused with the Greek word for "column." Thus, "style," perhaps appearing in error and/or caprice, points in two directions—toward an object, appearing as an image, and toward a word. As early as the fourteenth century, style referred to a writing instrument and to a rod or pin, to a fixed point, in any case. From the fourteenth century to the present it referred to a mode of action, to technique in art, in dress, in architecture, and in life. Austen, Dickens, and Ruskin were all recommended as great observers of "style of life." Warhol's "style" became an image, a flattened concept or cliché, as the history of the word revealed. In Benjamin's sense it was a sensuous semblance that illuminated a non-sensuous dimension. Seen from the right angle words suggested the aura beneath and to a sense that returned the gaze that forced

the viewer to look back. “Style” was both an image of an object and a word in contest from the beginning. Perhaps it even appeared by happenstance. “Style” was a unity in opposition and hence not a concept but a metaphor, a writing instrument and architectural column, perhaps granting meaning to life. The life of the word however devolved to fashion and to one more manifestation of life. The metaphor revealed a narrative that still applied however much narrative was denied. The word “cliché” according to the *OED* appeared in 1832 and referred to a stereotype block, a printer’s cast or “dab.” It began in a visual dimension, but the word was also a variant of *cliquer*, meaning “to click,” likely referring to the sound of the lead pieces as they were struck. This auditory dimension is lost in its modern sense, which is no longer the metaphor that was suggested. A worn out expression was left.

Ellul understood that in the human world apart from the technical dimension there was a play between two domains—the domain of sight and sound, the image and the word, an understanding that would have appealed to Benjamin in his quest for aura. The visual domain was essentially perspectival where the viewer was situated over and against an object, a here and now and where a landscape was established. The visual was before the viewer as a kind of certainty, an immediate presence, a fundamental awareness, a kind of totality, but a limited one.⁶⁰ The certainty ceased as I turned my head, as my attention wandered, as the light changed, or as it moved away. Its uncertainty arose from the embodied condition. My condition of embodiment, once made aware, framed the object, separating my ideas and feelings from it.

The word, on the other hand, points away from the certain, although it seeks a location. It is always mine. A sound requires with a peculiar necessity a turn of the head, a gaze directed. A strange sound is always accompanied by anxious eyes.⁶¹ Sound is as ambiguous as sight is certain, and the word shares this characteristic, even though the printed word seems to question this. Sound, and by implication, the word provides an all-around being and not a being—there, the province of sight. The sound and the word are naturally transcendental, as Benjamin also knew, when he claimed that human language represented knowledge and judgment unlike Divine knowledge that produced the true. Ellul, too, claimed that the reel, *le Réel*, of the world of Babel, babble, shadowed the true, *le Vrai*.⁶²

Sound, because of its uncertainty was dialectical in Ellul’s sense, while sight was non-dialectical, merely logical.

Thus visual reality is clearly non-contradictory. You can say that a piece of paper is both red and blue. But you cannot see it as both red and blue at the same time. It is either one or the other. The famous principle of non-contradiction is based on the visual experience of the world, just as the principle of identity is. Declaring that two opinions cannot both be true, when one denies what the other affirms, has to do with vision,

*which involves instantaneity. But language involves duration. Consequently what is visual cannot be dialectical. Knowledge based on sight is of necessity linear and logical. Only thought based on language can be dialectical, taking into account contradictory aspects of reality, which are possible because they are located in time.*⁶³

The rational was the linear that inevitably moved to the image or something image-like, to the level of the concept. The word, the sense of a beyond in time and space, a sense of history with a hint of aura, challenged the primacy of the image. What is before me is what is now and not then. “Then” takes me back to the search for an original. Origins abided in language and history, in the domains of both sights and sounds. In the technological world sound collapsed into sight, the word into the image, and all of these into a rational process. Critics would complete art and artists would become critics, and all of which would become as meaningful as one more moment of technological life. The sense of art from Plato to the Renaissance that the art object had been a harbinger of the True and the Good was either lost or denied. Ironically “rationality” from Plato forward helped to bring on this transformation, although I would deny that Plato’s sense of rationality would now apply.

In *La Technique ou l’enjeu du siècle* (*The Technological Society*) Ellul claimed that technical mentality involved a game, a wager.⁶⁴ This notion of *l’enjeu* echoed Pascal’s famous wager that takes place with the realization that, although he cannot rationally prove God’s existence, he must, nonetheless, choose between the infinity of the natural world or God’s infinity, between a false and a true infinity; he chose God. Ellul found himself in a similar bind: either choose the false infinities of technique or the true infinity of God. Technique had moved beyond industrialization and beyond the Marxist critique that Ellul knew well and for a time acknowledged. Ellul defined technique as the totality of means rationally determined and seeking absolute efficiency in all areas.⁶⁵ His notion of technological rationality was crucial in this regard. In the following quote I add in brackets a clause that was left out in Wilken’s translation:

In technique, whatever its aspect of the domain in which it is applied, a rational process is present which tends to bring mechanics to bear on all that is spontaneous or irrational. This rationality, best exemplified in systematization, division of labor, creation of standards, production norms, and the like, involves two distinct phases: first, the use of “discourse” in every operation [under the two aspects this term can take (on the one hand, the intervention of intentional reflection, and, on the other hand, the intervention of means from one term to the other.)]; this excludes spontaneity and personal creativity. Second, there is the reduction of method to its logical dimension alone. Every intervention of technique is, in effect, a reduction of facts, forces,

*phenomena, means, and instruments to the schema of logic.*⁶⁶

Rationality then referred to the application of a method employing the principles of logic—something was what it was and was not not what it was. Identity ruled. All was to be *thought and expressed* in a propositional language where something either was or was not. Thinking and language were to produce concepts and then to produce technical phenomena. Concepts were identities created by eschewing differences. From the standpoint of photosynthesis, two plants are identical regardless of leaf shape or number. All manner of concepts leave the differences in objects behind, as is clearly noticed in opinion surveys. As will be clear, in this regard concepts are not symbols, notably metaphors, where differences count. From the barometer and thermometer readings T. S. Eliot's sky "like an etherized patient" will never appear, whereas what does appear in human feelings and imagination registers deeply with Eliot. Homer's wine-dark sea was possibly like no other; now modern readers tire of the refrain, perhaps a metaphor that became a cliché. Cliches now pass for metaphors in the technological mind; they are the symptoms of the loss of the symbol.⁶⁷

Industrialization was the mirror of what took place between words and images discussed above. Rational concepts methodically applied transformed technical operations, the use of tools, by technical consciousness. Tools extended from the body; technical phenomena extended from *d'une intention* technique, from a technical intention.⁶⁸ For instance, traditionally, the painter ground pigment in oil each day before painting. Painters had to apprentice to learn the art of making paint, clearly inefficient by modern standards. By the nineteenth century painters could buy oils in metal tubes that altered painting forever by allowing uniform colors, ease of storage, and convenience on all levels. Rembrandt had made his own paint, and his canvases were unique from the first stroke; his genius, imagination, and perspective added the rest. Modern painters have to struggle with mass production before applying a brush. This is one mere detail that cannot begin to catalogue the incursions of various techniques entering the realm of painting; one can paint now in pixels without lifting a brush. Metal tubes, of course, revealed the continual applied conceptual advances of mathematics and all levels of science. Perhaps not noticed as operations became phenomena, the body was co-opted in the processes. Grinding pigment, traveling to find a master to whom one would apprentice, etc. all appeared in the metal tube, just as the chainsaw reifies the actions of chopping wood with an axe. The technical phenomenon subsumes bodily relations, direct or indirect, to objects. In the process of reification beyond Marxist critique was the transformation of things into processes. Mathematics and science from the nineteenth century on left no operations behind.⁶⁹ The goal of technical consciousness was to produce identical workers who were efficient in making identical products that were good by

being a part of the system by being identical to it. Otherness was not welcomed. The Otherness of spontaneity was permitted as long as it did not disrupt the "one best way." Appearance of differences were allowed—the appearance of free choice-- and even encouraged: the hundreds of labels for soap in the grocery store hide the fact that emulsifiers are emulsifiers. American jazz musicians in the 1950s were routinely harassed or abandoned by college music departments until it was discovered that improvisation could be taught. Currently all manner of apparent spontaneity is tolerated in academic halls as long as course numbers can be found.

The system is the result of a technical consciousness in which the machine is only one aspect. All that was technique was machine-like Ellul would say. The system proceeded from technical rationality when the object as Other was co-opted by the technical phenomenon which produced other technical phenomena artificially, automatically, monistically, universally, and autonomously. What could be done would be done, regardless of religious, artistic, or philosophical criticism, which became the justifications of technique and only, *n'import quoi*, anything goes applied. Technique took place regardless of any cultural differences. In this summation of Ellul's discussion of the characteristics of technique of note was the self-augmenting character such that one advance yielded a geometrical progression that in principle was unpredictable. Who could have foreseen that metal paint tubes together with train travel would produce impressionist painting that would yield digital photography, and yet all elements, Ellul would contend, were inextricably bound.⁷⁰ The final stage of technical advance was autonomy where technique provided the new sacred. Here the object fully collapsed into the subject. What the technical mind produced was what it no longer knew, becoming knowledge itself divorced from the process of knowing. Technology proceeded with no sense of its own history, which became irrelevant, with no need of a transcendent religion, what with the objects of imminent worship and with no truths beyond the laws of identity, contradiction, and exclusion. A profound sense of forgetting, what Ellul called *Lethotechny*, settled in.⁷¹ The sacred of technique was not the true holy of the Wholly Other, the goal of the word, in the Word of the Wholly Other. Thus, technical consciousness is confronted with an irony: No manner of ordering can exist without some form of absolute, a notion of infinity in some measure. All is technique is such an example, emphasizing the ALL. For technique, however, nothing stands outside of it, thus making the problem of meaning problematic. If the meaningful is just one element of entities ordered, meaning collapses into one more element. And, importantly the laws of logic determining the rationality of technique are not logically justifiable. A sidetrack into Hegel is useful.

In considering the problem of an infinite series or the idea of infinity itself Hegel offered profound advice. One sense of an infinity was derived by moving from one particular, and then another, and then another, and saying that infinity

was not this particular, or not this one, or, again, not this one, *ad infinitum*. Thus an infinity was defined simply in terms of the next particular which the infinite wasn't, which illustrated Ellul's understanding of technological self-augmentation. Absolute efficiency was merely the next moment, by definition, why technical production was endless in the sense of Warhol's drinks and of soap in the grocery store or in Benjamin's notion of the *ever-same*. And the other sense of the infinite was in the claim that infinity was not the totality of what was finite. The infinite was the Nothing of the finite. On this view the infinite was an empty class, a sense of a whole that in the past suggested God, the True, the Beautiful. These notions either become endless strings of finitudes or merely an empty class concept, another version of *n'importe quoi*.⁷²

In *L'Empire* Ellul concluded that formalism or neo-formalism and "art with a message," were the hot and cold taps of the technological society from which flowed the above spurious infinities.⁷³ "Art for Art's sake" encouraged "anti-art," artistic expressions with no object or subject; art had died but in its death throes produced more art objects and/or concepts in the object's denial. Propaganda of all kinds was met with a denial of art's political nature. The more complex or formalistic the art the more challenges embracing "*Kitsch*" arose. Narcissism in all forms reigned. And thus the principle of *unicité* was followed: what could be done would be done employing technique or some other manner of rational ordering, no matter how chaotic or passionate. Unreason fueled reason beyond measure. Art was what artists did and all had become artists. And yet there is still a word for art, however strangely employed. If all was art, why would there be a word for it? Perhaps there was no longer a word for it.

Ellul noted the claim that art had become a game, *un jeu*, and that it no longer had to be taken seriously, which he understood as a serious claim. He wrote: [Modern] Art opts for illusion over reality and gives reality to the illusory.⁷⁴ The symbolic world of which art is a part requires imagination and otherness. He further stated:

*In the technological system, there is no more possibility of symbolizing. . . . First of all, this possibility is not present because the reality is produced by man, who does not feel mystery and strangeness. He still claims to be the direct master. Furthermore, it is not present because, if symbolizing is a process of distancing, then the whole technological process is, on the contrary, a mechanism for integrating man; and finally, because now, it is no longer man who symbolizes nature, but technology which symbolizes itself. The mechanism of symbolization is technology, the means of this symbolization are the mass media of communication. The object to be consumed is an offered symbol.*⁷⁵

The dialectic link between the individual and the world and between that subjectivity and what is expressed

enables this "other world" to be achieved; it is both the condition of symbolic consciousness and its result. The problem of technical consciousness is that it is nondialogical and nonsymbolic and thus not a viable form of consciousness. It is a form of non-sense. We require the symbol and language to inhabit the world as best we can and need the symbol to navigate what is an essential mystery. Ellul wrote:

*The most explicit and best-explained word still brings me inevitably back to mystery. This mystery has to do with the other person, whom I cannot fathom, and whose word provides me with an echo of his person, but only an echo. I perceive this echo, knowing that there is something more. This is the mystery I feel as I recognize spontaneously that I do not understand well or completely what the other person says. There is a mystery for me in my own lack of comprehension, as I become aware of it. How am I going to react? How can I respond? I sense a whole area of mystery in the fact that I am not very sure I understand correctly. I am not very sure about answering. I am not sure what I am saying.*⁷⁶

We communicate and understand in symbols in which we say what we mean and do not mean, in signs that mean and do not mean, and in these gaps meaning takes place; this is not a nonsensuous meaning but a meaning that makes sense of sense. The echo of the word shatters Narcissism, as it did on Ovid's account. We have art so that we do not die without truth, to invert Nietzsche, but we have a truth that anticipates and responds to whatever reality we can imagine in what ever sense of aura we can express. Benjamin's aura became the conceptualized and disembodied object bereft of otherness from Ellul's perspective. Meaning and symbol require the otherness that appears in a word's history, its circumstance, its possibility, and limitation. The play and tension between image and word "infol" in the work of memory and the imagination but which are co-opted in what passes for art in the technological society.

¹ Andy Warhol, *America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 112.

² *Ibid.*, 14.

³ *Ibid.*, 199

⁴ *Ibid.*, 21-22

⁵ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 129

⁷ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁸ As quoted in Claude Marks, *World Artists: An H. W. Wilson Biographical Dictionary* (New York: The H. W. Wilson Co. 1984), 880.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 879.

¹⁰ Andy Warhol, "What is Pop Art?," interview with Gene Swensen, *Art News* (62) (1963), 26.

¹¹ Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renaissances in Western Art* (New York: Icon Editions/Harper and Row, 1972), 41.

¹² Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproductions," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn and edited and introduced by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 223-224. There were three editions of this work and I am using the third edition, which Benjamin understood as a work in progress.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 223.

¹⁴ *Illuminations*, 233.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 234.

¹⁶ "The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, and Others, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), vol III, 107, hereinafter cited as *SW*.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 107-108.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 121-122.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 231.

²⁰ Theodor Adorno, "Exchange with Thodore H. Adorno," in *SW*, vol. III, 55-60.

²¹ *Illuminations*, 188.

²² *Ibid.*, 158.

²³ *Ibid.*, 238.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 187.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 186.

²⁶ *SW*, Vol. II, 518. A very complete and far reaching discussion of aura can be found in Mirriam Bratu Hansen, "Benjamin's Aura," *Critical Inquiry* 34 (Winter 2008). Particularly note page 356 where she entertains something like the notion of a false aura.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 527.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 518. These words are nearly reproduced in the second edition of "The Work," in *SW*, vol III, 104-105.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 527.

³⁰ Trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 3-13.

³¹ *SW*, vol. II, 216.

³² *SW*, vol IV, 46.

³³ "The Influence of *Les Fleurs du mal*," *SW*, vol. IV, 97.

³⁴ "Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations*, 174-175

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 176.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 177.

³⁷ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin and Prepared on the Basis of the German Volume Edited by Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 14.

³⁸ *SW*, vol. IV, 41.

³⁹ *Arcades Project*, 11.

⁴⁰ See Esther Leslie's *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, (London, Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 2000) for a well reasoned Marxist interpretation and well placed criticism of opposing views. Rachard Wolin's *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) takes the

mystical/religious stand. Both have excellent bibliographies. I was helped by both.

⁴¹ *SW*, vol. II, 722.

⁴² *Ibid.*, vol. I, 224.

⁴³ Trans. John Osborne with an Introduction by George Steiner (London: NLB, 1977), 46.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴⁶ *SW*, vol I, 74.

⁴⁷ "Riddle and Mystery," *Ibid.*, 267-268.

⁴⁸ *Illuminations*, 159.

⁴⁹ *SW*, vol. IV, 391.

⁵⁰ See "The Author as Producer," *Reflections*, 220-238

⁵¹ (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 77.

⁵² As quoted in Rainer Crone, *Andy Warhol* (New York and Washington: Praeger Books, 1970), 10.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ As quoted in Tom Wolfe's *The Painted Word* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), 108.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁶ *The Humiliation of the Word*, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), 223, hereinafter cited as *Humiliation*.

⁵⁷ Jacques Ellul, *The Political Illusion*, trans. Konrad Kellen (New York: Knopf, 1972), n. 4.

⁵⁸ *L'Empire du non-sense: L'Art et la société technicienne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1980), 34, hereinafter cited as *L'Empire*.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 59

⁶⁰ *L'Empire*, 59.

⁶¹ *Humiliation*, 36.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 22-26. See my discussions of this in *TDS*, 49-68.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 13-16.

⁶⁴ (Paris: Armand Colin, 1954); English trans: *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkenson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), hereinafter cited *TS*.

⁶⁵ *TS*, XXV.

⁶⁶ *TS*, 78-79; *La Technique*, 73-73.

⁶⁷ See ch. 6 of *Technique, Discourse, and Consciousness: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jacques Ellul* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 1991) for a full discussion of the cliché for technical consciousness. Hereinafter referred to as *TDC*

⁶⁸ *La Technique*, 44.

⁶⁹ See *TDC*, ch. 3.

⁷⁰ See *TS*, ch. II and *TDC*, ch.5.

⁷¹ *Living Faith: Belief and Doubt in a Perilous World*, trans. Peter Heinegg (San Francisco: Aarper and Row, 1983), 277.

⁷² See my *TDC*, 98-105.

⁷³ *L'Empire*, 50.

⁷⁴ My translation, *L'Empire*, 274.

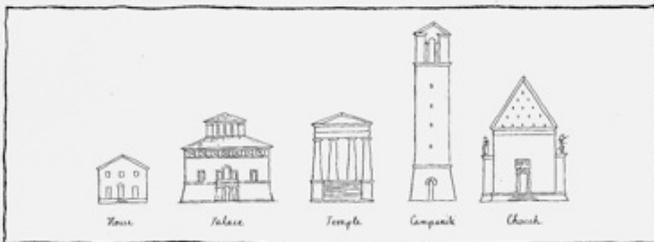
⁷⁵ *The Technological System*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Continuum, 1980), 177.

⁷⁶ *Humiliation*, 25.

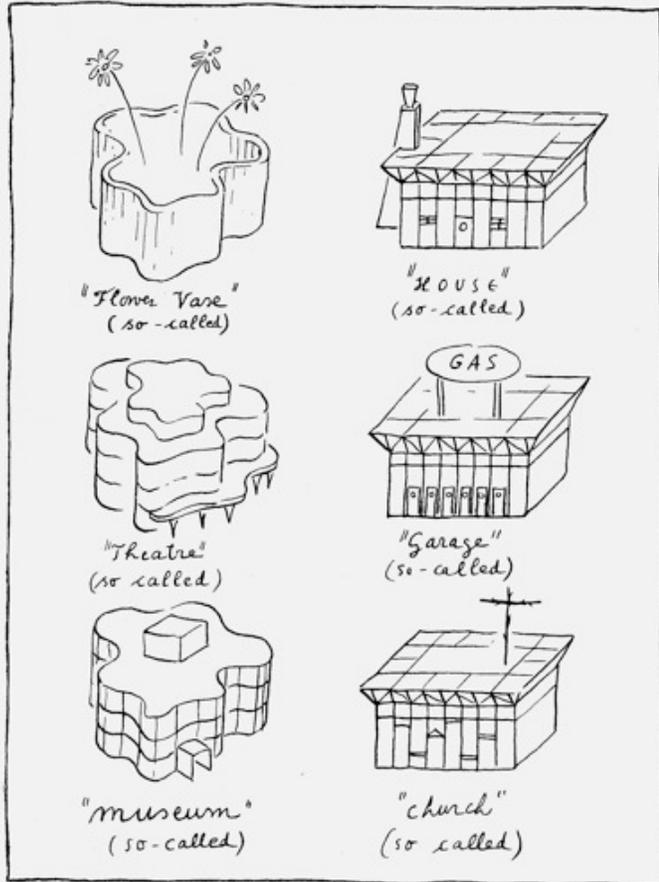
Technique and the Collapse Of Symbolic Thought

by Samir Younés

NAMEABLE OBJECTS



FORM versus UNIFORM



SO-CALLED "OBJECTS"

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"Art has become one of the major functions used to integrate humankind into the technicist complex."¹

Jacques Ellul.

The drawing is by Léon Krier, titled Nameable Objects.

In a poignant analogy Jacques Ellul once remarked that if one were travelling on a train then one could not see the direction that the train is taking. One must disembark from the train of *technique* in order to gain a perspective on its direction, and affect decisions from outside its empire. Such a task is truly formidable considering that *technique* as a system (*le système technicien*) plays a determining role inside society, a role that participates in steering the major forces of this society toward a technological direction, a direction that always appears inevitable to the technologically-formed mind.² One of the salient characteristics of J. Ellul's *L'empire du non sens* (*The Empire of No Sense*) is that his critique of modernist art was based more on the texts that justified modernism and less on modernist art itself. He is less concerned with the clusters of positions elaborated by several artistic and architectural movements that include Constructivism, Futurism, Cubism, De Stijl, Expressionism, the Bauhaus, Functionalism, the International Style, or the declarations of C.I.A.M. congresses, and more with the fact that they were all informed by *technique*, and that they in turn validated the technological milieu. In keeping to his train analogy, he engages modernist art from the 'outside', using his concept of *technique* as a focusing lens. And while he also offers a genuine critique of modernist art, he is unwavering in his judgment that modernist art and its theory are justifications for the integration of "humankind into the technicist complex". This characteristic sets him apart from others who opposed modernism from the 'inside', that is, on the grounds of art theory and architectural theory. Opponents of modernism usually assailed its fundamental bases in historicism, in the cult of

the zeitgeist, in industrialized mass production, abstraction and its remoteness, or the profound alienation felt in urban contexts where modernism dominates. Appropriate though these oppositions are, they could find further justification by incorporating Ellul's concept of *technique*. But unfortunately, Ellul's work is almost unknown among artists and architects in general, and *L'empire du non sens*, which has yet to be translated into English, is virtually unknown even among French-speaking artists and architects.

Artists, architects, and their critics, apprehend and make the world imagistically, and they apprehend and make modernity imagistically. Put differently, their understanding of the world is strongly mediated by images –the images that inhabit the world and the images that inhabit their minds. Ellul, by contrast, is a man of the word whose sensibilities are more inclined toward symbolic content, to the meaning that should underlie artistic form and justify it. Much of his understanding of the world is mediated by the word, and less so by the image. In fact Ellul was quite alarmed by the invasive proliferation of images in the technological society. His strong Protestant aesthetics played a significant role in this distress which he expressed as a religious conflict between the image and the word³. But Ellul is not an indiscriminate enemy of visual culture. He was most concerned about a particular kind of image, a triumphalist image whose empire humiliated the word, namely: the technicist image that frames the minds of citizens in the consumer society. Citizens of the technological society were consumers of technicist images, images that were justified by an ideology that glorified presentness as the leading edge of modernity. “With the ideology of instantaneity in art, with immediacy, with spontaneous creativity (the happening, etc..), we are in the presence of a pure assimilation into the technological processes, and a total negation of all that has been considered art since the beginning.”⁴ Space and visuality in modernist art, architecture, and also music, were expressions of technological operations.

Artists and architects, we said, apprehended the world with images and made the world with images. This, however, is not to say that artists and architects are not concerned with meaning or with symbolism. Indeed they are acutely concerned with meaning. Only, as makers of visual culture they place a higher value on the image, the form. Artists and architects desire form differently than others. They desire form from their standpoint as makers of forms, and these forms have a dialectical meaning that takes multiple directions. Artistic work is aimed toward society and society returns meaning toward the artist. This condition obtains especially in a traditional society before *technique* became a system. Yet, in a predominantly modernist culture, the overriding purpose for which artists and architects produce forms has more to do with self-expression than a contribution to the public realm, the sense-in-common, or the general good. This phenomenon takes particular importance with respect to the idea of meaning in art and architecture because modernism

inherited and amplified the Romantic belief in the artist or architect as a solitary genius who walks in no one's shadow and who produces forms that have not been seen before. The modernist rupture and transgression, in Ellul's terms, of previous traditions assured a tabula rasa where artists and architects can begin anew, while at the same time exponentially exalting their personae by putting at their disposal all the massive means of technology. The theoretical justification of modernism shifted the artistic intent of elaborating a tradition –ever a collective endeavor– toward a deepening interest in the artist's personal life which itself became an object of art. Here we have a replacement of art by the artist, as the artist became a sacralized figure whose genius must always be valued and whose decisions are almost beyond judgment. Even the empty canvas became an object of art –itself a mute comment on a painting that could have been.

And yet, the act of withholding a painting from manifesting came to be endowed with the aura of art, as if its intensely private meaning was precisely the reason why it should matter for culture at large –a condition of no sense. This gesture must have given its author a certain emotional pleasure for having achieved something new by the very absence of artistic gesture. In exasperation Ellul protested that “To apply exactly the mentality of Epicurus is no aesthetic creation.”⁵ With positions such as these, the frenetic pursuit to distinguish oneself, especially when undertaken by a considerable number of artists and architects over several decades, amounted to an exclusion of the sense-in-common in favor of the self-referential sign. Sense-in-common here is distinguished from common-sense because common-sense could be applied by simple habit. By contrast, sense-in-common designates sets of artistic conventions whose justification derives from the continual reflection, agreement and disagreement between many free minds contemplating the same artistic concerns, and enriched by the wisdom of experience. This condition has been violently reversed in modernism, particularly among architects who frequently put self-expression over an above the idea that architecture as a public art is called to serve the City, the *res publica*.

Ellul was little affected by the sophistries of modernist art theory because he saw modernist art forms as technological forms situated within and explained by a society that is meant to be technologically determined in the first place. Modernist art and architecture and their theory sought to form and conform the mind in a technological direction –literally a technological *weltanschauung*. This theory claimed to be the only form of modernity possible. Indeed, it claimed to be the only reality possible for art and architecture as they were given the task to mold the physical forms of society accordingly. Previous forms and traditions that have been painstakingly elaborated and layered over centuries within a cultural sense-in-common could therefore be iconoclastically discarded. Modernism had become a monistic force that was justified by art and architectural historians and critics as if it were a historical necessity, a panacea toward which

all previous artistic production was unalterably led and from which it definitely separated. Classicism's old belief in an unsurpassable past artistic ideal was replaced with the belief in a future ideal that will somehow arise from a historical contingency determined by *technique*. Apologists of modernism ardently argued for this belief, and some of them, like several Futurists, argued with shocking violence. In so doing, they produced conflation with far-reaching consequences, among which is the conflation of teleology with progress, as various historians of art and architecture wrote this conflation into their narratives.⁶

Progress differs from teleology in the sense that teleology does not necessarily imply improvement. A *telos* (Greek: goal, end) might very well lead a chain of events toward undesirable conclusions. Such, for instance, is the difference between promise and progress. In their good aspirations early modernists in art and architecture sought to wed their preferred artistic and architectural forms to progressive social ideals and their beliefs in the redemptive role of technology with the full expectation that historical events will gradually unfold in the direction of their goals. Yet, the decades that followed showed that modernist art and architecture became a tool of daily market forces having little to do with earlier stated ideals, while the unrestrained belief in technology led to catastrophic environmental consequences and a long-standing unwillingness to admit these consequences. Progress is a particular way to represent historical time that differs from the simple notion of development in that progress advances toward a certain finality. Progress implies that history moves according to a unified direction, and that historical periods constitute the various steps of that progress in which a principle gradually realizes itself and justifies all the changes. For Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, this principle is God governing history; for Voltaire and Nicolas de Condorcet it is Reason accompanying history; whereas for Hegel, Reason systematically justifies the progressive movement of historical periods on their way the realization of the Concept. Historical events or periods gain their significance depending on the place they occupy within a unified and progressive chronological development. Consequently, progress implies the merging of meaning with direction.

Yet, progress for artists, and especially architects, has been deeply entangled in means, and when the technological means proliferated, Ellul reminds, the ends for which the means were developed disappeared from sight. But the post-modernist self-conscious reaction against the modernist justification of progress was not embraced in all cultural spheres. In fact, progress has now become such a routine belief that it passes unreflectively for a historical given. Yet, when some thinkers saw the weakening of the Enlightenment certainty regarding the progressive direction of history, they concluded that this was the dissolution of history itself.⁷ Others went further, arguing that the acceleration of events has proceeded so exponentially that it is now beyond our capacity to see

them as history. Others still, went as far as to propose that the immense network of self-referential signs within the consumer society makes it such that we can no longer distinguish historical reality from the myriad consumer images that occupy the reality of experience.⁸ The multitude of images that now inhabit the technological consumer society have the power to condition contemporary understanding to such a point that they already frame the intellectual assessment within this society becoming a kind of lens through which historians look both at the past and the present. Accordingly, the mind is strongly affected if its grasp of the present-as-history is enclosed within this context. Paradoxically, although modernists championed their work as a decisive rupture from historical precedents, they nonetheless cherished the idea that they were carried by inexorable historical forces to the point they presently wish to occupy. For reasons such as these, many artists and architects rebelled after decades of proscriptive modernist control on artistic forms, on their history and their explanation. One of the first rebellions, since the late 1970s, rose to oppose modernist determinism by calling for a cultural milieu that accepted plural artistic expressions, a milieu that was characterized by its openness to the lessons of previous artistic traditions, a milieu that is generally known as post-modernism.

It is no surprise that *L'empire du non sens* was not well received in societies where modernism reigns supreme as a monistic force that outweighs, encircles, and invades all other cultural forces. It is difficult for the mind that has been formed inside the technological system to evaluate modernity separately from *technique*. It is also difficult for this same mind to differentiate between modernity as a reference to time and modernism as an artistic ideology. It is even more difficult for this mind to understand some of the most enduring paradigms that influenced artistic production in the past such as the idea of imitation, or rather, the inseparable couple: imitation and invention. The enduring concept of imitation allowed artists and architects to imitate nature and imitate established traditions. Imitating nature concerned Nature understood in her laws (*natura naturans*), and nature understood in her products (*natura naturata*). Art and architecture could imitate Nature in her laws by transposing ideas of order, of unity through variety, symmetry, harmony, solidity, and so forth, into work of human making –the Greek *poesis*: to make. Art could imitate nature in her products as in landscape painting or in sculpting the human body. Contrary to art, however, architecture does not have a *direct* model in nature, with the exception of the cave as an original shelter, or the forest as an origin to hypostyle columns (e.g. the hypostyle as a forest of columns as in the Temple of Karnak in Egypt, the Porticus Margaritaria in Rome, the Great Mosque of Cordoba in Spain, or the mediaeval tradition of the Italian broletto market hall with a city hall on the upper floor). As great theorists like Marc-Antoine Laugier (1713-1769) and Antoine Chrysostôme Quatremère de Quincy (1755-1849) lucidly clarified, architecture had to invent paradigms that could be

considered as “natural” models, as for example the idea of the primitive wooden hut that could be considered an origin to both the house and the temple. Imitation in art and in architecture provided the intellectual discipline, the theoretical foundations that enabled the painter, sculptor, or architect, to judiciously select and unify the best aspects of precedents from traditions with the expressions of personal invention.

Central to Quatremère de Quincy’s thought is that imitation produces the resemblance of an object in another object that becomes its image. The imitation reveals one object within another. This imitative representation implies a distance between a general type and a particular object or building. It affords us the kind of intellectual pleasure that precisely derives from recognizing and understanding this distance. Examples from sculpture are Antonio Canova’s statue of Napoléon Bonaparte as Mars, and his George Washington as Caesar. An example from architecture is Thomas Jefferson’s indebtedness in the Virginia Capitol at Richmond to the Roman temple known as the Maison Carrée in Nîmes. The imitation is a resemblance, but it is an incomplete resemblance. It is rather a choice of qualities inherent to one object to be transposed and into another object. Transposition is also transformation where the qualities of one object are recognized within another object. Transposition and transformation operate on the notion of the fictive which serves another kind of truth: artistic truth. Between the artistically true and the artistically factual stands the artistically fictive. Thus Washington could be analogically assimilated to a Caesar, and a state Capitol could be analogically expressed through a temple. Such an imitation is categorically distinguished from the copy which repeats the reality of an object. The copy implies repetition, sameness, counterfeit; it is an object’s double. In a very influential essay *De l’imitation*, Quatremère elaborated on the vital distinction between the copy and the imitation, between “similarity by means of identity” and “resemblance by means of an image.”⁹ The copy, Quatremère concluded, applied to the mechanical arts, while imitation applied to the fine arts. This prescient distinction, made at a time when industrialization was beginning to displace objects of art, was to obtain in full force with the industrial production in series, with the collapse of types into the standard, and finally with the collapse of the imitation into the copy. That is why, having rejected imitation, modernist theorists speak of simulacra. But there is always the persistent belief that art reflects society – a distant and enfeebled echo of the idea of art imitating cultural paradigms that in turn serve as external justifications of art. In many pages of *L’empire du non sens*, Ellul displays impatience with overused and banal justifications of art as a reflection of the society in which it exists.¹⁰ This banality, one must add, is erroneously used as a justification of art whereas in reality it is only describing the conditions for this art’s emergence in a particular societal context.

Prior to modernism, imitation meant that objects are made out of combinations of other objects, cities and buildings

out of combinations of other cities and buildings, while invention sought to improve the rational choice made from exemplary precedents. Whereas skepticism regarding the practice of imitation as part of a historical continuity began to be voiced in the eighteenth century, it is important to note that imitation and invention, in general, were considered as two facets of the same coin well into the nineteenth century and increasingly again since the nineteen eighties on the part of modern traditional artists and architects. With modernism, however, invention became an end in itself. The different facets of the same coin: imitation and invention, now became two identical facets: invention and invention. This separation was given currency and legitimacy by modernist art historians who wrote histories of art as histories of ruptures. The sequential passage from Mediaeval to Renaissance, to Baroque, to Neo-classical art, to Eclecticism, to Modernism, was assured by rupture, and invention was the cause of this rupture. Thus, the coupling of rupture with invention came at the expense of uncoupling imitation and invention. Moreover, rupture and invention in the arts and architecture came to be associated with the conflated idea of progress that we mentioned above. Artistic and architectural production was now considered to be *all invention* at the same time that imitation and invention came to be understood as antagonistic rather than complementary concepts. To be inventive meant that artists and architects were to practice *creatio ex nihilo*, the making of objects out of nothing, following their individualistic expressionism. Only, artists and architects do not create in the elementary sense of creation from nothing as their forms are invariably based on older forms even if they are the inversions or abstractions of previous forms. Instead modernist forms have been made, situated, evaluated, and judged with respect to *technique* as the value of all values. The big contradiction resided in the modernist claims to freeing the imagination and invention while wholeheartedly accepting technological determinism. Moreover, despite their fervent wish to be unique and produce the previously unseen, and despite their determination to separate imitation from invention, modernist artists and architects still learned, appropriated, and practiced their preferred forms through undeniable imitative acts for two important reasons. First, any collective construction of artistic or architectural qualities and forms and their transmission over several generations means that a tradition is being elaborated. Second, artistic and personal identities are inextricably connected to those of other architects who share the same world-view. For these reasons modernism itself became a tradition. At one point, even a renewed avant-gardist urge toward continual change passes from being a transitory phenomenon to becoming an established practice, even if only for the duration of a few decades. Those who denied tradition themselves developed into a tradition.

The idea of technologically remaking the world, the complex sets of phenomena that Ellul called *la technique*, was conflated by modernist architects with the uncertain belief in architecture as a scientific discipline. This idea

operated on the assumption that science (understood as technology), architecture and art, were linked by the *same* idea of progress. Whether it is cities, buildings, ocean liners, automobiles, aircraft, furniture, or kitchen utensils, the technological society was to be made with technological products and be represented by these same products. Every product must be qualified by a technological character. This unassailable belief exerted some far-reaching influences on symbolic thought, on artistic expression, on architectural character, and on the art-language and architecture-language analogy. Because technology was both the symbol and the product, the true and the real, the signifier and the signified, the artistic idea and its representation converged or rather collapsed into each other. If imitation and invention implied a certain transparency between an exemplar and a work of art, *technique* as a mentality presented an opacity to meanings outside of itself. Because meaning was internal to *technique*, it becomes enclosed within a self-organizing and self-referential system that accepts no external feedback. It becomes non-dialectical, a presentational immanence –a spurious infinity as David Lovekin affirms in his use of the Hegelian expression.¹¹ In the technological system that permeates society, the idea of making always resembles itself and replicates itself. It became its own ends. For this reason *technique* became monistic. It also eclipsed the symbolic ends, forms, meanings, and cultural conventions that previously allowed architecture to express a civic character or a private one. And yet, although modernist architects enthusiastically embraced the non-dialectical modes of the technological system, they still wished their forms to symbolically represent the technological order because they still retained the traditional idea that any object acquires a symbolic function simply because it was made. They justified their architecture as a *reference* to technology, while in reality *it was* technology. So the problem was not that there was a lack of correspondence between “image and substance“, as Robert Venturi suggested,¹² but rather that the image and content were equal. Thus, what is usually considered to be one of modernism’s strongest points, that is, the view that art and architecture symbolized the technological society and its informing zeitgeist, is actually its weakest. A symbol that recoils onto itself is a vicious circularity. A symbol that symbolizes itself is a condition of no sense.

The symbolic function received another setback with modernism’s attempts to eliminate the difference between the imitation and the copy while producing numerous identical repetitions of technological buildings and products in every continent irrespective of the character of place. The exorbitantly anti-ecological glass and steel skyscrapers that dot the planet as one of the sacred images of modernist progress bear little belonging to any place. They are built in every continent while belonging nowhere. Eliminating the difference between imitation and the copy also meant eradicating the distinction between the type and the model. Architectural types collapsed into technological standards, e.g. the skeletal structure of the *maison domino*

was meant to be the standard underlying the very idea of every modern building. Because any architectural character can be attached to this skeletal structure, structural form can be dissociated from architectural character and meaning which in turn become removable attributes. In such a way artistic truth is displaced. If any architectural character can be attached to a mute skeletal structure then the result is kitsch –one of the most abundant phenomena of the technological society as Léon Krier has tirelessly repeated for several decades.¹³ This phenomenon is most evident in the confusion of genres that abound in the technological society where a warehouse with a cross on its roof conveys that it is a church, where an amorphous and sinusoidal vase might also be the shape of a theatre, a library, or a museum. Thus, when ordinary citizens engage in caricatural naming of buildings, architects ought to listen because naming calls forth an object’s nature, its character. Naming lays bare an object’s artistic truth. Thus, designating the Centre Pompidou in Beaubourg in Paris as an “oil refinery“, or the new museum for the Ara Pacis in Rome as a “petrol station” shows an indelible sense of what architectural character “ought” to be even if the general public may not necessarily know the exact form this character may take. When artistic shapes and architectural shapes are exchanged and dissolved inside a technologically determined reality a crisis of meaning is precipitated –a condition of no sense.

L’empire du non sens can be considered *un cri de peur* on the part of a man who laid bare his fears and disquieted concerns about a society so utterly permeated by *technique* and so docilely accepting of this invasion. Artistic creativity, or invention, were not only “radically and totally integrated into the technicist system”¹⁴, but this integration passes almost unnoticed because modernist art affirms and confirms *technique*, and because the compensation for the problems caused by *technique* are themselves technologically mediated. In many ways the empire of *technique*, an empire of means, exploded the limits or boundaries between the arts. Architecture could become sculpture and vice versa, while architects transformed cubist paintings into the plans, sections, and elevations of buildings following the example of modernist prophets such as Le Corbusier. The keyboard of an electric organ produces the sound of drums and cymbals. An artist who produces ‘art work’ through a collage of unrelated photocopied images with varied colors is evaluated on the same level as the painter who composes and proportions a painting with the painstakingly judicious use of the brush following years of assiduous training and introspection. To a technicist mind, the photocopier and the brush are both means that are equally received irrespective of artistic skill; and the technicist mind, Ellul reminds, considers the proliferation of means to be a necessary condition of artistic freedom. Only, with this triumph of means any combination of forms becomes possible irrespective of the natural boundaries between the arts, of artistic genres, or established modes of composition. All considered obstacles in the emancipatory role seductively offered by

technique. Yet, contrary to prevalent belief, *technique* did not necessarily facilitate the expansion of artistic freedom, nor the quality of art. If the manifestation of artistic form previously depended on a symbolic thought that instantiated expression and representation through manual skill, this manifestation has now been replaced by technical processes and operations and the near elimination of what has hitherto been known as symbolism, whether it is art imitating nature, or symbolizing religious themes, or social mores. It is important to note that the *augmentation* of technical means has been accompanied with a diminution in symbolic form and meaning. It is important to note that the *proliferation* of technical means has brushed aside symbolic form and meaning with an intolerant sleight of hand. Thus the distinction between an object of art wrought with skill and the multiplication of technological processes and products has been blurred. Here we encounter one of the greatest paradoxes of the technological society: on the one hand, the proliferation of objects imply the triumph of the object, on the other, this very proliferation also means the obsolescence of the object—a condition of no sense.

L'empire du non sens was published in 1980, and although opposition to modernism in art and architecture was beginning to be expressed in the 1970s, Ellul could not therefore account for the solid alternatives to modernism that developed since then. Even if the teaching and the practice of art and architecture today remains predominantly influenced by modernistic forms (the technicist image) there are glimmers of hope that one discerns in academies and in professions. Several art schools and ateliers around the world (e.g. The Florence Academy of Art, and the Angel Academy of Art, also in Florence) have now emerged where the study of nature, the human figure, beauty and proportions, landscape painting, historical subjects, realism, form the core of their curriculum. A handful of architectural schools and private institutions dedicated to traditional architecture (e.g. the University of Notre Dame, The University of Miami, The Prince of Wales' Foundation, the Institute for Classical Architecture) are now established. They teach traditional architecture and urbanism in view of constructing an enduring world where nature is seen as the enclosure, where the city is built inside of nature, and where architecture is built inside the city, in that hierarchical order. Paralleling these academic developments, painters, sculptors, architects, musicians, poets, are now practicing the humane art of dwelling wisely on this planet based on the successful lessons of past experience and on the avoidance of past disasters. Both art and architecture are ontologically linked to the human character, but the architecture of the city forms the very milieu where we all move and have our being, and traditional architecture across cultures has provided enduring examples of how to build wisely with nature. This is not to say that all traditional cities have achieved a successful balance with nature, only to affirm that successful solutions that have been achieved in the past have a direct instrumentality in our use. It would be irrational to discard them, especially

based on so unstable and fleeting a concept as modernity and its conflation with modernism. But the word tradition needs to be qualified. The soundness of tradition derives from the soundness of reason—the sense-in-common that we defined as a continual reflection on the part of many free minds enriched by the wisdom of experience. Continuity is judiciously approved where architectural production has rationally been proven successful, and change is carefully approved where and when there is a rational need to depart from a practice that has failed. Such is the rationality of tradition as a modern practice. Following the hard-earned lessons since the Enlightenment, the practice of tradition will benefit by avoiding a blind faith in an unsurpassable and idealized past, and a blind faith in an unknown idealized future that will somehow emerge from a technologically determined reality. As Ellul himself acknowledged, there is much in human nature that refuses to be integrated into a technological system that frames the true, the factual, and the possible.

¹ “L’art est devenu l’une des fonctions majeures intégratrices de l’homme dans le complexe technicien.” *L’empire du non sens*, Jacques Ellul, Presses Universitaires de France, 1980, pp. 277. My translation.

² For Ellul’s discussion of the technological system as an autonomous and totalizing system qualified by an absence of finality see his *Le système technicien*, Calmann-Lévy, 1977.

³ See his *La parole humiliée*, Seuil, 1981, pp. 202-224.

⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 249-250. My translation.

⁵ *Empire*, pp.34. My translation.

⁶ For example the work of historians: Emil Kaufmann, *Von Ledoux bis Le Corbusier*, (1934), (French translation 1994). Sigfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command*, (Oxford University Press, 1948); *The Eternal Present: a contribution on constancy and change*, (1962), (Princeton University Press, 1981); Nikolaus Pevsner, *An Outline of European Architecture*, (1948), (Penguin Books, 1968); *Pioneers of Modern Design: from William Morris to Walter Gropius*, (1949), (Yale University Press, 2005); *The Sources of Modern Architecture and Design*, (Oxford University Press, 1968); Henry-Russell Hitchcock *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, (Penguin, 1958); Leonardo Benevolo, *The Origins of Modern Town Planning*, (Routledge & K. Paul, 1967); *History of Modern Architecture*, (Routledge & K. Paul 1971); *The History of the City*, (MIT Press, 1980); Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co, *Modern Architecture*, (1976), (Harry Abrams, N.Y., 1979); Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: a critical history*, (1980), (Thames & Hudson, 2007).

⁷ See Gianni Vattimo, *La fine della modernità*, Garzanti, Milano, 1985.

⁸ See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulations*, Galilée, 1981.

⁹ *De l’imitation*, (1823), Archives d’architecture moderne, Bruxelles, 1980, pp. 21-28.

¹⁰ For example, pp.9.

¹¹ See Lovekin's *Technique, Discourse, and Consciousness*, Lehigh University Press, 1991, pp.98-105

¹² Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour,

Learning from Las Vegas, (MIT Press, 1972), pp. 137.

¹³ See Léon Krier, *The Architecture of Community*, Island Press, 2010.

¹⁴ *Empire*, pp.30. My translation.

In Review

***Our War on Ourselves:
Rethinking Science, Technology, and Economic Growth***
by Willem Vanderburg
University of Toronto Press, 2011

Reviewed by Richard Stivers

Richard Stivers has authored a number of books on technology, including his latest, The Illusion of Freedom and Equality.

In *The Growth of Minds and Cultures* (1985), Bill Vanderburg articulated what some of us (including Jacques Ellul) regard as the best extant theory of culture. In *Our War on Ourselves*, Vanderburg applies this theory to the technological life-milieu. This book is required reading for students of Ellul and everyone who is seriously concerned about the decline of meaning in modern societies.

In applying his theory of culture to the technological society, he extends and refines a number of Ellul's insights, some of which were not developed in detail:

1. Technique supplants practical knowledge derived from experience; consequently, more and more activities have to be learned as technique.
2. Technique destroys the need for tradition (shared symbolic experience of the past).
3. Technique destroys "true" meaning and creates "false" meaning in its stead.
4. Humans do not perceive the need to symbolize their technological life-milieu because it is their own creation. Until the 19th century, nature and society were understood to have an independent existence.

As a result culture lacks a symbolic unity and becomes fragmented. In its place, the technological system creates a logical external unity by coordinating the knowledge and practices of the various specialized techniques. Desymbolization—the loss of metaconscious knowledge and meaning—follows from scientific and technological specialization.

No one has made a better analysis of specialization than Vanderburg. He brilliantly explains how specialization has destroyed the meaning (desymbolization) embedded in our

institutions and practices. He discusses in great detail the global economy, law, management, engineering, and education to reveal how devoid of meaning they have become. Finally, he suggests how we might begin to resymbolize these same institutions and practices.

Perhaps there are no more readily-contested concepts than those of meaning and symbol. Vanderburg avoids turning his book into a belabored rehash of the literature on the subjects of meaning and symbol. He assumes we have an intuitive sense of these concepts.

Meaning possesses "weak" and "strong" senses. The latter refers to the meaning of life, the meaning of time, absolute or final meaning. The weak sense of meaning has to do with the meaning of all words, events, activities, and objects that are only indirectly related to final meaning. The sacred (central myth in his terminology) provides the anchor points of a culture by creating a hierarchy of values. The central myths of a traditional society allow societal members to understand at a metaconscious level the meaning of their past and present experiences. The most important myths are creation myths, which provide a theory of the perfection that we can return to or reach in the future.

In traditional societies, practical knowledge was organized by the metaconscious, which provided a context for the individual and community to both differentiate and integrate their experiences and perceptions. Consequently, experience, and the knowledge embedded in it, was holistic. By contrast, experience and knowledge in technological societies becomes atomistic and specialized. The metaconscious is reduced to activities in everyday life and in work that are not fully technicized. Practical knowledge still exists, but is shrinking. This is why so many of us complain about people lacking common sense.

As Vanderburg observes, a technological culture reduces truth to reality. The genius of language, according to Ellul, is to express our search for truth, meaning, and value, which can never be reduced to empirical reality. The sacred or central myth of a technological civilization concerns technique (the most powerful means of manipulating reality). Meaning and value thereby are reduced to power

and consumption, which is false meaning, because power and consumption are insufficient to provide individuals with an answer to the hopelessness of inevitable suffering and death. Hence, we have turned power into a value and do not experience an urgency to symbolize our technological life-milieu and thus provide it with true meaning.

In chapter 5, Vanderburg suggests ways in which we can begin to resymbolize our technological life-milieu, but this of course means not only developing a holistic perspective on the biosphere, but also reintroducing values other than those of power and efficiency.

All who are critical of our technological civilization should use *Our War on Ourselves* as the basis for clarifying their experiences and thinking through the first steps of resistance.

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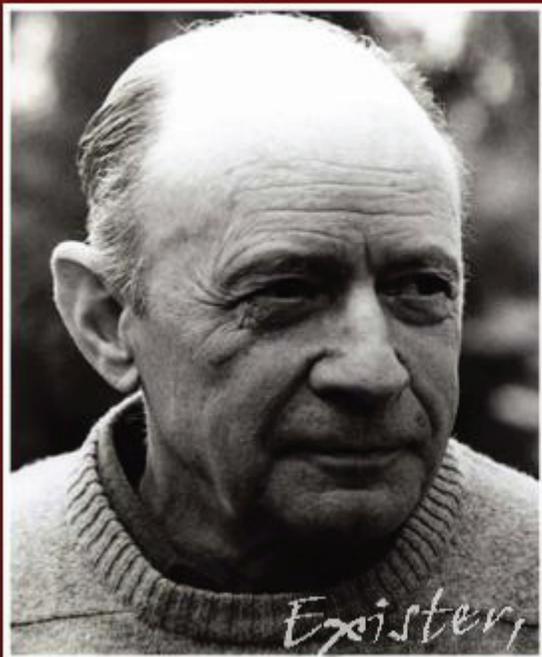
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