

Originary Technics

A paradoxical effect of the spread of writing was to produce a conception of the self as constituted by an inviolable interiority: the subject who speaks (really, reads and continues the "voice" of the text) silently to himself prior to any entrance into the social arena. This subject is not only pre-social, and therefore in a direct relation to God, the Idea, or Truth, but pre-technical and therefore the originator and user of technology from a position external to the technological world itself. Whether in the form of the subject of the free market or technocracy, this imaginary presupposes the possibility of mastery over technology, which, like the environment itself through technology, can be subordinated to purposes formulated within an intellectual space unaffected by the technology to be subjugated. This is why talk of the relation between humans and technology so often takes on the form of utopian projections predicated upon humans finally attaining absolute mastery over the machine world or dystopian nightmares in which the technology comes to master us.

There is a tradition of more sophisticated thinking about technology, including thinkers like Lewis Mumford, Gilbert Simondon, and Bernard Stiegler, which sees humans and technology as co-constitutive. If we can see humans and technology as "always already" interdependent and

reciprocally defining, we can dispense with lurid fantasies and learn to take responsibility for ourselves as technological beings. I think there is a difficulty in doing so, though, that I've only seen Mumford address but in his case more, I think, as a "deviation" than a constitutive feature of technology: its intrinsically hierarchical and asymmetrical structure. It's easy to imagine technology being mastered by "Man" because some men are always mastering technology and through it other men. It seems to me impossible to imagine equal and spontaneous contributions to the technological order by all involved, which is why the only form of equality that seems imaginable in any detailed way in a technological order is that of equally "dehumanized" "cogs" of the machine. It's different in scientific, laboratory settings, where everyone can be working on parts of a larger problem without anyone knowing in advance how any of the parts will fit into a larger whole—insofar as something is to be built, though, in a specific place, under the authority of someone, at a specific time, drawing upon materials and manpower that must be marshalled, the uneven distribution of leadership and power is inevitable—some one takes charge. We are dealing here with imperatives—which supports, I think, the claim that technology is prior to science, which really enters the scene when technology fails or needs supplementation, subsequently acquiring a degree of autonomy from direct technological application.

Here, I will proposing that taking a particular speech act, the imperative, as the origin of technology, will provide a powerful way of thinking technology and the human in a conjoined manner and in a way, furthermore, that sees technology as having an intrinsically ethical and moral component, rather than being a neutral phenomenon that takes on ethical implications only in the "uses" we "choose" to make of it. We can ask, why are there imperatives? The imperative, on the face of it, seems to be the human speech act closest to animal interaction: after all, while we don't see animals "explaining" things to each other, we do see one animal submit to another and do what the other wants. It would be easy to imagine that language originates with the imperative. But that would be to confuse exercises of dominance with meaningful linguistic acts: what characterizes an imperative is precisely that it can extend beyond the physical presence of both parties to the speech act and can therefore be delayed and transformed: the two parties must already "understand" each other in order to ascertain whether the imperative has in fact been obeyed.

This understanding must come before the issuance of an imperative, which means that the first speech act must institute this understanding—that is, it must be reciprocal and symmetrical, with all parties involved acknowledging that the sign issued by the others is same sign as the one issued by oneself. The most parsimonious way of

hypothesizing the emergence of such a sign is as the conversion of another gesture but not quite sign into the reciprocally recognized one. So, we presuppose a common object, desired by all, with the desire of each mimetically multiplied by the desire of the others, so that the impossibility of any fulfilling that desire becomes apparent, in which case the gesture of appropriation, the grasping of the central object, is aborted, and converted into gesture of deferral, which means something like: the being at the center wants none of us to have it. This is the originary hypothesis proposed by Eric Gans, which I think I can assume just about anyone reading this has some familiarity with. This first sign is an "ostensive" sign, which means it says nothing "about" anything, it just indicates and preserves mere presence. Think of the kinds of expressions we use to alert others to an emergency situation—"fire!"; "man overboard!"—and you get the idea. Before anything can be done or examined, our attention must first of all be fixed on this thing.

In the sequence of the emergence of the speech forms, as hypothesized by Gans, the imperative follows the ostensive. In that case, we might say that technology, insofar as we derive it from the imperative, is not quite co-originary with the human, which we take to be founded with the ostensive. But the Being who will issue the imperatives around which the increasingly complex human community will be

organized has already interposed its will between the community and its object of desire. Still, this Being does not issue the first imperative which, according to our hypothesis, was the result of an "inappropriate ostensive": someone proclaims or "signs" the name of some object in its absence, and his interlocutor fetches it: since this can be repeated, we have a new speech form, which can be issued deliberately. The imperative speech act is an intrinsically asymmetrical one, even if not in any obvious way: pleading, praying, petitioning, and so on are also performed through imperatives, by a subordinate or, at least, the weaker party in that case. There is another feature of the imperative worth noting here: since the performance of the imperative must conclude with an ostensive acknowledgement or affirmation by the "imperator," the imperative further implies a relation of supervision and, even more, instruction or pedagogy—to see that the imperative is carried out as ordered requires, eventually, that the one issuing the order walk through it step by step, repeatedly, with the one to carry out the order—this is at least always an implicit possibility in any imperative. Here is where I would locate the origins of the technical—in this intimate, fallible, highly interactive instrumentalization of one party by the other. And we can already detect an ethics of the technical here: this kind of intensive pedagogy has the goal of enabling the "recipient" of the imperative to carry out the imperative with ever diminishing supervision, precisely so that the range of imperative ordering can expand.

Since the ritual center, the materialized memory of the originary event, is by far the most important element of communal life, whether the imperative emerged on the ritual scene or not it would quickly become a prominent feature of the scene. That is, the center would become the source of imperatives. The nature of these imperatives would be to construct the ritual scene in such a way as to solicit further imperatives from the center, and to submit imperatives to the center in turn. Everything that serves the community—sources of food, shelter, victory over other groups, but above all the minimizations or elevation of conflicts within the community itself—is a gift of the center. It is the center or, if we want to "demystify" a little, those capable of listening authoritatively to the center, that secures all these benefits. In exchange, the center wants a part of the goods of the community, like a part of the buffalo meat that the buffalo god/ancestor has provided us with. The logic of human community, until very recently and least residually still, is sacrificial. But the imperatives of the center also concern the structure of ritual, which is very important, because it is through ritual that the group enacts the events that have formed the bond between the community and the central Being, and this must be done very precisely to avoid offending the gods and maintain the relationship of imperative exchange: the will of the gods can only be heard through the structuring of ritual.

The imperatives from the center under a ritualistic order, then, are overwhelmingly concerned with what we could call the design of the ritual scene. This would involve the use of natural objects, the manufacture of specialized objects, and the arrangement of members of the community on the scene in specific ways. The emergence of technics, on this account, is the development of this imperative exchange between the community and the center: the community petitions the center for help, and the center commands certain practices in exchange for such help. This help is not always forthcoming, or easy to recognize, which generates narratives of happenings on the central stage, which becomes densely populated with mythic beings whose stories are told and woven into rituals. Insofar as activities organized primarily through imperatives takes place off the ritual scene (hunting and gathering, warfare, etc.) it will be modeled on the ritual scene and likewise "covered" with ritual and myth—and, with the kind of pedagogical or apprentice-like relation I said above must accompany the imperative speech act from the beginning. This is "technological" in the sense that implements are created and used, but also in the sense that the ritualized order is a way of making things happen in a broader sense: it "conjures" relationships and actions into being. When modern artists like Richard Wagner aimed at creating a "total work of art," it was the totalization of the ritual scene they were hoping to recreate on modern terms.

The construction of specifically human tools itself depends upon the ability to represent a series of steps, which in turn depends on the capacity to narrate, and therefore upon the fully developed language we find in the declarative sentence, with a subject and predicate, suited for describing things out there in the world. The declarative itself, in Gans's hypothetical deduction of the sequence of speech forms, is tightly bound up with the imperative: to keep it simple, for now, we can see the origin of the declarative in the countering of one imperative with another incompatible with it, with the subsequence reconciliation of the two in a "reality" that includes them both and that neither party can control. If you ask me for a knife, and I say something like "knife went," and you, rather than aggressing against me for "disobeying" your command, accept that the knife isn't there (which in an imperative world could only be represented as the knife being commanded to be elsewhere), we have a declarative sentence, insofar as we can refer to something absent. The declarative allows for the representation of a sequence of acts, for correction, and for recourse to models to measure one's work against. It allows us to construct, in advance, a stereotyped sequence of events in which the request for a knife will always lead to one being provided. The imperative can continually be prolonged, so that the request for a knife can be extended into the command to create a knife, and to do so in accord with certain procedures and in accord with precise specifications. The

imperative, in this case, is issued from a higher level in the social order and is split and "delivered" to its "imperatees" through an increasingly complex set of relays. To demand a knife becomes the demand for the production of knives in a regimented manner as well as the demand to produce those who can make and use knives. With the ever expanding design of the scene, the designers are themselves designed in such a way as to sustain the system of design.

For imperatives to be issued from a higher level within the social order there needs to first be a higher level of the social order. This can only be the case once the ritual center is occupied by a human, who seizes or usurps it in what would have been the first "revolutionary" act in human history. The first to do this was the adventurer anthropologists know as the "Big Man," but the Big Man, through a long history we need not address here, becomes the sacred king and some of the sacred kings become "God-Emperors," ruling over vast territories and peoples, in a more or less divinized form. The sacrificial center continues to exist through these transformations, but it gets weakened and pluralized—the imperial subjects may bring their sacrifices, whether cattle or first-born children, to the temple in the capital, once a year, but otherwise they will be engaged in exchange with local and familial deities. Even more important, with the rise of the gigantic empires, we see the creation of masses of people conquered, enslaved, and torn out of any relation to the

sacred. These slave armies can be completely and mercilessly "instrumentalized," in the form of what Mumford called the "mega-machines" of antiquity, and which probably represent the first approximation to what we would readily recognize as "technology": extensive division of labor applied to projects well beyond the capacity of individuals or small groups. From this initial technology, predicated upon total command, we can derive the axiom that all technology is governance. Within any technological order, the machines will be modeled on and complement the activities of human collectives, while human collectives will be modeled on actual or possible machinic articulations.

My hypothesis here, then, is that the bursting of technology beyond the bounds of ritual that we have seen since, say, the Renaissance, can still be described as scenic design without the ritual scene. The breaking of ritual constraints is equivalent to the weakening beyond repair of the sacrificial order, which is to say the absence of any sacrificial center. All the engineering feats and the reconstruction of society around massive systems of sensing, measuring, energy extraction, refinement, circulation and deployment in various forms of automated movement and, now, the enormous data collection and algorithmic ordering that commands all the rest, can still be described as the ongoing perfection of a system of imperative relays constructing a scene in which any transformation in one section of the scene "demands"

some corresponding transformation in others. Those who design technology are quite literally, if indirectly, telling others what to do: you must go from one place to another, and you must do it in one of these several ways. There is always a tendency to reduce the options so as to optimize the system imperatives. The most perfect technology, in that case, would be one in which the designers at various levels would compel a single activity from each subsequent or simultaneous operator all the way down to the end user. These single activities might be quite complex and require a high level of skill, discipline and concentration to complete.

But if there is no more ritual center, on whose behalf, in what system of exchange, is all this frenzied building taking place? The answer is simple: on behalf of that which replaced the ritual center: the state. And since states serve no sacred order higher than themselves, but are rather subordinated to a ever evolving and incoherent set of imperatives deriving from such demands as "democracy," the "will of the people," "liberty," the "constitution," "human rights," "equality," "health," "the market," and so on, the gathering power of the state drives technological advance while simultaneously providing scope for all kinds of sabotage. That technology can be both a "bane and a blessing" is a commonplace, but perhaps we can move beyond that and beyond humanist invocations of the need to "choose" (as if Humanity is a deliberating agent) according to some vaguely specified but

likely residually sacrificial mode of morality. How do we even say whether a particular technological development is "good" or "bad," "harmful" or "helpful," or a bit of both? Today we see disputes over whether this or that innovation is even "real." Rather than reiterating the demand (issued by and to whom, exactly?) to make "technology" conform to this or that externally established standard, we would do better to think through technology as scenic design and the perfection of the imperative within the framework of technology as a form of governance within which we are all always already designed and designers, albeit in ways that are highly differentiated and asymmetrical.

I would begin with the simple question of how one knows one has done something. If you paint your house, but it rains immediately after and washes all the paint away, you haven't really "painted your house"—that is, painting your house includes, as a practice, accounting for the conditions under which the paint will stay on the house. So, we can think of a practice as an activity that includes the criteria for determining whether the activity has been carried out and completed not only as planned, but in a way recognizable to others familiar with the norms and expectations governing that activity. Here, of course, I'm speaking in a way deeply indebted to Alasdair MacIntyre and, through him, thinkers like Aquinas and Aristotle. So, I'm participating in the retrieval of the kind of "virtue ethics" demolished by

modernity. MacIntyre includes more in his understanding of what a social practice entails, such as the narration of one's activity as part of a tradition that one participates in knowingly, carrying it forward and revising it, as well as the practice being one that presupposes and contributes to forms of exchange and collaboration within a community. I would slightly revise this tradition by bringing it to what I think is a finer point, and one only conceivable under technologized conditions: the marker of the further perfection of your practice is the selection, more or less explicitly, depending on the practice, of the successor of your practice, the one who will continue and further perfect it. In that case, the question of a successor (and a predecessor) is built into the practice itself—you could define a practice in terms of the singularization of the one who will succeed it. Succession is, again more or less explicitly, always staged: in your practice you seek out, contract with, audition, train, create pathways for, the one (you always want to narrow it down to one) who will succeed you. Even more: you want to select the one who will in turn be best suited to select his own successor, and in turn his own successor, and so on. The foundation of any practice, in that case, is what I am calling "singularized succession in perpetuity." Whatever is involved in considering the conditions that might prepare a wide enough range of suitable candidates, available resources, training, public recognition and acceptance, even participation in practices

of succession—all that is part of the practice, however important it might be to explicitly thematize one element or another.

This understanding of practice implies a particular kind of social order, one in which precisely this kind of continuity is staged from the top down, so that a central and particularly visible part of governance is practices of succession carried out by whoever is responsible for maintaining the entire system of succession. After all, if governing is a practice, and to be genuinely governing involves issuing imperatives that are obeyed in ways that are recognizable as the imperatives actually issued, then the most certain way to ensure that governance is enacted is to have the practice of succession in the hands of the governor: if someone else is to choose the successor, then whoever that is has ample means for interfering in ongoing practices of governance. Only a ruler who can see to the continuing perfection of his practices of rule in perpetuity can be said to be ruling. Ruling involves ruling through technology, so it is ordered governance, which means continuity at the center, which comprises scenic design. In this way, we can also account for a post-sacrificial center, which is to say, a center to which the ruler is obedient but which nevertheless cannot be deployed by saboteurs to undermine his rule for "non-compliance" with it. Singularized succession in perpetuity obeys the primary imperative, rooted in the originary event itself, or "linguistic

presence," to ensure the continuity of the center and the alignment of the community with it. Meaningful practices are meaningful in the literal sense of being linguistic enactments which offer "proof" of the words, sentences and texts one produces in the constellation of all around the center implicit in the completion and succession of one's practices. This entails enacting the social roles privileged by the community, whether they be familial, occupational, or civic, and all of which, if not having one true, fixed meaning, are constituted by a set of possible "falsifications" and "verifications" that qualified observers can respond to from within their own practices. The sacred is rerouted to the significant—doing things that mean something in the sense that someone could follow up on them in ways that you would recognize as a follow up—which it was always conjoined with anyway.

There is nothing utopian in this social logic because it also describes what everyone is already trying to do, even if it tends to be most explicit in families where parents want their children to grow up to be more or less better versions of what the parents imagine they'd be growing up to become under those conditions, and to have children who in turn... Political leaders, in proportion to their strength as leaders, select and promote successors who will continue their agenda; any conscientious worker in any industry whatsoever wants to attract and train those who will continue and improve the work; an artist wants to establish a

new tradition of that kind of art, or to continue in such a way that will enable others to continue, that form of art, and so on. In fact, it is bureaucrats who are least able to stage succession because they must display obedience to anonymous procedures that explicitly take such staging out of their hands—so, they can only stage succession in underhanded ways. So, the best way to participate in the imperative order is to exemplify, encourage in others, and make more explicit singularized succession in perpetuity. I haven't emphasized this, but such practices also involve some form of homage to one's predecessors, those whom one has been selected by, or whom one wants to prove oneself worthy of being retroactively "adopted" by. This theoretical approach won't necessarily tell you directly what to do with or about Twitter, Facebook, Google, Apple, etc.—such a theory is more for readying you to listen for imperatives than to issue them. But I would issue the soft imperative to, even if it goes against the grain, embrace the narrowing of options I suggested above: whatever you are building, you want it to be the one thing you need to build in order to obey the command to install singularized succession in perpetuity across the social order—and, you want what you build to issue such a command as well, broadcast and ramified as far as you can send it. Imperatives that are built to last will narrow things down but also open things up, insofar as the imperative interferes and is interfered with by others, requiring continual hypothesizing

and refinement. (This also means that if you're wrong, you're generating the practices that will reveal that.) It's hard to imagine anything more powerful than participating in a command structure traceable back to the origins of humanity and stretching forward to indefinite human continuance, nor any more compelling program of study than to identify everything worthy of continuation in our practices, and what perfection of those practices would most likely ensure that continuation. Rather than standing outside of technology and determining what use we want to put it, we participate in technology as a mode of revelation of our planetary destiny.