

Modern Technology within the Western Theological Imaginary

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Abstract

In this paper, I claim that modern technology possesses certain general ‘onto-formative’ characteristics that indicate that our contemporary technological condition now defies orthodox theoretical forms of comprehension. In the light of this claim, I will propose that any adequate conceptual understanding of modern technics requires a decisive shift of disciplinary register: specifically, towards *theology* and to the formation of new philosophical paradigms founded upon *metaphysically*-inspired interpretations of the ‘total significance’ of modern technics. Such theological conceptions, I will argue, emerge from a startling recognition of modern technics’ incipient association with the infinite, the transcendent as well as with its capacity to “bring new worlds into existence”. I attempt this, in the first instance, by drawing upon the work of two major thinkers who I believe paved the way towards just such a theological conception: Martin Heidegger and Ernst Jünger. In a non-standard interpretation of their respective philosophies of technology, I will go on to claim that these two thinkers should be viewed as attempting to find a way towards a “radically conservative” revalorisation of ancient theological truths that they believed could provide 20th century modernity with the philosophical groundwork for a new techno-political order that they posited in contrast to a dying Platonic-Christian civilisation. For both of these thinkers a theological understanding of modern technics created the possibility of a new spiritual condition/*zeitgeist* where the very idea of modern technology is rearticulated as the focal point of a post-Platonic-Christian social imaginary that they believed to be revolutionary in its necessarily destructive relationship to extant historical worlds and their corresponding traditions. By these lights, I suggest, that modern social imaginary can only be conceived within a new theological synthesis that transcends the Platonic/Christian dichotomy of *techne* and *theoria* - of the worker and the philosopher/priest - in a way that allows for the poetic root of both to be revealed in its primal, world-constituting, form. I will conclude with a brief comparison between these ‘pagan’ conceptions of technology and contemporary Christian theological conceptions which have been acutely aware of the highly ambiguous position of modern technics within Christian metaphysical schemes and the need to reform these in the light the manifestly destructive potential of modern forms of technological innovation.

Key Words

Technics / modernity / theology / radical conservatism / Christianity / Platonism / myth

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I. The Turn to Theology?

In this paper, I will claim that modern technology now possesses certain general onto-formative characteristics that indicate, in a stark manner, that our contemporary technological condition has come to defy orthodox theoretical forms of comprehension, at least when this condition is conceived in standard social-theoretical terms. In the light of this claim, I will propose that any adequate conceptual understanding of modern technics requires a decisive shift of disciplinary register: specifically, towards theology (broadly conceived) and to the formation of new philosophical paradigms founded upon metaphysically-inspired interpretations of the total significance of the increasingly augmented role that modern technics plays vis-à-vis the patterns and processes of contemporary quotidian life. Such theological conceptions, I will argue, emerge from a startling recognition of modern technics' incipient association with the infinite, the transcendent as well as with its onto-formative capacity to "bring new worlds into existence".¹ In this way, I will attempt reposition many of the received philosophical discourses surrounding modern technics, in the first instance, by drawing upon the work of two major thinkers who I believe paved the way towards just such a theological conception: Martin Heidegger and Ernst Jünger. In a non-standard interpretation of their respective philosophies of technology, I will go on to claim that these two thinkers should be viewed as attempting to find a way towards a "radically conservative" revalorisation of ancient theological truths that they believed could provide 20th century modernity with the philosophical groundwork for a new techno-political order that they posited in contrast to (what they also believed to be) a dying Platonic-Christian civilisation, see Turnbull (2009). For both of these thinkers a theological understanding of modern technics created the possibility of a new spiritual condition/zeitgeist where the standard instrumental conceptions of modern technology are rearticulated as the focal point of a post-Platonic-Christian social imaginary that they believed to be revolutionary in its necessarily destructive relationship to extant historical worlds and their traditions, see Dahl (1996). By these lights, I want to suggest, modern technology, in the work of both these philosophers, is not only something that requires an imaginative (rather than a rational response) on the part of today's philosophers. It is more that any such imaginative

¹ Of course, the idea that a "machine God" has become a new object of mass veneration and an ontological force that is creating entirely new and unfamiliar worlds has become commonplace in many contemporary popular discourses on the nature and significance of modern technics. However, what is perhaps surprising in this regard is just how little academic consideration has been given to this idea. This could be another example of popular consciousness being ahead of an academic consciousness inhibited by ideological constraints and moribund disciplinary logics.



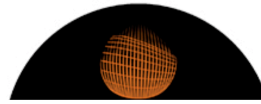
response, in turn, must be positioned as foundational in the construction of a new social imaginary that valorises new technical ideals of precision, mobilisation and ultimately the power of accelerated life in a way that no longer contrasts (in the manner of modern Romanticism) “the technological” with the ‘spiritual/metaphysical’. This new social imaginary can be brought about, according to these thinkers, only within a new theological synthesis that transcends the Platonic/Christian dichotomy of *techne* and *theoria* - of the worker and the philosopher/priest - in a way that allows for the poetic root of both to be revealed in its primal, world-constituting, form.² In this vein, I will suggest that the ultimate intellectual goal of these two thinkers was to re-sacralise modern technics in order to create a new ideal of modern technological order, one where modern technics is re-integrated back into the meaning-giving structures associated with an original *Lebenswelt* in a manner that allows it to merge and harmonise with the more recognisably human capacities of thought, imagination, discourse and sacred observance. In this radically-conservative revision to Western metaphysics humanity can be subjected to the logic of a Platonic-Christian “salvation history” only once modern technics is liberated from the Platonic-Christian world that gave rise to it and as such repositioned in its original *heimlich* condition where *techne*, *poesis* and ancient senses of the divine once formed an integrated unity. By way of a conclusion, I will then briefly examine in what ways, today, we might need to go beyond these preliminary theological reflections in an exploration of alternative Platonic-Christian reading of the significance of modern technics in a discussion of what the implications of a “fully Christianised” theological problematic of technics might be for those wanting to understand the nature of the modern social imaginary.³

2. Beyond Social Theory: Technics as Metaphysics

In the 20th century technology emerged as a taken-for-granted background to many

² The Heidegger-Jünger vision of the 20th century allows us to understand why that century must be viewed as more than a century of the technologically controlled mass mobilisation of people, as a century driven by an ‘organised inorganics’—see Stiegler (1994: 17)—that makes possible ‘the self-disciplining of subjects, the incessant whisperings of disciplinary logics’, see Hardt and Negri (2001: 330); a point of view much celebrated by recent thinkers of the left. For Heidegger-Jünger this style analysis misses the essential theological significance of the 20th century that of the Nietzschean death of the old Gods and the painful birth of new divinities.

³ Heidegger and Jünger’s approach to modern technology needs to be contrasted with the “mechanology” of Gilbert Simondon. Rather than a theology of technics, Simondon recommends a philosophical approach that seeks after a new ‘science of technics’ in order to incorporate the machine into the wider family of human commitments. However, what is not clear in Simondon is just how this re-orientation is to be achieved without a deep ontological shift that would clearly have to be theologico-political nature, see Simondon (2012).



N. Turnbull

Modern Technology within the Western Theological Imaginary

A Journal of the
Social Imaginary



traditional forms of human life. As such, it formed a new habitus that was formative of attitude and character and became the basis for the emergence of 'the new man' of Henry Ford and his Marxist celebrants. By these lights, at the beginning of the 21st century we can see that our century will almost certainly be the first century of "ubiquitous technology", the era when technics becomes universalised for the first time as the new measure of all things. Although the overall philosophical significance of this shift remains unclear what does seem readily discernible is that it signifies that the older Kantian a priori (of the modern transcendental subject) is now emerging as a technical a priori; and as it becomes prior rather than posterior to human action modern technology presents itself as a transforming ontology that takes human thought action away from the simple instrumentalities and practicalities of mundane tool use. As something transcendental rather than empirical, as what conditions rather than as a simple condition, modern technics has emerged as a basis for a new sense of history as an ordered chaos of accelerating technologically-conditioned events, a history where cultural value is increasingly measured in terms of modern technology's ability to create new senses of transcendence associated with speed, power and precision. Moreover, here modern technology in its very omnipresence has emerged as a space of inhabitation that conditions post-Platonic ideas of virtue and ideals of the good the life. However, the power and dynamism of this new techno-sphere (especially its growing omnipotence and its increasingly surveillant omniscience) creates significant serious difficulties for traditional philosophical conceptions premised upon a real distinction between techniques and values, means and ends. Historically, philosophy has viewed the world as in its essence a cosmos; as a natural order that humans relate to rationally by dint of their very nature. But what does philosophy mean (and what does it mean to do philosophy, to think and to reason) when the cosmos has emerged as a 'techno-cosmos'? When the machine has released itself from the finitude of its traditional forms, when in its endless repetitions of the same it de-sacralises traditional notions of transcendence in a new conception of the infinite (an infinitude that engenders boredom as much as sacred awe) how can one think through the nature of the human and the meaning of the good life?

In this way, as an increasingly omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent transcendental force, modern technics emerges for the first time as an issue that touches on questions pertaining to the nature of the divine. This situation clearly requires a new approach to traditional philosophical and social theoretical questions, one that recognises that modern technics, in becoming a site for a new kind of a priori necessity and universality, is emerging now primarily as a problem for the metaphysician who reflects on the nature of technologised being and its relationship to ideas of perfection, transcendence and the infinitude of new sources of power. The Kantian synthetic a priori, the condition of possibility for knowledge of the world itself, the principle that sets limits to the world in the worlding of it, now takes a technical form and with it the modern Kantian idea of synthesis (and thus 'world-building') is no longer simply an imaginative task but must be



now viewed as a imagino-technical process that bypasses the space of conceptuality, the space of reasons, altogether in a way that shows its affinity with older notions of revelation and faith. The metaphysical implications of this shift were recognised early on by Walter Benjamin (1992) whose justifiably famous account of the impact of mechanical reproduction on traditional works of art amounted to a critique of traditional ideas of transcendence from the vantage point of the new senses of infinitude opened up by the endless duplication and replication made possible by reproductive machines. However, perhaps even more important than Benjamin's work here, is that of the American philosopher Henry Adams who saw in the dynamo (and ipso facto electrification) a new sense of the infinite. For him, in the passage to modernity the Aristotelian first mover (Aquinas' God) emerged as "motor" and as such the dynamo becomes a new spiritual force that replaces the older spiritual force of "the Virgin". In this vein, in modernity a faith in and a worship of the dynamism of technics—whose final teleology is not mediaeval unity but rather a chaotic ordered multiplicity—ensures that the ancient pilgrim in search of transcendence becomes a modern pilgrim of power who seeks out the energetic sources that could summon to full presence of the transformative force "the machine God", see Colacurcio (1965). In Adams' work we can discern an appreciation not only of the theological roots of the modern technical worldview but also its tacit religiosity, where the divine becomes reconceived in thermodynamic terms (as an infinite energy that can neither be created nor destroyed). Interestingly, this metaphysical perspective on modern technics has been articulated in strikingly theological terms by the Heideggerean philosopher Robert Romanyshyn, who brings out the point here quite well:

Technology is the magic of the modern world and every man and woman and child, however humble in their circumstance, can be a practitioner of its art. Here in my island house, in the stillness of a dark night, I can sense Merlin's envy. My finger is a wand and I am invested with the cloak and cap of ancient times. Technology is awe-ful. And what is awful, what fills us with wonder and awe, invites us to wonder and dream (Romanyshyn 1989, 2; original emphasis).

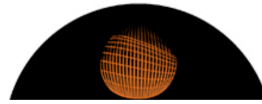
Modern technological civilisation is thus in many ways an expression of an occulted "technological divinity" where technology appears in its ancient form as both beautiful and terrifying, in many instances as a kind of "miracle of modernity" or "dark magical force" (depending on how you theologise it) that, in its very duality, has given rise to everything that we continue to mistakenly term history and progress. However, what remains to be achieved is a full appreciation of the wider intellectual significance of this theological reading and the extent to which it requires a radical shift in how we think.

2.1 Heidegger and the Revelation of Modern Technics: Modernity in the Theological Imaginary



Although we are in many ways still 'too close' to Martin Heidegger's many and various philosophical innovations to be in any position to make a final judgement vis-à-vis their lasting value in relation to a wider philosophical history of Western ideas, one way of beginning the process of understanding the historical significance of his thought is to recognise that its lasting influence is very likely to be a consequence of its inauguration of an entirely new theologico-political understanding the world-historical significance of Platonic-Christianity as a point of origin for Western philosophy, especially in relation to the metaphysical foundation of modern technics and to the manner in which Christendom was eventually to reduce the question of being to the anthropological question of 'the nature of man'. In opposition Platonic-Christianity humanism, Heidegger's philosophy can be viewed as the attempt to forge a radical re-conceptualisation of the significance the Western philosophical project via a new historical attunement to the "Greek awakening", one that allows us to understand Platonism as an error and historical wrong-turning that has taken Western thought down the path of 'metaphysics' that leads directly to the nihilism of the modern technological world; a world that, in its metaphysical (dis)ordering of being, stands in stark contrast to the freedom and divinity of a poetic and poeticising truth that emerged with philosophy's original pre-Socratic appearance, see Wood (2002: 175).⁴ In this way Heidegger's call for a return to Greek primordality was not simply an expression of a misplaced nostalgia for pre-modern forms of myth and enchantment but was, on the contrary, an attempt to understand what Heidegger believed to have been the central philosophical problematic of our time: the overwhelming facticity and social and political authority of the modern technological world and the disguising of its very particular metaphysical provenance in the humanism of the Platonic-Christian imaginary. Thus for the later Heidegger in particular, any adequate understanding of modern technics demands that we appreciate how, in the Platonic-Christian reduction of techne to an efficiency of means and to the human involvement with technics to anthropocentric instrumentality, the true ontological basis of techne (as a mode of 'revealing' and thus as essentially an 'onto-formative' inhuman force that 'worlds the world') has been fundamentally obscured and forgotten; and as a consequence it has become impossible to retain any authentic sense of life or being-in-the-world in the age of modern technics. In this context the danger posed by Platonic-Christianity is that, given the increasing scope and power of technics in relation to modern life the past and its traditions can no longer guide us; to the extent that in the age of technics "the flight into

⁴ In this context, Heidegger struggled to find a space for philosophy in an increasingly planetary-technological and cosmopolitan age that seems to deny the legitimacy of any philosophy of Greek provenance. For Heidegger, philosophy is essentially Greek (and thus in his view also German) and only philosophy in this sense, he believed, could provide the basis for a way of life beyond the nihilism of the technical era. However, here an engagement with 'eastern philosophy' (where the question of being is not so relevant) could provide insights into the nature of technology not available from the Western point of view.



N. Turnbull

Modern Technology within the Western Theological Imaginary

A Journal of the
Social Imaginary



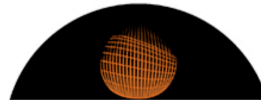
tradition, out of a combination of humility and presumption, can bring about nothing other than self-deception and blindness in relation to the historical moment" (Heidegger 1977: 136). The reality of our 'historical moment' is rather that of a de-traditionalisation of the world in the reduction of classical *techne* to the technological, to technique and to a conception of the world without any kind of authentic relation to the past in its unceasing attempt to construct and reconstruct itself out of the practical necessities of the present. This condition had important existential consequences for the later Heidegger; specifically that Platonic-Christian ethics must be reconceived as, in the final analysis, a project of "world-technologisation" that is now threatening to bring into existence a flat voided world with no authentic past or sense historical futurity and where everything is valorised from a perspective that gives primacy to the principle of human performance within the immediacies of collective tasks. For Heidegger, the Platonic-Christian *anthropos* (that was in modernity to emerge as Renaissance man, the man who wills himself into being) expresses a need not for a form of belonging that links past, present and future in an holistic historicising manner, or for any transcendent relation to something wholly other, but rather seeks out domination and control only in relation to humanly defined issues and concerns. Here the human will itself undergoes a radical transformation in Heidegger's view: it turns back on itself in order to perfect and empower itself; and for him modern technics is the direct result of this radical objectification of the human will into a meta-will, what the later Heidegger in particular referred to as the expression of "the will to will", understood as a kind of drive to create the very capacity for controlled human action in its desire for total mastery over itself and its surroundings. The Platonic-Christian evolution of the *imago dei* into "self-assertive man", who lives by "staking his will" in the drive for total control, to the extent that he lives only by risking his nature in a grasping attempt to control nature, is in this way the theological condition of possibility for the emergence of modern technology as a historical way of being in the world. In the Heideggerean scheme, modern man weighs and measures constantly; he counts and assesses and he calculates the pros and the cons, but he does not know "the real weight of things" because of his disconnection from his authentic relation to being as such. Thus according to recent commentators on Heidegger's work, such as Michael Zimmerman's (1990), modern technology is underpinned by a bourgeois ontology of measurement and calculation that is itself a phenomenon of a new kind of willing. As such, pre-modern ideals of Platonic wisdom and 'the son of God', the image of God's wisdom,, become reduced to a logic of control as Platonic-Christianity wakes up to full awareness of what is required of its world-historical mission. In addition, as the Christian *imago dei* is modernised into a new humanism, the idea of the sacred itself takes on a new form that reveals something lost in the passage to the Platonic-Christian world. By being open to this condition (and not fleeing from it in a Romantic reaction) we can recover an older conception of technics that will allow us a freer and more authentic relation to it. Thus as Heidegger claimed:



The assessment that contemporary humanity has become the slaves of machines is...superficial. For it is one thing to make such an assessment, but it will be something quite different to ponder the extent to which the human being today is subjugated not only to technology, but the extent to which humans respond to the essence of technology, and the extent to which more original possibilities of a free and open human existence announce themselves in the response (Heidegger 1996b, 19-20).

This is why for Heidegger the only authentic aim of today's philosopher is to articulate "truth of Being holding sway" within technology so that we can begin to question and to think "that which radically carries forward and constrains into the future, out beyond what is at hand, and lets the transformation of man become a necessity springing forth from Being itself" (Heidegger 1977: 138). Thus for Heidegger, thought must now appreciate the historical necessity of modern technology and its "fated" character: to the extent that modern technology reveals itself as the historical destiny of western thought and life, albeit one that at the level of philosophy remains "unthought". We can, in his view, only begin to live with this destiny by returning thought to its pre-Platonic point of origin. Only when technics becomes a "matter for a more original thought" in this way will the contemporary thinker be able to appreciate the possibility of a more free and more open form of technological existence in a form of technical being that has transgressed its own nihilism in recognising its secret sacrality. Only after modern technology is understood and responded to with "the right thought"—that is, understood and responded to in terms of a historical essence that has been masked by the Platonic-Christian humanisation of being—will the decisive confrontation with technology take place and new spirituality of the machine age emerge, see Heidegger (1978: 340). Thus in Heidegger's view, the possibility of human freedom in the context of modern technics presupposes a new ideal of human existence, one that appreciates the hidden association between *techne* and divinity, articulated from a position within the technological understanding of being itself. Until this conception becomes available Heidegger believes that the authentic thinker of the modern should practice *Gelassenheit*, the vantage point of the person who has withdrawn as much as is practically possible from the thrusting dynamics of the modern technological habitus in order to understand it more fully. When seen from such a position, modern technology can be seen to stand in relation to the modern world in the same way that religion did to pre-modern world: as the all embracing force, that which gives things their historical measure, that structures and patterns the contours of historical existence.

Nowhere is this aspect of Heidegger's thought more evident than in perhaps Heidegger's most important late work that explores the significance Hölderlin's hymn *der Ister* for the fate of European civilisation, see Heidegger (1996). Here, Heidegger provides us with an



N. Turnbull

Modern Technology within the Western Theological Imaginary

A Journal of the
Social Imaginary



alternative technological account of the fall, one where technics is viewed as the very basis of an original, heimlich (albeit Promethean), state of grace. Here, the origins of human culture lie not in the sacred garden but with the family and the technics of the hearth. The hearth is viewed by Heidegger as the original condition of being homely – and with its (divine) fire it signifies the capacity for poetry and memory, the two most authentic ways in which humanity can be receptive to being/divinity as such. In this way the hearth is for Heidegger what he terms “the site of all sites” and the ur-phenomenon of human culture. However, for Heidegger there is (in the manner of Antigone) at the same time an inevitable expulsion from this homely condition as a result of the inability of the hearth to contain the countervailing demands for non-traditional, universal, ethics and justice; a banishment that renders humanity homeless (uncanny) and demands a new kind of response; the response of the new universal religions (Platonism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam), the response of modern politics and ultimately the response of the modern machine strives to create an exiled heimat compatible with universal justice. In this sense modern technics is the attempt to find a substitute for “the lost hearth of being”; something that in its very striving gives rise to a radical forgetting of this condition as well as the significance of the powers that it facilitated. In this way, Heidegger’s famous ontological conception of technics as das Gestell is the uncanny compensation for our contemporary condition of ontological homelessness.⁵ It has often been noted that Heidegger’s central philosophical claim that in the context of modernity das Gestell reveals the world as standing reserve (bestand). In so doing it widely stated that modern technics, in a Platonic fashion, banishes the truth of the poetic to the philosophical margins in its effort to impose new form of the good and the good life (a life of ease and utility). This, it is often claimed, is the primary danger of our times for Heidegger: the fateful occlusion of poetic truth by technological truth. However, for Heidegger technics itself as a consequence of an original banishment; the banishment of the hearth, from the domestic space where, in Heraclitean manner, the Gods were still present and where being was fully and unproblematically present to the human imagination. The task of contemporary philosophy then is not simply to reclaim an original poesis against the nihilism of a world reduced to standing reserve, but rather to reclaim this original mode of technics – a condition where technology could again become heimlich and where poetry, memory and technics could again provide a site for an authentic revelation of being and an meaningful experience of the divine. Heidegger’s entire project can be seen as attempt at just such a hermeneutic recovery in the search of an alternative modernity, one where technics becomes a sacralising rather than a profaning force.

⁵ It is we might say that the profane sacrality of technics allows for a higher justice than allowed by the family and the community.



2.2 Ernst Jünger, Technics as 'Aladdin's Problem': Technology in the Theological Imaginary

The attempt to reposition Heidegger as a new kind of modern philosopher who attempted to think through and ultimately beyond modernity in a new theological conception of technics reveals a striking similarity between Heidegger and another radically conservative thinker who is often mistakenly viewed as a quintessentially militaristic, post-philosophical, thinker, Ernst Jünger, see Kittler (2008). Jünger was one of the first thinkers to recognise that in the 20th century technology had ceased to be a set of practical devices or an assemblage of productive machines but had emerged as a global metaphysical process through which a new world was being brought into being. In Jünger's work modern technics is re-conceived through a return to a primal, mythical, understanding where technics is conceived as a dynamic ontological movement based upon a new principle of 'totalised aesthetic value', see Dahl (1999: 46). In this regard, Jünger argued that modern technology must be conceived as a metaphysical force that possesses all the phenomenological powers and social and cultural significances that were formerly associated with the 'transcendent'; with 'omnipotence and omniscience' as well the ability 'move the world' with a view to producing a new, second, creation: a post-historical world where technics has put humanity back in touch with ancient senses of the infinite and the eternal. It is only once the ontological power of modern technology is recognised—as the modern equivalent of Aristotle's 'ground of the world', as the unmoved mover of 20th century modernity—that we can begin to understand its real significance and thus begin the task of recreating meaningful and significant forms of human life that the modern technological world, as a liminal condition, threatens to destroy. However, for Jünger, the post-historical technological era that was for him just beginning to emerge in the 20th century was not yet conducive to any kind of authentic human flourishing as it had become essentially fearful and nihilistic in relation to the powers it has unleashed and he believed that technologically-induced nihilism could only be overcome by means of new founding myth of technics. In many ways it was Jünger's profound philosophical intuition that the 20th century signified the beginning of an new epoch that can only be understood via the 'infinite intensity' generated by new 'techno-ontology' that provided the philosophical opening for new world-bestowing ontological conceptions of technology that have predominated in recent philosophical and social theoretical discussions, see Toscano (2007: 189). In this regard, Jünger explicitly states that 20th century technology represents the inauguration of the age of *die totale Mobilmachung*, or total mobilisation, that requires the formulation of new myths in order for its historical significance to be fully understood, specifically a myth that allows us to see in modern technology a means to resolve the ancient dichotomy between being and



becoming, form and the infinite, order and chaos, see Jünger (1983a).⁶ In this way, according to Jünger, modern technics in inaugurating a radical break with the fundamental tenets of Western philosophy in its expression of a new spiritual condition where the relationship between technology and the meaning of 'the historical' becomes for the first time a theological concern, a concern with the relationship between human being and its capacity for transcendence.⁷ In this vein, in the novel *The Glass Bees*, Jünger explores the rise of the techno-entrepreneur and his associated visions of a global synthetic ('virtual') empire that have become commonplace in academic discussion of the significance of the neo-liberal capitalism. In this work, Jünger refers to the age of modern technology as a post-historical age of the 'execution of great plans' that looks only to immediate successes, to what we might refer to as the immanentism of technical precision rather than to traditional transcendent aspirations and goals – but it is one that in its very capacity to perfect exiting things signifies the re-incarnation of an ancient divine presence in the world. In this respect, according to Jünger, in the age of modern technology modern individuals are no longer concerned with the futurity of progress but express a new modesty of temporality in relation to power of the eternal, manifested now in the design and use of technological artefacts, see Jünger (1983a: 284ff). As such, for Jünger the 20th century became the first century without history as such: a century that, as Manuel Castells was later to point out, will ultimately reside within a "timeless time" conditioned by the immediacy of relentless technological activity, see Castells (2000). In this respect, the infinite power of modern technics is one that puts humanity back in touch with older notions of eternity. In its power to repeat everything with rigorous precision we enter the Nietzschean nirvana of the eternal return of the same that allows for an understanding of the eternal in terms of more traditional senses of 'revolution', as that which returns us to the origin. However, even more important in this context is the fact that Jünger understood this transition, from the historical world of Christianity to the

⁶ An idea that was to later, via Heidegger, to provide the basis for Paul Virilio's theological critique of modernity, see Turnbull (2015).

⁷ Many commentators have acknowledged that Jünger was a significant influence on Heidegger's post 1933 thinking. Michael Zimmerman, for example, claims that Heidegger rejected Jünger's technological conception of modernisation, along with his idea that the 20th century thinker should bow to the inevitability of modernity's technological future. For him, Jünger's relationship to Heidegger was complex and contradictory and that Heidegger, in effect, "used Jünger against Jünger" (Zimmerman 1990: 67). However, such claims fail to take into consideration two things. Firstly, that Jünger's position as a conservative thinker of 20th century modernisation was philosophically far more nuanced than this, as the above discussion clearly shows. Secondly, that Heidegger himself was no simple proto-ecological and anti-technological critic of modernity – and his work in no way amounts to a neo-romantic rejection of technology in contrast to Jünger's modernist endorsement. Like Jünger, the later Heidegger accepted that thinking today must begin with an attempt to think through and ultimately beyond technology as it is currently conceived in both philosophical and within everyday contexts in way that takes thought towards an appreciation of new global historical ontological condition that is in some, yet to be fully articulated, sense profoundly 'theological'.



post-historical world of technological eternities and infinities, in theological terms: as the return of the world that existed 'before the arrival of the Gods', to a sense of religiosity masked over by Platonic-Christian metaphysics, to a world determined by the conflict between Divine and Titanic forces. In Jünger's view, to experience the 20th century was thus to experience what he terms 'the labour pains of Titanism', see Jünger (1983b: 47), a condition where one is forced to celebrate the destruction of the old Gods but to endure the interregnum of the arrival of new ones; the new divinities and the post-bourgeois order that he believed will emerge as new forms of sacred authority that will ultimately forge a reconnection between humanity and older senses of 'the infinite', a connection that modernity, in its championing of finitude, appeared to have relegated to the status of emotive marginalia. As such, Jünger suggests that the ancient yearning for 'new worlds' (and new Gods) has now taken on very distinctive technological features, to the extent that after the death of the Christian God (as traditionally conceived) transcendence is now only conceivable in technological terms (in drug use, space travel and cybernetic forms of bodily augmentation). The historic purpose of modern technology is then to efface the old faith in order to make space for a new one. As one of the characters in his late novel *Aladdin's Problem* claimed "[r]ockets are not destined for alien worlds, their purpose is to shake the old faith; its hereafter has been shown wanting" (Jünger 1983b; 120). This new faith will express a new kind of 'cosmicism', one that reconnects us to the cosmological worldview of the ancients with modern technological sensibilities - but this in turn will require a new mythological response given our radically altered technological predicament: As Jünger himself wrote:

In 1932 I saw a new type of planetary man was putting itself in place and that he bore within himself a new metaphysics of which, on the empirical plane, he is not yet really conscious. Today still his visage remains partially hidden...But in this [technological] process, one must avoid representing it from an historical economic, social or even ideological angle. The phenomenon transpires at a much greater profundity... Today we live a transitional age between two immense moments of history, as it was the case in the time of Heraclitus. The latter found himself between two dimensions: on the one side there was myth, on the other, history. And we, we find ourselves between history and the appearance of something completely different. And our transitional era is characterized by a phase of Titanism, which the modern world expresses at all levels (Jünger, cited in Zimmerman, 1990: 63)

For Jünger, there is no way of denying the unconformable condition of Titanism. We might say in this vein that the religion of the future will be one where this technological condition awaits a new Plato/Christ who slays the Titans allowing us to begin the task of thinking through the new ideals of ethics, politics and epistemology that post-historical,



technological, existence demands. Jünger's conservatism is thus somewhat different from Heidegger's, as it does not believe that Greek philosophy has any power in relation to technological present because what is now required is a new religious myth for an age when the future can only be understood by appeal to the powers of new technologically-inspired divinities, the 'seminal reasons' of our age - because in his view only myth has the ability to create a new ideal of technological inhabitation. In the meantime (as with Heidegger) the authentic thinker, Jünger believes, can only escape the global nihilism to which modern technology has given rise by 'fleeing into the forest' - the response of der Waldgänger.⁸ Here, the authentic thinker waits, for the new God who brings light and understanding to the dark world of Titanic technology. Here the forest represents the capacity of human beings to resist modern technics in retaining their 'God-given' powers of authentic decision. However, the forest passage for Jünger is only possible 'if the great power of theology is able to come to the aid of the modern technological subject. [where]...[m]an is interrogated about his supreme values, about his view of the world as a whole and the relationship on his existence to it' (Jünger 2013: 56).

Therefore Jünger can and should also be seen, like Heidegger as a techno-mystic - the final refuge of a radical conservative who has lost all political hope.⁹ For Jünger the danger that presides over human life in the age of modern technology is that of a return to humanity's ancient relationship with the elemental in way that is threatening and disturbing, a relationship that will only be made fully safe by means of the new religion to come, where technological forces become a new source of sacred rites and taboos. Here the destructive power of modern technology (understood in this instance as the capacity to unleash the elemental in order to wage war) becomes venerated and re-sacralised as the basis for a new theologico-political authority.¹⁰ In this regard, Jünger attempted to

⁸ The basis for this interpretation was the experience of the First World War, the *Fronterlebnis*, most famously articulated in his autobiographical account of trench warfare *Storm of Steel* (*In Stahlgewittern*) - a work famously criticised by Benjamin for its aestheticisation of both war and politics that offers us return to a pre-Platonic mythical conception ideal of heroic redemption. For Jünger, the war brought the reality of danger back into human awareness after its pathologisation in the liberal bourgeois era. For Jünger, the First World War was a 'revolutionary protest against the values of the bourgeois world' and a war not between nations but between two epochs: bourgeois modernity and the technological post-bourgeois modernity to come, see Jünger (1993b: 29-30). In his most famous philosophical work *der Arbeiter*, Jünger attempted to make the *Fronterlebnis* the foundation for a new Nietzschean conservative politics and for the theological ordeal that all moderns must face in the modern technological epoch.

⁹ "Techno-conservatism", represents perhaps one of the most important philosophical positions taken up by a variety of different thinkers during the in the last century: a position that attempt to find a new principle of order within technology, albeit one that rejects all existing traditions and institutional forms. Daniel Bell can be viewed as a techno-conservative in this sense as well all those who have followed Schumpeter in viewing technology as the key to understanding modernity as a force of creative destruction.

¹⁰ According to two recent commentators, Jünger's politics was the expression of a Heraclitean techno-ontology of war, where war is conceived as 'a nihilistic will to destroy', see Mitcham (1994: 249). This is



think through the theological dimensions of modern technological civilisation within its emergent planetary contexts where technological change seems to defy any kind of rational comprehension. Jünger's thought was thus not militaristic and those who stress its warrior ethos overlook the fact for Jünger the wars of the century were not to be celebrated at all but were viewed merely 'transitional phenomena', symptoms of the birth of a new post-historical technological condition; the first painful movements produced by a new incendiary ontology, the ontology of a emergent 'dynamite civilisation', the civilisation of 'the explosive technological event' driven forwards by 'the rapid diminutive explosions which set in motion myriads of machines, the explosions which threaten continents' (Jünger 2000: 93). For in the explosive arrival of modern technics, that destroys the old Gods, Jünger kept faith in the hope a new religiosity that will eventually emerge that will be radically different from all previous theologies. Without theology our times will remain incomprehensible to us.

From the vantage point of the forest the authentic response to modern technics is that of the anarchist who waits in a state of inner emigration for what he terms the "wall of time" to make manifest "the immovable centre" of modern technics as the sublime stillness within the technological absolute (that both underlies and determines the dynamism of modern life). In this way Jünger's anarchist is consoled by the expectation of a novel arrival: a new myth and new forms of godliness that are able to give form and purpose to the Titanic, post-historical world. In Jünger's case, the new god will emerge as Phares, the bringer of light who speaks for the technological world and is able to occupy and thrive at its dynamic core - a God who emerges as "a mentor with Gnostic instruction", see Meyer (1983: 134).¹¹ This, according to Jünger, was the task facing the 20th century philosopher. It is what he termed "Aladdin's problem": the problem of how we are to decide (in the philosophical sense) in the face of the primal cosmic, titanic, powers now steaming towards us, see Jünger (1993a: 118). For him, moderns now have in their possession a new world-transformative power in their Faustian summoning up of elemental powers. However, modern philosophers are as yet incapable of telling them what to wish for with it and will not be able to unless they begin to recognise that modern technics requires a theological rather than a philosophical response. It is only by

understood to be "essential for human excellence", that is for that attainment of virtue in post-theistic context, see Taylor (2007, 630).

¹¹ For Jünger, then, technology is to some extent the *malin génie* of 20th century modernity; the demon that is the destroyer of old certainties and worlds but also that which allows for the emergence of new certainties and divinities. In this way, for Jünger the technological genie is also a messenger; albeit one whose message cannot yet be understood (one thinks here immediately of the image of the monolith in Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey). Technology for him is an ancient language, but it is written in a language that we, given our philosophical and intellectual traditions, cannot yet understand. In this context the task of the thinker today is to decipher technology's primal language in order to make sense of the nature (and the significance) of the founding religiosity of the post-bourgeois world to come.

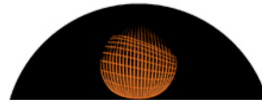


recognising the religious significance of this power (and through this own our true relationship to the divine) that its status as the harbinger of a radically new civilisation will be made fully visible to us.

3. Conclusion: Theologising Technology - Pagan or Christian?

Modernity, it is often claimed, is the historical era that characterised by the attempt to universalise European culture in the name of 'the political truths of 'human rights', 'international law' and the techno-sciences. In contradistinction to this, Heidegger and Jünger pointed out that 20th century modernity represents a profound departure from the Enlightenment conception of universal truth because in their view it is at this juncture that modern technology emerges as a site for the emergence of a deeper, more primordial truth. Here the only solace is to be found in interior worlds until the true theological significance of technics is fully revealed to us. This truth, they believed, will support a new spiritual authority based upon a new way of understanding technology in-itself. In this way, their thought represents an attempt to show how a conservative can swim with the tides of technological modernisation and they demonstrate the extent to which modern technology, in dismantling bourgeois high culture and ideology, can become the vehicle for a new radically conservative modernity founded upon pre-Christian, pagan, ideals and values (in this sense the new Gods are very much the old Gods). In this scheme modern technology will preserve a recognisable way of life where humans retain the traditional powers of autonomy and decision.¹² In this sense, their philosophies also permit us to discern, in the design and application of modern technics, the strange worship of a hidden Gnostic God, a God set free from the limitations of matter that denies the legitimacy of the Christian order of creation. The basic truth of their German techno-mysticism stems from its recognition that modern technology has a power and scope that once only

¹² In as much as which, modern technology requires a very different intellectual positioning to those taken up today's critical theorists of technology; one founded upon an awareness that the technologically induced nihilism of the 20th century cannot be overcome by finding new forms of social relation that reflect the complexity and epistemic powers of the technological world, nor upon a philosophical account that allows the overcoming of the alienation and psychic numbing of the mass of the population in the face of technological change. For Heidegger and Jünger, the line of nihilism can only be crossed via a new 'theological' focus 'that which endures' within 'the world' of technology: a concern with that fixed point within technology to which humans can develop a meaningful relation over an extended period of historical time. Only then, in their view, will moderns be able to see beyond the 'carceral' aspects of das Gestell and show how modern technology can support a sense of worldhood that is no longer the fleeting and transient world of postmodern nihilism but a world touched with ancient glamour of 'eternal truth'.



N. Turnbull

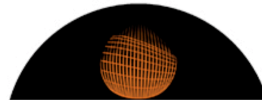
Modern Technology within the Western Theological Imaginary

A Journal of the
Social Imaginary



fearful pagan divinities possessed, and as such it has become a force that defies all forms of rational comprehension and theoretical systemisation in its sublime manifestation in the epoch of transition. Modern technology, in this sense, will no doubt emerge as a new categorical imperative: one founded on the new ideals of precision and performativity where ethics an obligation that only a theological discourse possesses the imaginative resources to conceive of and counter. In their view in order to grasp the nature of modern technics another way of thinking is required; a mytho-poetic thinking that is capable of mediating between traditional Platonic-Christian 'man' and his Nietzschean power-pilgrim that stands today as his 'technological other', a way of thinking that takes us beyond the crude technological imperatives and political ecstasies of a seemingly Godless century.

However, what such theological speculations omit are the extent to which this issue has been very much alive within traditional Christian forms of theological reflection and the extent to which this problem is still insightful for the Christian theologian. In fact, these concerns were especially present in the historical reflections on the theological significance of modern technics by the American mediaevalist Lynn White (1977). Interestingly, White links modern technology not to an incipient logic of Greek Platonism. On the contrary, he argues that that both science and technology, at least in their modern guises, are underpinned by a new attitude towards the order to creation that emerges first in Europe in the early mediaeval period. His analysis reveals an intimate connection between modern technology and what we might term modern 'Gothic' Christianity, the Christianity that became fascinated with the power of technics to transform nature into 'purposeless substance' in order reveal a flat ontology that positioned humans and the divine as aspects of the same world (the ontology of late-mediaeval nominalism). Thus for White, it is not a Platonic-Christian misconception of technics that is decisive in this context but rather the radical transformation experienced by our senses of the sacred and the divine as a consequence of the late-mediaeval technological revolution. For it is only in the late Middle Ages that Western Christendom first conceives of the possibility of a technological society no longer the result of the efforts of sweating slaves; one where theologians become aware that the "good infinity" of mechanism can resolve the political problem associated with the "bad infinity" of perpetual torment and toil. Thus although Christianity itself from its very beginning, as can be clearly discerned in the Judeo-Christian creation story, understood being as something created primarily for humans—as we are created in the image of God (the *imago dei*), to the extent that humans are by divine fiat the masters and controllers of nature—the crucial change that mediaeval Christianity brought about was the belief that technical innovation has made possible a Christian theology that can give sacred legitimacy to the radical transformation of the world; one where technics was viewed as the angelic means for bringing about the eschatological



N. Turnbull

Modern Technology within the Western Theological Imaginary

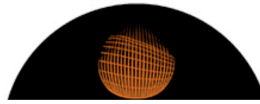
A Journal of the
Social Imaginary



kingdom of God.¹³ In this way White points out that that question of the world-historical significance of technics was a theological concern prior to the industrialism and the scientific revolution, and to this extent one of the primary tasks of Christian theological reflection is now to find an appropriate theological response the arrival of a fully theological world that threatens the profanation of everything – to find a way of understanding how Christianity became essentially an ideology of modern techno-science with its destructive powers and potentials. What, then, might a properly Christian theological response to modern technics be? In orthodox theological terms, from the point view of the ‘round-arch’ of Augustinianism, modern technics emerges as “satanic”; as something like a void that brings into existence a worldless world that in its crude functionality is the direct antithesis of the glory of the divine order of creation. However, when viewed in less orthodox terms (more scholastically) then technology takes on a salvific aspect, as the angelic harbinger of the final resolution to the theological problem of salvation history. It becomes the source of a new glory, the glory of a world lit up by the power of an artificial light. In this regard, Heidegger and Jünger’s techno-theology seems caught between these two poles: part orthodox, part heresy, it is suspended between traditional conceptions of good and evil, unable to decide in the face of modern technics whether to choose the old God or the devil (hence the retreat into the forest). In fact, in this way both Heidegger and Jünger seem emblematic of 20th century modernity itself, a century that we may now say can only be revealed as the catastrophe that it was from the vantage point of more orthodox theological discourses that stress the importance of traditional ethical dualities.

To condemn the Platonic-Christian outright tradition (as anachronism) is thus to forget that we have not one Christianity but rather two rather opposed versions: an orthodox (Protestant) version that views technology as in some sense satanic and the enemy of the “true word” (the “saying of being”) and a scholastic (Catholic) version that sees in modern technics a force for hope (of a universal civilisation of charity devoid of want and so on). And in this regard, the Christian theologian, who does not flee the theological trails of this time but travels with modern technics in hope, may yet have the final say. If the modern technological world is indeed to overcome its current difficulties, if eschatology is not “the end of the world” but rather its radical transformation, then we might see in technics not something that takes us back to a mythical origin, but rather a force that is us taking further; into another world that is the keeping of old metaphysical promises, a world that has yet to be realised and a future that from the point of view of all Greek-pagan schemas must forever remain invisible.

¹³ In Christianity, the claim that nature has value in and of itself is idolatrous. In many ways one of the key theological issues in contemporary Christianity is how to find a way towards a re-sacralisation of nature in way that does not legitimate a return to ancient paganism



N. Turnbull

Modern Technology within the Western Theological Imaginary

A Journal of the
Social Imaginary



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