

T is for Technology and Theft

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2000

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When We Use Tools They Use Us Back

(from Jeanette Winterson's response to a letter from her friend William Gibson:)

Today, technological innovation itself commands too much of our attention and energy. We use a disproportionate amount of our collective creativity inventing new technologies to dominate the world, rather than discovering new ways to enjoy it. This reflects an underlying theme in our civilization: our values tend to revolve around control rather than pleasure. We have put all our capabilities into adjusting the "how" of life, without stopping to address the "why."

Some claim that recklessly rapid technological development is inherent to any industrial society. It seems equally likely that it is a result of the pressure the capitalist economy exerts on businesses and inventors to keep coming up with new products to outmode the old ones. A truly non-capitalist society, in which competition for sales and survival did not exist, might be able to make the best of the technologies it had at its disposal rather than continually trying to develop more complexity for its own sake. Technology itself would be deployed differently in those conditions, as well (e.g. more public transportation, fewer cars and highways and pollution), making it less of a threat to human happiness and freedom.

But there are still important questions to consider. First of all, how much of today's technology would be possible at all in a non-capitalist, non-hierarchical society? Today power is centralized in the hands of technocrats who direct unbelievably complex global networks. It is these systems that produce the unbelievably complex technologies we are accustomed to. Is radically direct democracy and group decision-making even possible on such a huge scale? Probably not. The question, then, is how much of our technological complexity we could take with us in the process of decentralizing our society.

And it still remains to consider the pros and cons of individual technologies. Under radically different circumstances, could automobiles, e-mail, television, neon lights be used to make our lives more exciting and rewarding? For some of them, the answer is probably yes, while for others, no. When evaluating the worth of particular technologies, we must always remember that our activities and environment are shaped as much by the tools we use *When action seems impossible* as they are shaped by our

"Communication" is consolation. applications of the tools themselves. For example, using the internet for communication involves sitting stationary for minutes or hours, staring at a glowing screen, isolated from the world of the senses, surrounded by and yet separated from others, as one is in a traffic jam (thus people communicating anonymously through the internet often show each other the same courtesy they would in rush hour traffic); it also replaces forms of communication that are less mediated. In a paradise, would this be a part of everyday life?

You talk about using the tools of the system to destroy the system—but if some of these tools create alienation by their very use, they can only adjust and ultimately

reinforce the system of alienation. Rather than taking for granted the official line that “more technology is better,” and accepting the linear conception of history taught to us by the ideology of “progress” (i.e. humanity goes from a less technological to a more technological state, never the other way around), we should be willing to make whatever alterations are necessary in the technology used by our species in order to get the most out of life that we can.

And yes, we should use whatever tools will work in this struggle, but only the ones that really will work. Let’s be wary of every technology, and dare to believe that we really can leave behind the ones that are no use to us.

To make these generalizations concrete, I’m frankly very frightened by the antiquated image of a technologically engineered utopia that you conjure up with your computer-guided cars. I can barely repair a

car myself at this point; do you realize that if everything were guided by computers, the ability to fix and control everything would be left in the hands of a tiny minority, the ones who had the special proficiencies required? The average person would feel very little understanding of or control over the world she lived in. All the practical aspects of life would be left up to the “experts.” We’re almost there, already, and it makes the world an alien and confusing place for most of us, doesn’t it? Is “progress” really so inexorable that I shouldn’t dare ask for this to be different?

With all our new capabilities for communication and mobility, we’re paralyzed running in place. In a world where information equals power, the most powerful are the ones who are willing to be immobilized in every real sense in order to function better as information processors. Unplug yourself from the circuitry! Mobilize!

Oh Cyberspace, what big eyes and ears you have!

(Stella Nera’s critique of Jeanette’s response)

It was once said that the map is not the terrain. The speaker meant to point to the limits of human abstraction in friction with full reality. But we are now being herded with electronic prods from the terrain to the map, from the real to the virtual—soon there will be no friction! Simulated electronic space is a map, merely a map: the better to simplify, rationalize, describe, monitor, predict, propagandize, contain, and control you with. Cyberspace is a closed playpen, where everything is permitted, but nothing is possible. Use cyberspace to get information? When you use cyberspace, you get *information*.

Interactive communication has become a form of invisible control. Cyberspace integrates us into a neural network; together, we become the extended brain of the technological system. The more interconnected the population, the faster propaganda diffuses. Yesterday’s control by communication: politicians polled the public, processed the results, and adjusted their rhetoric to correct image problems. Today’s control by communication: the outfitting of employees with pagers, cell phones, email accounts,

voice mail ... it is interesting to note how the current theme of propaganda is that consumers need more information—and therefore must not only plug themselves into the system, but must also carry an array of communication devices with them wherever they go.

*A new design for relationships,
Relationships of distance.
Relationships which don't require meeting,
Relationships which require never meeting.*

And the future? The days of watching the Spectacle are almost over. The audience storms the stage: now *we* are the Spectacle, and propaganda is obsolete.

In the future, we will no longer be misled and distracted from reality by the media and other forces. We ourselves will become the distractions, interacting with each other in a medium in which no reality is possible. We remove ourselves from reality into Cyberspace.

Nostalgia for an unpredictable future

In this system, we work for the sake of organization. And organization increases, which increases work. The harder and faster we work, the more work there will be to do. Humans—originally carefree and free-ranging—have been tied down, first to the farm, then to the city factory, then to the office, and now to the computer monitor's virtual glo-grid. Thirty years ago offices didn't have PCs or cubes. How many of us today are forced to sit solitary under fluorescent bulbs in windowless gray cubes most of our waking hours (most of our *lives*) in front of a computer monitor, staring at flickering blue nothing, listening to high-pitched machine hum, making tiny movements with our fingers to manipulate symbols that have no vital meaning to us, all the while subconsciously panicked by pervasive surveillance? Forget the whole dynamic complex of simultaneous coercion, persuasion, socialization, sticks, carrots and credit that condemn us to the console. Would we do this if instead we could just live our lives, foraging in one way or another, eating, socializing, fucking, fantasizing, sleeping, drawing, singing, dancing, just being human, unemployed, not in use, free, free of fabricated goals? Subsistence would be such a luxury, compared to the "luxuries" we have.

Human minds are transformed into information-processors. (At least with physical labor your mind is free to fantasize.) We are degraded into serving machines—processing raw reality into computer logic data (scanning products at a cash register, data entry). We are used more and more as either physical robots or translators, that is, as interfaces between computerized systems. In the service industry, the food chain gang must wear uniforms and logos, recite scripts, weigh scoops of ice cream while wearing plastic gloves. *Machines cast us in their images.*

Technology uses people, people do not use technology. Technology is not any single isolated object, it is a unified system of relationships between elements and systems. Those who claim that technology is a “neutral tool” or that it is an accumulation of independent “things” to be picked through selectively for keepers, fail to realize that technology is a metaphysical whole, that it is an expression of organization, and therefore can only direct itself toward higher order, increased centralized control, and the inevitable degradation of its human components. The metabolic flow must speed faster in pursuit of total productivity. We can always be more efficient, but we can never be efficient enough.

The electronic fist comes in molded beige plastic, beeping. Suddenly we all do Windows, and he who will not compute will not eat. And as our work, so our play: both are communication. To be silent or un-in-formed is to be anti-social. Evermore we will be engulfed in the electronic, starved of light, fresh air, fresh food, spontaneous movement, friendly face-to-face human company, human warmth, human smell, human touch, animals no more. We struggle: depression, agoraphobia, addiction, bulimia, panic, obsession-compulsion, suicides. And doctors medicate.

Our pre-pacification ancestor the cavewoman would never have sat still for this. Nor our four year old selves. But cyberspace disperses the crowd, and clears the streets. We are living in the post-riot era, inside our cubicles (office blocks, suburban blocks, cell blocks), staring at the screens, being entertained.

Here is Folk Science!

(And finally! F. Markatos’s take on the whole thing:

Yes, the problem has been solved

But *I* never saw it proved.

Someone else has, but I have not,

Landed on the moon.

— Sera White, “A Momentary Gain of My Loss; or, Fragments”

There is nothing wrong with tools, technology, and science. As a species, we are nothing if not the inventors and builders of our world; but as individuals, we have the capacity to determine what world we want, and to build it ourselves. When we do this, we seize the adventure, the invention ... the inventure! that is our birthright. This is folk science.

Folk science is not new, it is as old as humanity—lab coats, the scientific method, and centralized top-down technology are new. As we progress, we will learn to view these things as aberrations of the innate scientific creativity that is a part of each person. As folk scientists, we will see that consensus science, with its universal explanations and solutions, taught us to distrust our own ingenuity, creativity, and intuition.

Folk Science Vs. “The” Scientific Method

The scientific method is a universal format and language for experimentation. Among other things, the scientific method is a way of packaging the results of one scientist’s inquiry so that they are accessible to other scientists. Thus the scientific method acts as a net combining the efforts of all of the world’s scientists. Using this powerful Babylonian tool, scientists cooperate to surpass our every need and bring us into their modernity ever faster and more efficiently.

As a scientific-method-driven phenomenon, modernity tells us that there is no use for repeating. This view is the source of the oft-heard comment “that’s been done,” a retort tantamount to death for a scientific act. Used in this way, the scientific method becomes a method for encouraging the progress of the group over the progress of the individual.

“Still powerful lords of universe, sooner or later you will give us machines to play with, or we will be forced to build them ourselves—to occupy the free time which you, with insane eagerness, wish to see us squander on trivialities and brain death.”

— Henry “Adolph” Ford’s rebellious daughter Marianne, in a letter from her rural commune.

So our critique of “The Scientific Method” skips “Science” because it is a fundamental tool of our species, skips “Method,” for method is the enactment of science but finds “The” guilty of a crime. This tyranny of “The” is part of a language that attempts to unify the menagerie of human curiosity and struggle into just one investigative technique and in doing so fails both science and humanity.

Folk Science and Art

At the root, art and science are the same. Both of these pursuits use the observation and experience that are part of every life as a basis for creative thought, ingenuity and production. But as science has become universalized and gathered up into the hands of the few, it has come to alienate the many.

The alienation of consensus science has also infected art. From Colour Field Painting to canned shit, art has become a that’s-been-done style endgame. This process is encouraged when critics and historians who love logic, order, and their jobs support art that contributes to the linear progress of art history. This is art in a technological mode.

In the face of a system that cares only for final products, folk scientists reclaim the processes of scientific and artistic *discovery* as inherently valuable. Folk scientists see the beauty, adventure and relevance of reinventing the wheel*. So a phrase like “that’s been done” is dribble to the folk scientist, who will respond: “not by me.” By

holding invention as a form of play, folk scientists are free from the tradition of linear progress that has stolen creativity from the uninitiated and made science and art into unattainable priesthoods.

The Folk Science of Love

Professional scientists have become intermediaries between us and our world; but nowadays these intermediaries can be found everywhere. These doctors, designers, evangelists and psychologists are a priest caste in the business of connecting the lowly individual to the universe, health, god, happiness, even love.

I want to think that, had I not seen kissing on television, I would have spontaneously come up with this bizarre interaction, but I can't know. We are so saturated with icons of love in mass media that, like science and art, this natural impulse becomes the business of experts. These sleek actors and porn stars let us fumble with our awkward bodies, botched lines and improper lighting, then step up show us how it's really done. The greatest achievement of any lovers is to transcend the bombardment of glossy images and find their own way.

So Here Is Folk Science ...

... where we make it a daily practice to find our own way. Here, it's not too late to invent the airplane, the bicycle, the kiss. Here, there is room for inquiry into gravity, cancer, psychology, and anthills. Here, incredulous, we set out to see if the world is round—and find that it is not.

So don't spend your money, which wears away like the soles of your shoes. Spend your ingenuity, which is alive and becomes sharper with wear—spend your time, which, combined with ingenuity, seems ever more abundant—spend your life, the only gift you can hoard jealously and give graciously at the same time.

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