

Forget Heidegger

Introduction

Imagine yourself in what is perhaps an all too familiar *scenario*. You walk into a hotel room, a slightly grotty hotel room perhaps. The walls may be somewhat dirty; paint, perhaps, is peeling from the furniture; and there may be a musty smell. Initially you feel a sense of alienation. The room is unfamiliar. You don't feel at home in it. Nevertheless you unpack your bags. You put your washbag in the wash room and hang your clothes in the wardrobe. Gradually, as you lay out these familiar objects, the room seems less alienating. But what is most curious is that after a night or two spent sleeping in the room, what once seemed alienating and unfamiliar gradually becomes familiar, to the point that you begin to feel at home in the room. Maybe you even become slightly fond of it, with its shabby furniture and musty smells. You start to feel cosy there, and almost do not want to leave. Somehow — almost imperceptibly — a shift has happened. What once appeared grim and alienating, now appears familiar and homely.

This is a phenomenon with which we are all too familiar, and yet somehow no one, to my mind, has yet attempted to analyse it fully. It applies equally to questions of design. What once seemed ugly may eventually appear less objectionable after a period of time. And it applies also to questions of technology. Take the example of satellite dishes. At first sight they may appear unfamiliar and out of place, but before long they have been accepted as part of the familiar language of the street. And the same principle, no doubt, applied to traffic lights before them. Even the most seemingly alienating of technological forms can soon become absorbed within our symbolic horizons, such that they no longer appear so alienating.

Of course the situation is often not that simple. Other factors may come into play. There may be some further consideration — an unpleasant association, for example — that prevents you from ever feeling at home in a particular environment. Yet such factors appear merely to *mitigate* against what seems to be an underlying drive to 'grow into', to become familiar and eventually identify with our environment. It is as though there is a constant chameleon-like urge to assimilate that governs human nature.

What, then, is going on here? What exactly *is* this process of 'growing into', becoming fond of, familiarising oneself with our environment? How does this mechanism operate? And more especially, within the context of this particular enquiry, how might this

phenomenon prompt us to rethink the question of technology? How might, for example, the overtly negative stand taken by certain theorists on the supposedly alienating effect of technology be revisited in the light of these observations? Can technology be viewed more positively? All these questions are addressed to an architectural culture still dominated in certain areas by a broadly Heideggerian outlook, and which remains largely critical of technology.

Heidegger and the Question Concerning Technology

What, then, was Heidegger's attitude towards technology? Technology is a crucial concern throughout his work, but the issue is addressed most explicitly in his essay, 'The Question Concerning Technology'.¹ Heidegger was not opposed to technology as such. But rather he saw in technology a mode of 'revealing', and it was here that the danger lay. 'The essence of modern technology,' as he puts it, 'lies in enframing. Enframing belongs within the destining of revealing.'² The problem lies, for Heidegger, in precisely this 'destining' of this revealing, in that it 'banishes man into the kind of revealing that is an ordering.'³ And this form of 'revealing' is an impoverished one as it denies the possibility of a deeper ontological engagement: 'Above all, enframing conceals that revealing which, in the sense of *poiesis*, lets what presences come forth into appearance.'⁴ Rather than opening up to the human it therefore constitutes a form of resistance or challenge to the human, in that it 'blocks' our access to truth: 'Enframing blocks the shining-forth and holding sway of truth.'⁵

What we find in our contemporary age, according to Heidegger, is a condition in which humankind treats nature as a form of resource, something to be exploited, stockpiled and so on. 'Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately on hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering. Whatever is ordered about in this way has its own standing. We call it the standing-reserve [*Bestand*].'⁶ And it is this sense of 'standing-reserve', rather than *poiesis*, that lies at the heart of modern technology: 'The essence of modern technology shows itself in what we call Enframing. . . It is the way in which the real reveals itself as standing-reserve.'⁷ The

¹Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, David Farrell Krell (ed.), New York: Harper Collins, 1993, pp. 311-341.

²*Ibid.*, p. 330.

³*Ibid.*, p. 332.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 332.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 333.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 322.

⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 328-329.

problem is not so much of nature being devalued as standing-reserve, but humankind finding itself in the same condition: 'As soon as what is concealed no longer concerns man even as object, but exclusively as standing-reserve, and man in the midst of objectlessness is nothing but the orderer of the standing-reserve, then he comes to the very brink of a precipitous fall; that is, he comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve.'⁸

Technology therefore comes to be associated with a form of alienation. It prevents humankind from being in touch with a richer form of revealing which operates within a more poetic dimension. But it is important to stress that the danger lies not in technology, but its essence: 'What is dangerous is not technology. Technology is not demonic; but its essence is mysterious. The essence of technology, as a destining of revealing, is the danger.'⁹

Needless to say, Heidegger's comments on 'truth' are as deeply unfashionable in contemporary theoretical circles as is his belief in 'essences'. And even attempts by more recent thinkers in this intellectual tradition, such as Gianni Vattimo, to update Heidegger's thought for a postmodern world of 'difference' and 'differals' of meaning, can do little to redeem such a position. The question will always remain: 'Whose truth?' And this refers to all forms of human engagement. As Félix Guattari comments on the subject of technology: 'Far from apprehending a univocal truth of Being through *techné*, as Heideggerian ontology would have it, it is a plurality of beings as machines that give themselves to us once we acquire the pathic or cartographic means of access to them.'¹⁰

Heidegger's approach always threatens to reduce human beings to a single, universal individual, and to collapse the subject into the object, so that the agency of the interpreter is somehow overlooked, and 'meaning' is deemed to be unproblematically 'given'. Yet we might more properly approach such questions from an individual perspective, and treat meaning not as some universal 'given', but in symbolic terms as that which may vary from individual to individual. Symbolic meaning — like beauty — lies in the eye of the beholder, but is no less real for that. And symbolic meaning, as Fredric Jameson reminds us, is 'as volatile as the arbitrariness of the sign'.¹¹ An object might mean one thing to one person, and quite the opposite to another. This is not to sanction

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 332, as quoted in Scheibler, 'Heidegger and the Rhetoric of Submission' in Verena Andermatt Conley (ed.), *Rethinking Technologies*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 116.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 333.

¹⁰Félix Guattari, 'Machinic Heterogenesis' in *Rethinking Technologies*, p. 26.

¹¹Fredric Jameson, 'Is Space Political?' in Neil Leach (ed.), *Rethinking Architecture*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 258.

relativism, so much as to highlight the need to acknowledge the agency of the interpreter and the perspective from which an interpretation is made. As such we might do better to retreat from such abstract universals and address the specificity of the concrete situation.

What such thinking fails to interrogate is how our understanding of the world is always mediated. It fails to address questions of consciousness. What is important, surely, when we address objects in the world is to consider not only the objects themselves but also the consciousness by which we know those objects. The phenomenological tradition does not perceive this as an area of concern. It therefore fails to grasp the very fluid and dynamic way our engagement with the world takes place. And this includes technology. Just as humans invest and subsequently transfer notions of 'home' by cathecting it from one dwelling to another, so they take a more dynamic and flexible attitude to technology. They may come to invest it with meaning, and to forge an attachment to it, that serves ultimately to overcome any initial resistance to it. As such they may reappropriate it from the realm of standing-reserve.

In sum, what needs to be brought into the frame is the notion of 'appropriation'. Heidegger, to be sure, has been criticised elsewhere for overlooking the question of 'appropriation'. As Derrida argues convincingly, the whole principle of hermeneutics is based on a form of undisclosed appropriation — 'claiming' — where the agency of the interpreter in making that interpretation is not fully acknowledged.¹² But by 'appropriation' I refer here to the process of 'familiarisation' over time. Just as one can question whether the 'authenticity' or indeed 'inauthenticity' (in Heideggerian terms) of an artefact will endure once memory of its creation is lost, so technology can never be seen to be the enduring site of alienation. Technology is always open to poetic appropriation.

The somewhat monolithic attitude of Heidegger towards technology needs to be challenged. Those who argue that technology is the perpetual source of alienation clearly overlook the potential for human beings to absorb the novel and the unusual within their symbolic framework. We need to adopt a more flexible, dynamic framework, that is alert to the very chameleon-like capacity for psychical adaptation that is a fundamental aspect of what it is to be human. It may, of course, be that we can locate an opening in Heidegger's thought, and argue, as does Ingrid Scheibler, that Heidegger also allows for what he terms, 'meditative thinking', and that this can be deployed in the realm of technology so as to forge a less deterministic relationship between human beings and

¹²Jacques Derrida, *Truth in Painting*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, pp. 255-382.

technology.¹³ But such strategies will tend to bear the character of an apology, a qualification to an earlier argument. The sheer force of Heidegger's critique of technology foregrounds calculative thinking as the dominant mode of engagement, and it is not at all clear when, if ever, calculative thinking gives way to meditative thinking.

Moreover, we need to adopt a more open attitude towards technology not least because we live in a technological age. Technology has permeated all aspects of contemporary existence, and has suffused itself within our background horizon of consciousness. We live our lives so much *through* technology, that we begin to see them in terms of technology. With time not only do we eventually accept technology, but we even begin to identify with it. We call our cars names and speak to our computers. Ultimately we even begin to constitute our identity through technology — through our cars, computers and electronic gadgetry. We *are* the car we drive, or so the advertisers would have us believe: sleek, elegant, sophisticated, rugged, adventurous, whatever. Technology can lend us our lifestyles, can lend us our identities.

Mimetic Identification

How, then, might we adopt a more sympathetic attitude towards technology? What theoretical framework might allow us to address these concerns more openly? I want to propose that the work of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno on the concept of *mimesis* offers a more subtle approach to questions of assimilation and identification in general, and to the problem of the alienation of technology in particular. To quote Adorno:

According to Freud, symbolic intention quickly allies itself to technical forms, like the airplane, and according to contemporary American research in mass psychology, even to the car. Thus, purposeful forms are the language of their own purposes. By means of the *mimetic* impulse, the living being equates himself with objects in his surroundings.¹⁴

This last sentence, 'By means of the *mimetic* impulse, the living being equates himself with objects in his surroundings', is, surely, one that holds the key to exploring the whole question of how human beings situate themselves within their environment, and points to an area in which the domain of psychoanalysis may offer crucial insights into the

¹³Ingrid Scheibler, 'Heidegger and the Rhetoric of Submission' in *Rethinking Technologies*, pp. 115-139.

¹⁴Theodor Adorno, 'Functionalism Today' in *Rethinking Architecture*, p. 10.

mechanism by which humans relate to their habitat. It begins to suggest, for example, that the way in which humans progressively feel 'at home' within a particular building, is precisely through a process of symbolic identification with that building. And equally they may come to identify with technological objects. This symbolic attachment is something that does not come into operation automatically. Rather it is something that is engendered gradually, in Adorno's terms, through the '*mimetic impulse*'.

Mimesis here should not be understood in the terms used, say, by Plato, as simple 'imitation'. Nor indeed does it have the same meaning that Heidegger gives it. Rather *mimesis* in Adorno, as indeed in Walter Benjamin, is a psychoanalytic term — taken from Freud — that refers to a creative engagement with an object. It is, as Adorno defines it, 'the non-conceptual affinity of a subjective creation with its objective and unposited other'.¹⁵ *Mimesis* is a term, as Freud himself predicted, of great potential significance for aesthetics.¹⁶

To understand the meaning of *mimesis* in Adorno we must recognise its origin in the process of modelling, of 'making a copy of'. In essence it refers to an interpretative process that relates not just to the creation of a model, but also to the engagement with that model. *Mimesis* may operate both transitively and reflexively. It comes into operation both in the making of an object and in making oneself like an object. *Mimesis* is therefore a form of imitation that may be evoked both by the artist who makes a work of art, and also by the person who views it. Yet *mimesis* is richer than straight imitation. In *mimesis* imagination is at work, and serves to reconcile the subject with the object. This imagination operates at the level of fantasy, which mediates between the unconscious and the conscious, dream and reality. Here fantasy is used as a positive term. Fantasy creates its own fictions not as a way of escaping reality, but as a way of accessing reality, a reality that is ontologically charged, and not constrained by an instrumentalised view of the world. In effect *mimesis* is an unconscious identification with the object. It necessarily involves a creative moment on the part of the subject. The subject creatively identifies with the object, so that the object, even if it is a technical object — a piece of machinery, a car, a plane, a bridge, whatever — becomes invested with some symbolic significance, and is appropriated as part of the symbolic background through which individuals constitute their identity.

¹⁵Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, C Lenhardt (trans.), G Adorno, R Tiederman (eds.), London: Routledge, 1984, p. 80.

¹⁶'... I believe that if ideational mimetics are followed up, they may be as useful in other branches of aesthetics. . .' Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), trans. James Strachey, London: Routledge, 1960, p. 193. For further reading on *mimesis*, see Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, trans. Willard Trask, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953; Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, London: Routledge, 1993; Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf, *Mimesis*, trans. Don Reneau, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

It is important to recognise here the question of temporality. Symbolic significance may shift — often dramatically — over a period of time. What was once shockingly alien may eventually appear reassuringly familiar. The way in which we engage with architecture must therefore be seen not as a static condition, but as a dynamic process. The logic of *mimesis* dictates that we are constantly assimilating to the built environment, and that, consequently, our attitudes towards it are for ever changing. Our engagement with the built environment is never a given, static condition, but an ongoing process of constant adaptation. While books have been devoted to ‘weathering’, to the performance of the building *in time*, few seem to have addressed the question of our own reception of the building itself within a temporal framework.

Mimesis therefore constitutes a form of mimicry, — but it is an adaptive mimicry — just as when a child learns to speak and adapt to the world, or when owners take on the characteristics of their pets. In fact it is precisely the example of the child ‘growing into’ language that best illustrates the operation of *mimesis*. The child ‘absorbs’ an external language by a process of imitation and then uses it creatively for its own purposes. Similarly, within the realm of any aspect of design we might see *mimesis* at work as designers develop their design abilities: it is this process which also allows external forms to be absorbed and sedimented as part of a language of design.

Although *mimesis* involves a degree of organised control, and therefore operates in conjunction with rationality, this does not mean that *mimesis* is part of rationality. Indeed, in terms of the dialectic of the enlightenment, we might perceive *mimesis* as constitutive not of rationality, but of myth, its magical ‘other’. *Mimesis* and rationality, as Adorno observes, are ‘irreconcilable’.¹⁷ If *mimesis* is to be perceived as a form of correspondence with the outside world which is articulated within the *aura* of the work of art, then enlightenment rationality, with its effective split between subject and object, and increasing emphasis on knowledge-as-quantification over knowledge-as-sensuous-correspondence, represents the opposite pole. In the instrumentalised view of the enlightenment, knowledge is ordered and categorised, valorised according to scientific principles, and the rich potential of *mimesis* is overlooked. All this entails a loss, a reduction of the world to a reified structure of subject/object divides, as *mimesis* retreats even further into the mythic realm of literature and the arts.

At the same time *mimesis* might be seen to offer a form of dialectical foil to the subject/object split of enlightenment rationality. This is most obvious in the case of

¹⁷Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 81.

language. Language becomes the 'highest level of mimetic behaviour, the most complete archive of non-sensuous similarity'.¹⁸ *Mimesis* for Benjamin offers a way of finding meaning in the world, through the discovery of similarities. These similarities become absorbed and then rearticulated in language, no less than in dance or other art forms. As such language becomes a repository of meaning, and writing becomes an activity which extends beyond itself, so that in the process of writing writers engage in unconscious processes of which they may not be aware. Indeed writing often reveals more than the writer is conscious of revealing. Likewise the reader must decode the words resorting to the realm of the imagination which exceeds the purely rational. Thus the activity of reading also embodies the principles of *mimesis*, serving as the vehicle for some revelatory moment. For Benjamin the meaning becomes apparent in a constellatory flash, a dialectics of seeing, in which subject and object become one for a brief moment, a process which relates to the experience of architecture no less than the reading of texts.

Architecture along with the other visual arts can therefore be viewed as a potential reservoir for the operation of *mimesis*. In the very design of buildings the architect may articulate the relational correspondence with the world that is embodied in the concept of *mimesis*. These forms may be interpreted in a similar fashion by those who experience the building, in that the mechanism by which human beings begin to feel at home in the built environment can also be seen as a *mimetic* one.

Mimesis, then, may help to explain how we identify progressively with our surroundings. In effect, we read ourselves into our surroundings, without being fully conscious of it. 'By means of the *mimetic* impulse,' as Adorno comments, 'the living being equates himself with objects in his surroundings'. Elsewhere I have argued that this may be understood in terms of the myth of Narcissus.¹⁹ The *mimetic* impulse might be seen as a mechanism for reading ourselves into the other. We relate ourselves to our environment by a process of *narcissistic* identification, and mimetically absorb the language of that environment. Just as Narcissus saw his own image in the water, without recognising it as his own image, so we identify ourselves with the 'other' — symbolically — without realising that recognition of the 'other' must be understood in terms of a *mimetic* identification with the other, as a reflection of the self. And this refers not to a *literal* reflection of our image, so much as the metaphorical reflection of our symbolic outlook and values.

¹⁸Benjamin, 'Mimetic Faculty' in *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, New York: Schocken, 1978, p. 336.

¹⁹Leach, 'Vitruvius Crucifixus: Architecture, Mimesis and the Death Instinct, *AA Files*, 38, July 1999.

The aim throughout is to forge a creative relationship with our environment. When we see our values ‘reflected’ in our surroundings, this feeds our narcissistic urge, and breaks down the subject/object divide. It is as though — to use Walter Benjamin’s use of the term *mimesis* — in the flash of the *mimetic* moment, the fragmentary is recognised as part of the whole, and the individual is inserted within an harmonic totality.

Rethinking Technology

What, then, can we read into this process of assimilation that is implied in the concept of *mimesis*, and how might it prompt us to rethink the issue of technology? There are clear comparisons to be made between Heidegger's championing of *poiesis* over 'standing reserve', and the corresponding championing by Benjamin and Adorno of knowledge-as-sensuous-correspondence over knowledge-as-quantification. Both traditions would criticise the world of enlightenment rationality as an impoverished one, and indeed *mimesis* here can be seen to offer a foil to this condition. But only with Heidegger is technology assigned unreservedly to this condition.

Let us take Heidegger's example of the airliner. The airliner that stands on the runway, for Heidegger, is 'surely an object. . . Revealed, it stands on the taxi strip only as standing-reserve, inasmuch as it is ordered to insure the possibility of transportation.'²⁰ The point here is that our understanding of that airliner is defined solely in terms of its 'standing reserve': 'The object disappears into the objectlessness of the standing-reserve.'²¹ The possibility that the airliner might be viewed in any other way is not entertained. And yet airliners, as Barthes once commented of buildings, are a combination of ‘dream and function’.²² But Heidegger fails to address the crucial role that an airliner might play as a symbolic form in its own right, a vehicle for dreams, emotions and desires. As such Heidegger offers a somewhat restrictive approach to the question. In his account there is no potential for the object to be withdrawn from the realm of standing-reserve. There is no potential for it to be reappropriated.

Intriguingly, Adorno also cites the example of an airplane, but his thinking remains more flexible. The argument of *mimesis* suggests — and indeed Adorno explicitly states — that symbolic identification may take place even with technological objects, such as a car or a plane, so that they too may be appropriated as part of our symbolic background: ‘According to Freud, symbolic intention quickly allies itself to technical forms, like the

²⁰Heidegger, p. 322.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 324.

²²Roland Barthes, ‘The Eiffel Tower’ in *Rethinking Architecture*, p. 174.

airplane, and according to contemporary American research in mass psychology, even to the car.²³ The airplane is not consigned — irredeemably — to the realm of knowledge-as-quantification. It can be reappropriated within the realm of the symbolic. In other words our consciousness of the airplane is itself altered.

Adorno's further example of the car reveals how the technological has come to colonise our everyday lives not as standing reserve, but as something to which symbolic intention is always already being 'attached'. The point here is that we have to understand that our engagement with technology involves a moment of 'proprioception'. Technology may come to operate as a form of 'prosthesis' to the human body that is appropriated such that it becomes part of the motility of the body. In driving a car we come to navigate the road *through* that car. As such, the car as an item of technology is not divorced — alienated — from the body. Indeed it becomes a form of extension to that body. What I am arguing here is not some simplistic manifesto for cyborgs, claiming that human beings can become part human and part machine. Rather I am trying to tease out the logic of *mimesis* itself. For according to this logic, human beings have absorbed technology at an unconscious level, such that they have come to operate *through* technology, as though by way of some tele-kinesis.

Not only this, but technology may actually influence the way that human beings think. It may itself affect our consciousness. Let us take the example of the computer. For, if as Walter Benjamin once argued, the factory worker in the modernist age comes to absorb the jolting, jarring repetitive action of the machine, such that those movements are appropriated into the worker's own behaviour, so too people today have absorbed the thinking and fluid circuitry behind the computer screen. New conditions breed new ways of thinking. As Douglas Rushkoff observes, a new computer generation is emerging.²⁴ The computer kids of today come to behave like their computers. They identify with them, play with them, and mimic their operations. Analogical reasoning is out. Non-linear, multiple-layered thinking is in — Deleuzian surfing. Fractals, rhizomes and clones, fluidity and flux — these are the buzz words of this new generation. In such a context, those who argue against the use of the computer in the contemporary studio are failing to address the concrete ontological reality of life today, and are doing no service to the students, for whom knowledge of computer programmes has become a 'given' within the contemporary office.²⁵ This is not to say that the computer should be accepted

²³Adorno, 'Functionalism Today' in *Rethinking Architecture*, p. 10.

²⁴Douglas Rushkoff, *Children of Chaos*, London: Flamingo, 1997.

²⁵ It may be that the still prevalent antipathy towards digital technology is merely a form of 'denial'. As in the case of homophobics, who often deny their latent homosexuality, critics of technology may be repressing a secret fascination with technology. (An obvious example of this is the incident in the film, *American Beauty*, where the homophobic father proves to have

uncritically within the studio. Indeed the lessons of those design schools that have accepted the computer wholesale would seem to indicate that the concerns expressed in *The Anaesthetics of Architecture* about the potential aestheticisation and hence anaesthetisation of social issues are borne out only too clearly in such contexts.²⁶ Rather it is a call for a self-critical, theoretically informed engagement with such realms. Theory may be unable in itself to combat the potential problems of aestheticisation. Yet it may provide the first crucial step. Once a problem has been exposed, one is no longer trapped by that problem.

The consequences are all too obvious. Not only have we accepted technology as an essential part of our everyday life, such that the distinction once posed between *techné* and technology seems no longer valid, but our whole existence has become conditioned by technology.

Technology and Design

Yet this argument only raises a further question: does technology belong to one uniform category, or can it be differentiated? How are we to distinguish between different forms of technology? When does technology constitute a form of knowledge-as-quantification, and when does it not? And does 'design' play any role? Indeed the logic of *mimesis* raises a question about the whole status of design. For if we are constantly assimilating to the built environment, why do we need to bother with 'good design'?

Here I want to take another argument from Adorno, in order to argue that *mimesis* is precisely a call for 'good design'. Much of Adorno's article, 'Functionalism Today', is devoted to a critique of Adolf Loos's article, 'Ornament and Crime'. Adorno accuses Loos of undialectical thinking. Loos attempts to separate art from technology. Loos champions an architecture of pure functionality, in which 'art' has no place. Loos bases this on the Kantian distinction between the 'purposive' and the 'purpose-free'. Yet as Adorno points out, there is no item so purely functional that it is rinsed of any sense of art, while, conversely, forms of art — one thinks immediately of dance — do have a 'function', albeit a 'social' function. 'There is,' as Adorno puts it, 'no chemically pure purposefulness set up as the opposite of the purpose-free aesthetic.'²⁷

homosexual leanings.) An individual 'in denial' may be fascinated by some personal psychic obsession, but, not wishing to acknowledge it, will project that obsession on to some external object, and then criticise it. But whether this antipathy towards digital technology is a form of repressed fascination or not, it is clearly out of place in what has become a highly digitalised world.

²⁶Leach, *The Anaesthetics of Architecture*, Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1999

²⁷Adorno, 'Functionalism Today' in *Rethinking Architecture*, p. 8.

Art and function must therefore be viewed dialectically, and all forms of the aesthetic recognised for their social 'function'. Equally, architecture that claims to be merely functional must also have some aesthetic dimension. Indeed, much of what is termed 'functional' in architecture either incorporates unfunctional features — such as flat roofs — or borrows its aesthetic from other domains — such as ships, grain silos etc. — which have their own functional rationale which is quite independent of architectural concerns. Adorno therefore concludes that the 'functionalism' that Loos is referring to is precisely an aesthetic category. 'Hence,' as Adorno remarks, 'our bitter suspicion is formulated: the absolute rejection of style becomes style.'²⁸

The point to be made here, though, is that we must view the question of technology *dialectically*. It is not a question — as some might imply — of drawing a distinction *between* art and technology, or indeed 'architecture' and 'engineering', but of considering to what extent technology and art are 'folded into' one another; to what extent — in the context of Loos's argument — technology is *designed*. What we find in Heidegger is the same problem, only inverted. Loos forces a distinction between functionalism and art, Heidegger between *poiesis* and engineering. Of course, practical questions of functionality must be foregrounded in addressing technology, but visual questions — aesthetic appearance — must not be overlooked.

The answer, it would seem, would be to approach the question dialectically, introducing the subtleties and flexibilities implied in the concept of mimesis. While Adorno is himself quite critical of the totalitarian capacity of technology, of its potential terroristic domination, we might nonetheless infer from his comments on the car and the airplane that such objects may be viewed from within the realm of *mimesis*. Technological objects may embody the principle of *mimesis*.

The argument, then, to be made about the role of *mimesis* in technology is simply this. *Mimesis* operates both in the design of the item, and in the relationship between the viewer and the item itself. It therefore follows that when a technological item has been designed with a view to a mimetic understanding of the world it will *lend itself* to being absorbed mimetically. In other words, if we are to understand *mimesis* as offering a mechanism of relating to the world, of forging a link between the individual and the environment, of offering a means — in Fredric Jameson's terms — of 'cognitively mapping' oneself within the environment, good design has an important *social* role. The image — far from being the source of *alienation* as one might begin to infer from Guy

²⁸Adorno, 'Functionalism Today' in *Rethinking Architecture*, p. 10.

Debord — has a positive role to play of *identification*. And if technology can in fact embody *mimesis*, this role is open equally to technological objects. Technology, according to such a logic, far from being necessarily alienating, as some would argue, *may* be the source of identification, provided that it has been ‘well designed’, designed that is, *according to the principles of mimesis*.

There was a time when Heideggerian thought made a substantial and noteworthy contribution to architectural culture in challenging the spirit of positivism that was once so pervasive. But now Heideggerian thinking must not itself go unchallenged, in that it threatens to install itself as a set of fixed values out of tune with contemporary society. And while some would criticise postmodern thought for being relativistic in accommodating plurality and difference, and questioning the ground on which any particular statement is made, the true relativism lies surely in a tradition that forecloses even the possibility of even asking these questions, by doggedly adhering to a set of out of date values, and by failing to engage substantively with any critical discourse.

It is time, it would seem, to adopt a more flexible and tolerant attitude towards technology. It is time to break free from the shackles of the past. It is time, perhaps, to forget Heidegger.

Neil Leach

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