

The Mental Age of Technology and the Conscience of Art

Considering technology and its relation to art attempts to marry one abstraction to another. Any such attempt must balance the historical bias of progress with the ever-changing aesthetic; in other words, it must decide what counts as technology today, and also give an account of what our modern outlook perceives as art. Before the respective remit of the two terms can be drawn up, a further consideration must be made: is such a relation bound by 'classification'? This is paramount because the central, but implicit, assumption made in the affirmative assumes that there is a relation between technology and art. A belief that 'video killed the radio-star', becomes as such a classification of the life and times of different technologies and their cohabitation with the arts: an evolutionary relation of progress is assumed. However, only by severing progress itself from evolution will the answer not be simply a survey of survival.

Having always depended on tools and techniques, or simply preferred to use them, their improvement, whether by accident or design, is correlative to our ability to recognise ourselves temporally. Our abilities of foresight favour or disfavour the individual relative to his desire for the future. The next instant therefore, belongs to the tools and techniques of advantage: technology. And in an intensely narrow sense, and also a common perception of today, technology is silicon-based, electronic, and speaks in binary mode. A boxed-in microprocessor, with a monitor to visualise our keyboard-based commands combine to form the electronic computer. Being, principally, little more than a calculation machine, the axiomatic embryo of Euclid has grown to become the brightest pupil in today's world and blinds like the products of mathematics have always done. Calculation is power. In monetary terms, it allows for the digital suspension of debt where credit is boundless - a game of hide-the-money. In political terms, new media brings the governors closer to the governed by rapid bombardment of large numbers of short messages, vying for attention by strobe effect. In cultural terms, and in particular the popular, or the mainstream, the traditional strongholds of production and distribution are being socialized. They are, at the very least, proliferated to more people who are asked/allowed to do both. For all the noise around the legality of Internet downloads, a subscription to the view that technology follows an evolutionary path demands silence. This view must remain indifferent to the fates of traditional copyright law and old forms of employment contracts. Such a correction that is experienced today, a reconfiguration

of the powers of production and distribution, is what most easily describe the historical path of art.

Sound and photography, moving and still, have been decoded into thin air; they are near-perfectly portable. The electronic written word is flourishing in its byte-size but struggles to translate the sensual sensation of turning the physical page of a book. Performance on a stage cannot be digitally transferred due to the necessity of physical presence. Both of these survive because of format. Both can be repeated or replicated to a degree only. And both seem to be resisting the current power of calculation. Access to the written word is of some importance sociologically as its proximity to the spoken one is so great; nothing is more relied on than language in making oneself understood. *Access blames force and format for its loss.* On the one hand, market-forces change format, and information is eventually permanently lost in one or other transfer. On the other, information that is delayed due to a restriction of access to a new format, or due to a temporary stay under a government's lock and key, is still in existence. The respective societal importance of loss and delay, however, is anyone's guess. Today, fragmented electronic messages are at least instant (and relatively uncensored and of explosive availability), but the fear of losing them is itself lost by the ease of production, the perceived security of storage, and the need for quantity. In essence, the common speech-act has moved from the larynx to the hands, where the creative craft in contemplative touch improves the accuracy of the message, free from the level of improvisation required of verbal communication. It is here, in the realm of the *speech-act*, that conscience must exist. Here we are free to choose the proximity of what we *say* to what we *do*; conscience, in this sense, being the reconciliation of the two. Our conscience, sadly, may choose distraction as its drug, uniting speech and act with the instant electronic word, networking online in an idyllic but suspended existence. Here, conscience is put into a relatively unstable equilibrium, where a voluntary force of perpetual and distracting stimulation, interspersed with an increasing granularity of non-committal hi's, hello's, and the occasional how are you's, keeps it in place. In this world, <Enter> commits.

To speak of the conscience of technology is therefore to consider the effects of that time of suspension. One measure is perhaps its capacity to modify the fortunes of people, in particular, to reduce or increase inequality; such a quality of distribution of finite resources, being the 'sharpness' of our tool. Technology, in an evolutionary schema, is never new, and is tightly bound to market forces that play on the narcissistic whims of the consumer, whose

identity is made more tangible by its codification into electronic form. Infantile, is perhaps a stern and one-sided conclusion on the mental age of technology, as judged by its use, but with the current parentage of money and power, little more can be expected

As regards the remit of art, it arguably has none, only specific functions in society. The unity of art and its message can be disregarded at society's peril. The artist is a prerequisite for every creation, and no matter how apolitical the artist is, the need to transmit a message cannot be divorced from the arts. Herein lies the conscience of art in relation to technology: to temper the human obsession with technology, and to moderate the advantage gained from access to it.