

# STS.464 :: The Intellectual History of Technology

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What made “technology” necessary?

10 May 2005

## White Noise

surreality of book

the virtual and the real

role of television

technological escape from death

pleasure from escaping death, risk

death is taken for granted, but fear you can't escape

sunsets: natural or technological?

at the time: issue of smog, sunsets

Three-Mile Island, Chernobyl, rivers on fire

“white noise” → death, static on TV

myth & reality → a representation of a representation

the role of the expert to define, delineate things (e.g. TV passage on p. 51)

**collective consciousness:** groups, nations share a consciousness that is realized in, reinforced by something (e.g. TV), something we share in individually and collectively

- TV then → Internet now?
- constant input, nonsensical
- TV is full of more that is unspoken, intimated, powerful
- images vs. text

**myth:** a second-order language in which the first language is treated figuratively, and which usually has a narrative → it's a story

- What is the narrative of technology?
- Is DeLillo developing a myth of technology?
- What is the lesson of the myth of technology? We have to be conscious of this noise, be reflective?

**collective knowledge** → very close to Veblen's definition of technology

Technology's “lesson,” what it “tells” us → not to trust your own senses? (e.g. medical technology, dissociation of diagnosis from body/self)

Logic backed up by data and diagnostic procedures.

We've moved far from the shared cultural conceptions of technology in this course...

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“unintended consequences” in medical technology like the environment  
the thing that influences your life the most and that you don’t understand  
a mutable definition of technology that moves with the times  
forces, laws of nature → laws of devices we produce  
the things for which we don’t have names.

Perhaps there are two definitions of “technology”:

1. cumulative (Henry Adams, forces) → not static, but changing less rapidly → an aggregate?
2. current (changes over time)

→ Perhaps these definitions just have different scopes?

**Schatzberg’s paper** → why the English term is so hard to pin down; things *and* processes

- WWII French & German, two different words: “technology” and “technique”
- the thing and the how-to
- these have become the same thing? e.g. software
- analysts and actors → different modes

Speaking of forces... Marx’s capital and capitalism

Connectivity: technology in this class → capitalism for Marx (this is important!)

**Industry:** production relations, labor, capital → political, economic term

- What “technology” does is depoliticize the word “industry” and hide all these relationships of production.
- Also includes the consumption part of the equation (as opposed to *just* production) → psychology
- A screen: hides politics, projects to us our desires
- “Technology” → marks a shift in how the relations of production are organized
- Machine and industry no longer bound to place

**reification:** reality is imparted to an abstraction, take a concept and impute it with qualities of being in the world

→ the power of “technology” to conceal the things that Marx is talking about

## The Technical Aesthetic

Veblen → engineers as counterculture

The spirit of common inquiry

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## **Technology as a force**

- the force that drives newness, to create things, to change
- basic human instinct
- desnity, rate of change, visibility making people aware of this force
- the known and the unknown
- take God out of picture, technology solves all the known
- you run up against the unknown
- bomb, create things to find out what happens
- consumerism
- technology has the extension of, a means of coping with fear of death
- you can't defeat death, so you just keep propelling self forward
- response to fear of death, self-preservation drive that can't alleviate the fear of death
- is technology fear of death or a way of coping with it?

## **The role of faith in technology**

- The different concepts we put our faith into over time
- Technology plays a liminal role between internal and external
- We create it and then it takes on a life of its own
- This is alluring → makes it an object of faith
- A surrogate religion? It is but it isn't.
- Faith in own ingenuity, different relationship with the object of faith
- Myth of it as out of control, but also that we will be able to solve it with ingenuity
- Machines as a surrogate for religion
- Decontextualizing the machine, aestheticizing, idolatry/fetishization?
- Benevolent vs. vengeful God → very like technology
- "The poison and the cure" → botox, chemotherapy
- Worship of false gods?

## **Concealment that the term "technology" provides**

- Interlocking of machine processes, something more in the system than the single machines
- Wedding of science to useful arts
- Wholeness, totality of the machine process
- Hides things:
  - capital
  - laborers
  - human components
  - the self

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- Historians contributed to this by making technology a socially constructed thing → what to do with this ambiguous notion of technology?
  - Hides the materiality of the technology, hides the people involved.
  - Attaching meanings to the material.

### **Technology, activism, democracy**

- What it means in other places in the world
- You have to confront the whole system
- Serves the interests of those in control
- It is not a thing apart
- What is technology's relationship to power?

### **Heidegger**

- Ordering, framing, manipulation the world in order to use it
- There are other ways of orienting ourselves
- Technology is the realization of, a response to the potentialities inherent in the structure of things.

### **Technology: The grand narrative of the present?**

- Emancipation of the human race
- Emancipating ourselves from nature?
- Fear of nature = fear of death (death as the ultimate natural event)
- Fear and hatred of nature
- Technology as frightening as nature itself
- Remaking nature → a technological world as scary as nature, as uncontrollable as nature
- The Western aspect of this
- A theory:
  1. First Nature: cosmos as it existed before life
  2. Second Nature: beginnings of life on this planet, *homo sapiens*, superimposition of a manmade and cultural environment on the first nature, a layered world (Marx & Hegel)
  3. Third Nature: Second Nature has so replaced First Nature that the whole earth is second nature.  
→ this is technology, the force that has converted the world from natural to manmade