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Jacques Ellul's *The Meaning of the City* (1951) draws a connection between the motivations of Cain as the first city builder and the human desire to tame Eden and rebuild it as a testament to human power. Ellul systematically unpacks Biblical references to the city, using his exegesis to determine its role in relationship to man's rebellion against God. Ellul reveals a vision of the city as a counterpoint to the Garden. The Garden is man's natural habitat. The place in which man is in community with God. The city on the other hand is the byproduct of man's pride. In the attempt for man to assert his own dominion over God's creation, he supplants himself as builder, in place of his own Creator. In *The Technological Society*, Ellul reveals the nature of technique to be efficiency and the nature of humankind as inefficiency. The city as a manifestation of this efficiency exists in a warring state with its inhabitants enslaving them to the myth of progress and belief in their own power. Ellul's vision of humanity as inefficient relates to the Biblical idea of man as a reflection of God's image. God is not concerned with productivity, only souls.

The Meaning of the City reflects Ellul's greater project as a whole. When relating this work to his writings on technique within *The Technological Society,* a deeper understanding of his warning against the use of technique and an understanding for the source of his hope in light of its undeniable power over man is revealed. In the Bible, each instance where man asserts his dominion over creation leads to his own comeuppance. In Genesis 11:4, an example of man's intent and God's response is made clear. "Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.'" (NIV) This passage reiterates Ellul's understanding of the desire of man to build for himself a place to remain. The longing for home paired with a rebellious refusal. It demonstrates a desire for humankind to put technology to work in order to ease for themselves the burden of wandering imposed upon Cain by God as a result of his sin. He builds a place within the world after being exorcised from

communion in the Garden. Man also builds it as a testament to his own glory. "Whatever direction we envisage for the future of our civilization, it is only too correct to think of it as the triumph of the city." (Ellul, 1970) So the city and the technique used to build it is born from the hardening of a sinful heart separated from God. Therefore, the city and its systems require a redemption. The belief in its possible good is the same folly as the belief in the goodness of humankind.

> As all the other cities, Babylon (representative of all the others) is at the hub of civilization. Business operates for the city, industry is developed for the city, ships ply the seas for the city, luxury and beauty blossoms forth in the city, power rises and becomes great in the city. There is everything for sale, the bodies and souls of men. (Ellul, 1951)

If the city is the manifestation of man's rebellious spirit, the secularization of urban life is a testament to man's idea that freedom begins where man has shed his reliance on God. Ironically, the systems man strives to impose—seeking to control the chaos of his nature—only serve to enslave humankind further. Ellul wrote, "The combination of man and technique is a happy one only if the man has no responsibility. Otherwise, he is ceaselessly tempted to make unpredictable choices and is susceptible to emotional motivations which invalidate the mathematical precision of the machinery." (Ellul, 1954) Man's nature is at war with the place he has built to contain him. "Urban civilization is warring civilization." (Ellul, 1951) Propaganda is the tool employed to convince us that the systems and technologies of the city are progress. "Again I want to emphasize that the study of propaganda must be conducted within the context of a technological society. Propaganda is called upon to solve problems created by technology, to play on maladjustments, and to integrate the individual into a technological world." (Ellul, 1962) Therefore, our understanding of the problems of urban life will never be resolved through the application of knowledge that grows from information produced through technological thinking.

When we transform education into the digestion and processing of information, we double down on this wrong headedness. For information is curated through the application of

technology to data. But we accept information as fact because, as Ellul points out, we cannot possibly process all of the information fed to us on a daily basis. (Ellul, 1973)

Ellul's project is particularly important in light of our current circumstances. Since the rise of the internet, the primacy, immediacy and availability of information has only increased. Instructors place an ever greater emphasis on technology use for assimilation in today's culture.

> This is why there is such an incredible stress on information in our schools. The important thing is to prepare young people to enter the world of information, able to handle computers, but knowing only the reasoning, the language, the combinations, and the connections between computers. (Ellul, 1989)

No ethical or moral context is required of information. Information is produced to be consumed; to make pliant citizens. The means left unnoticed in service to the ends we believe we have knowingly agreed to, without understanding what we have given up. As Ellul writes,

> It is mere vanity to wish to distinguish a technique as good or bad according to its end. Whether technique acts to the advantage of a dictator or of a democracy, it makes use of the same weapons, acts on the individual, and manipulates his subconscious in identical ways, and in the end leads to the formation of exactly the same type of human being...the well-kneaded citizen. (Ellul, 1962)

For Ellul, this way of living does not reflect the freedom of the Christian life. Ellul points to the inefficiency in the model of the early church, which relied not on human power or material goods but on God's power and priorities. The end result was never meant to be a globally dominant entity but a radical force that moved beneath the surface. Where Christ has refused Satan's offer for earthly kingdoms, Christians have eagerly accepted the offer to gain seats of power and influence in the State. (Ellul, 1984)

With eerie accuracy, Ellul has mapped out the predicament that is caused by the ever increasing speed and efficiency of technology. The loss of jobs to a changing marketplace. The loss of privacy due to the permanency of our digital footprint. The

splintering of opinion into increasingly vehement factions due to the nature of social media. The dwindling population of rural areas. All these are the inevitable result of technology. The technology and the technological mindset cannot be separated from its consequences and effects. The negatives of any technology manifest in a way that is specific to that technology. And because, as Ellul notes, technology seeks all its ends, technology will imbue culture with all its effects. So it is all of the good and all of the bad at the same time. As Ellul writes,

> Technique now constitutes a fabric of its own, replacing nature. Technique is the complex and complete milieu in which human beings must live, and in relation to which they must define themselves. It is a universal mediator, producing a generalised mediation, totalizing and aspiring to totality. The concrete example of this is the city."(Ellul, 1973)

The internet is at its heart just another city. A place where the forces of technology assert its power over man in exchange for immediate access to the information that keeps them enslaved. This truth can be seen in the way social media platforms influence behavior and interactions. Following the recent Cambridge Analytica scandal, Om Malik noted "Facebook's DNA is that of a social platform addicted to growth and engagement. At its very core, every policy, every decision, every strategy is based on growth (at any cost) and engagement (at any cost)."(The Guardian, 2018) The culture of the Social Network masquerades itself as a conversation but everything is curated a certain way.

> The social group which the city represents is so strong that it draws men into sin which is hardly personal to them, but from which they cannot dissociate themselves even if they so desire. Individual virtues are engulfed by the sin of the city.(Ellul,1951)

Social media is both city and propaganda. The nature of the technology determines the character of the resulting discourse in a very overt way. It alters not only the way we converse, but what literacy looks like.

In 2015, *The Atlantic* published an article entitled "The Decay of Twitter" by Robinson Meyer. The article attempted to unpack conversational "smooshing." According to Meyer, Twitter has become a space in which what is intended to be pithy, personal and conversational, has exited its context and reached audiences beyond its intent. The casual conversational tone of a tweet takes on added weight when retweeted or shared and removed from its enframing. What is personal becomes political, and what is private becomes public. This form of information sharing, like many other aspects of life online, is subject to a loose archiving whose curation is at the whim of a reactionary mass public. Called Tactical Twitter, this powerful tool controls information and regulates behavior through an arbitrary social code.

Tweets can escalate from casual comments to something more meta. One example is the ironic tweet gone wrong of Justine Sacco. Sacco was a PR specialist for IAC, the corporate head for the Daily Beast and Vimeo, amongst other things. As Sacco left to visit family in Cape Town, South Africa on her vacation, she tweeted about her traveling experience as she progressed on her journey. She typed, "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding, I'm white!" (Ronson, 2015) A reshare of this tweet by a stranger would lead to Sacco's dismissal from her position. A fact she would only be made aware of 11 hours later, when she exited her flight and it was far too late to do any sort of damage control. In an article in the *New York Times* that excerpts Jon Ronson's book *So You've Been Publicly Shamed,* Ronson comments on

the phenomenon that he cites as responsible for both the impetus to tweet ill conceived asides, and the impetus to shame the tweeter:

> Social media is so perfectly designed to manipulate our desire for approval, and that is what led to her [Sacco] undoing. Her tormentors were instantly congratulated as they took Sacco down, bit by bit, and so they continued to do so. Their motivation was much the same as Sacco's own—a bid for the attention of strangers—as she milled about Heathrow, hoping to amuse people she couldn't see." (Ronson, 2015)

The repercussions for our words so casually presented may permanently tarnish our reputation, lead to our dismissal, or alter our ability to interact online or in person. We have become watchful about how we express ourselves and look to sources of virtual nods of approval that are assured. So, retweeting the mistakes in the speech of others becomes preferable to asserting a possibly unpopular opinion. Shaming behavior requires very little of us, and has a high reward. It is not truly moral, but rather serves to further assimilate us to the technology.

Inside his article, Meyer mentions the work of Walter J. Ong, who famously studied the transitional space between pre-literate or oral cultures and literate cultures. Ong's work is relevant to Meyer's discussion primarily because of a phenomenon in media that Ong calls secondary literacy. This term describes a condition of orality that occurs within a media that could not exist without literacy. In other words, a literate culture produces a technology—like the Internet—that allows people to engage in a form of communication that mimics the behavior of oral cultures. As Meyer notes in the article, this relates particularly to a notion of instantaneousness, efficiency. (Meyer,

2015) According to Ong, "textualized verbal exchange registers psychologically as having the temporal immediacy of oral exchange." (Ong, 1990) Twitter occurs in real time. You can tweet and respond to tweets in the same way you hold conversations. Therefore the tone is conversational, on one level, and in one context. The problem is the permanence of the characters. Unlike face to face conversations, our interactions online can be shared and considered by audiences that are beyond our control.

Jokes and off hand remarks, like the one made by Sacco, are capable of being replicated without being owned, an electronic framing of the digital tweet forces the original speaker to repeat a joke he might not after the initial reception was cool. For example, if you tell an off color joke at a party, and no one laughs, you are less likely to repeat it at another gathering. If a fellow party goer repeats your joke in another context, they bare at least partial responsibility for the jokes perpetuation because the words cross their lips and the original teller is at least one degree removed this new telling.

For example, in the mid 1990s, the artist Glenn Ligon did a series of paintings called the "Joke Series." In this series, Ligon solidifies moments from the stand-up routines of Richard Pryor, the controversial black comedian, stenciling the text of his jokes with oil sticks onto a brightly colored acrylic canvas. Pryor unflinchingly examined race and sexuality. The paintings of Pryor's jokes were physically difficult to read; the text was small and required the viewer to approach them in an intimate space in order to ascertain what was said.

 On *Cocaine (Pimps)*, yellow-orange text was superimposed on a red-orange background, enhancing this illegibility. When the viewer accessed the text, the ideas

would be activated, and the viewer became part of the performance of the words. The

viewer was forced to read what Pryor would speak, which was more participatory than

listening to Pryor onstage or on video. Removed from the context of the stand-up

routine and placed within the contemporary art museum's white cube, the viewer had

to not only confront the text of the joke but also decide what to publicly do with it. The

viewer was forced to confront what the joke meant hanging in the wind by itself without

situational support. How should the viewer respond to:

> Niggers be holding them dicks too..
> White people go " Why you guys hold
> your things?"
> Say "You done took everything else
> motherfucker." (Meyer, 2011)

Ligon told the story of a docent at the Whitney Museum of Art in New York who led

patrons on tours through the *Black Male* exhibition in 1994. The docent did not want to

read the jokes, because he didn't want to say some of the words that the jokes

contained. Inevitably, when they would come to the part of the tour where they

confronted Ligon's work, someone would ask the docent to read the joke. The docent

would continue to talk about the work, and try to ignore or assuage the requests, but

due to the intimate nature of the read and the size of the groups in the tour, the request

to read would become more insistent. During the particular instance relayed by Ligon in

his talk, the crowd pushed past the docent to read the joke. When they realized what it

said, the crowd became agitated. One member of the crowd, when asked if he didn't

appreciate Richard Pryor's stand-up, stated that yes, he did, but Richard Pryor in his

living room is one thing, and on the wall at the Whitney is another.[1] In person, when smoosh between the personal and the public occurs, we are forced to witness how our speech operates and the effect it has on the people around us. Not so online, until we misstep.

An awareness of this "smoosh" is part of this new literacy fostered by the technology. This awareness leads to a fear of technology that—instead of directing us to blame and withdraw from the offending technology or technological system—manifests as a reluctance to identify oneself in a genuine way through words, which seem to reveal too much, forcing participants towards communicating with memes and pictures. Participants alter their behavior to conform to the platforms that are seen as essential to contemporary life. What is parsed out online is a filtered version of information that presents an identity statement and keeps private the individual who exists beyond the black mirror. Or at least that's the hope.

Bonnie Stewart, an academic scholar in digital pedagogy, identifies something she calls Call Out Culture, which exhibits the following characteristics:

> 1. The vitriol was public and sustained
>
> 2. It was generated not by pre-existing factionalism but by specific public statements and responses made online

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[1] Recently, in an Artforum article about his work, Ligon was quoted about why he had returned to this work after having stopped making Pryor paintings, specifically due to this incident at the Whitney, he said: "So why have I returned to Pryor after all these years? Perhaps it is that Pryor is funny again. Not that he wasn't funny back in the seventies, it's just that all his militancy, his rage at social and economic injustice, his breaking down of sexual taboos seems amusing now, almost quaint. The jokes don't scare me anymore because the world they promised to bring seems even farther away than it did then. As Pryor says, 'Remember the Revolution brother? It's over. Lasted six months.' When I listen to Pryor records now, I laugh and am a little sad--nostalgic for my fear, I guess."

3. It aligned a group perceived to have power and privilege against a group without". (Stewart, 2015)

Stewart highlights a space in which a subculture—academic Twitter—is altered by the politicizing of specific private statements which are held up to stand in for the mindset of the many through their retweeting. (Stewart, 2015) Meyer suggests that the patterns Stewart identifies became prevalent during 2014, and are responsible for a Twitter slowdown. (Meyer, 2015) Hashtag movements like #ferguson, #blacklivesmatter, and #GamerGate are examples of the type of exchange Stewart writes about which began or were active in 2014. Through social platforms like Twitter, the disenfranchised can compete for attention with dissenting or opposing viewpoints by highlighting examples of perceived privilege within casual posts through retweets. This actions wrests control of the flow of information from the speaker to the audience. Because these actions shift a balance of power, Stewart reads call out culture as positive.

Social media theorists like Clay Shirky within *Here Comes Everybody: the Power of Organizing Without Organization* and Charles Leadbetter within *We-Think*—who are proponents of open access projects on the web like Wikipedia and Craiglist—also believe that this form of organization through social media is a positive paradigm shift in the way people organize. Clay Shirky identifies this shift as a means of generating and sharing information that would not otherwise be possible within organizations. For Shirky, the business model is unable to generate maximum information about any given subject because it is worried about who makes a good employee. Businesses can't afford to hire employees who possibly generate only one good idea a year. The type of loose collective generated by the culture of social media allows for contributions by

many who may only ever offer up one idea. For Shirky, the access to ideas and

individual knowledge is the benefit of the social media platforms. Proponents of this

viewpoint are likely to bring up examples of the positive force for change that social

media can assist, like the Arab Spring. But so much of how we perceive this behavior

of information flow in social media is dependent upon our view of the inherent

goodness of the public participants within these communities. Shirky implies that this

means social media has a neutral character which can be positively harnessed.

However, it does not change fundamentally the nature of the system, which is born out

of wrong motivations. Attempting to regulate it through moral behavior is problematic,

according to Ellul.

> The ethical problem, that is human behavior, can only be considered in relation
> to this system, not in relation to some particular technical object or other.
> Learning how to use "rightly" or "do good" with such and such a technique does
> not much matter, since each technique can only be interpreted within the
> ensemble. If technique is a milieu and a system, the ethical problem can only be
> posed in terms of this global operation. Behavior and particular choices no
> longer have much significance. What is required is thus a global change in our
> habits or values, the rediscovery of either an existential ethics or a new
> ontology. (Ellul, 1983)

To better illustrate this point, let's examine the case of The Yes Men. The Yes Men are

two activists—Jacques Servin and Igor Vamos—and a network of allies who set up

fake websites in an effort to attract web traffic for the purpose of exposing the folly of

major corporations and political leaders, and foster awareness of social and political

issues they find important. Quite often, these sites establish them as expert speakers

on topics that result in their appearance at conferences under assumed identities. The

Yes Men believe that you can expose the truth by telling a lie. They employ tactical

media techniques. They capture, distribute and make effective use of information. They

began doing this in the early 2000s, after creating a fake website for the World Trade Organization that was consistently mistaken for real. Perhaps their best known action was when Andy Bichlbaum, a member of the Yes Men, appeared on the BBC World as Jude Finesterra, a spokesperson for Dow Chemical, on the twentieth anniversary of the Bhopal chemical disaster.

On December 3, 1984, Union Carbide India Limited's pesticide plant had a gas leak that caused the immediate death of close to 3800 people, and impacted the long term health of an estimated 500,000 more. Union Carbide settled with the government offering a payout that worked out to just over $2,200 per victim. Ingrid Eckerman estimated in 2005 that since the intitial wave of deaths, over 16,000 more people have died from gas related injuries. (Eckerman, 2005) Dow Chemical purchased Union Carbide in 2001, inheriting Union Carbide's moral obligation to the people of Bhopal. When Jude Finesterra appeared in the interview, he apologized for the Bhopal disaster, stated that Dow took full responsibility for the disaster victims, and stated that the company would liquidate Union Carbide and give $12 billion to the disaster victims. When this deception aired, Dow's stock plummeted and they lost $2 billion dollars by the close of the market. Officials at Dow were forced to go on record saying they did not apologize, and they were not going to pay the victims additional compensation. The BBC was forced to apologize for their mistake.

The Yes Men's tactics emphasized techniques frequently employed by major corporations: spin, media presence and access, and web traffic. The Yes Men covertly manipulated what information was presented to the public, and did it in such a way that it was not easily forgotten, inflicting measurable damage to Dow's bottom line.

They also manipulated the media's desire for instant access to information in order to critique the practice of shortsighted tv news channels who compete with the Internet and the immediacy of sites like Twitter for important stories in real time. On the surface this prank seems like a win for the Yes Men, and this view is correct. Through the publicity of this spectacle, the performances of the Yes Men became widely known. They are appreciated and well considered. However, their actions did not enact real change for the suffering in Bhopal in any real way. The Yes Men's tactics may have even fostered false hopes and created greater heartbreak for the victims. And in the end, like much social media phenomena, when the moment had passed, the victims for Bhopal were largely forgotten, while the fame and cultural awareness of The Yes Men were cemented. The means influenced what the ends became. Any attempt at morality is permeated by the corrupt nature of the tool. The problem of how to extricate ourselves from the system that overwhelms us is not solved, but served.

Technology progresses ever forward because we enable its processes in the name of progress. As Jonathan Reichental writes,

> social media takes knowledge and makes it highly iterative. It creates content as a social object. That is content is no longer something that is a point in time, but something that is part of a social interaction, such as discussion. It easily disassembles the pillars of structure as it evolves...the days of the single authoritative voice have come to an end the community has prevailed.
>
> (Reichenthal, 2011)

Ellul in the end finds within this ever increasing apocalyptic dependence on technology and reliance on the city as a testament to the truth of God's word. The solution is not a

resolution that occurs within this life but rather is a seed planted within man's war with the city that our striving cannot be quenched with technology but fulfilled in our deficiency of efficiency. Our nature makes our reconciliation to the city impossible except through its redemption through Christ.

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