Smartness and the Technological Society **Davin Heckman**

One groggy morning 24 years ago, I found myself muttering, "Good old, Mr. Coffee, what would I do without you?" That little anthropomorphic branding trick got me thinking about automation as a social act, as a form of what Louis Althusser called "interpellation," or the way that ideology conscripts subjects into its service. Many cups later, I was well into a draft of a proposal for a dissertation that would eventually become a book on Smart Houses. At the time, I was up on many of the fashionable French critical thinkers—Foucault, Lyotard, Deleuze, Baudrillard, Virilio, etc.—great resources for our mass mediated culture. Advisors made excellent recommendations to me, so I also read Lewis Mumford, Leo Marx, Bernard Stiegler, Marshall McLuhan, Martin Heidegger, and many others. But no one recommended Jacques Ellul's *Technological Society*. Through some stroke of luck or providence, I managed to find it on my own.

Ellul seemed to say what others only hinted at, pointing towards the epistemic logic of modern thought beyond capitalism, colonialism, or media:

> Without exception in the course of history, *technique belonged to a civilization* and was merely a single element among a host of nontechnical activities. Today *technique has taken over the whole of civilization*. Certainly, technique is no longer the simple machine substitute for human labor. It has come to be the "intervention into the very substance not only of the inorganic but also the organic." (128)

Ellul's definition of technique, organized around a process of producing technology that does not exist in "opposition" to the human, but rather to produce a new kind of human (or "posthuman"),

can be summed up in a simple statement: "[Technique] has a single role: to strip off externals, to bring everything to light, and by rational use to transform everything into means" (142). In other words, technique has at its root an assimilating process. And it is this assimilating process which is critical to the development of the Smart Home as a zone of spatial control and organization, with the goal of harvesting maximum efficiency out of materials which are to be determined in real time.

In 2001, the smart home was imagined as a local network of distributed sensors, appliances, and computers connected to a global network that could surveil, analyze, and plan. This apparatus would be aided by Artificial Intelligence. The chief shortcoming of my dissertation was my inability to understand the speed with which this automation would be achieved. I failed to anticipate: 1) the processing power and global and local connectivity of the iPhone (which debuted in 2007), 2) the widespread global adoption of the smart phone, and 3) the ascendance of the Platform Economy, which brought economic behaviors and resources, social and cultural practices, and surveillance-driven analytics together into one atmospheric cloud cast over the entire globe. These innovations and adoptions, though anticipated in the dream of the Smart House, became universal and ubiquitous, and would ultimately make home automation a real, practical possibility. In the end, I had been thinking too small.

In their book, *The Smartness Mandate,* Orit Halpern and Robert Mitchell explore "smartness" and its emergence as an epistemic framework for the recontextualization of the world. Rather than thinking about it as a paradigm for specific technologies, they consider smartness as a way of thinking about a world that has been extensively networked and digitized, and is consequently subject to calculation. Tracing the roots of this smartness back to Thomas Malthus' 1798 text *A Principle of Population*, Halpern and Mitchell weave through the rise of

actuarial science (or the statistical analysis of risk for insurance purposes) and into the present state of "population thinking" (which sees species as populations that express a range of tendencies). The key to understanding this drift in thinking is to consider the successive refinements in managing populations for the extraction of wealth from environments, shifting from the territorial capture of the raw power of "dumb populations" through its optimization via mass engineering and into a cybernetic phase in which raw material, manufacture, waste, recirculation, and thought are integrated into a seamless model (that converts everything into economic material).

Halpern and Mitchell continue with a discussion of Black-Scholes and the development of derivatives markets in which everything has the potential to become a resource. This development is key to the Platforms that can analyze, coordinate, and monetize sharing. This new conception of intelligence, as not consciously driven by the individual, but expressed as an accumulation of data that, in aggregate, adds up to meaningful signals is similar to the cybernetic hope that simple logical instructions can produce the appearance of intelligence when carried out at speed and scale. Despite painting a disheartening picture of a world where everything is pressed to perform economic service, Halpern and Mitchell ultimately see the Brave New World of "Smartness" as progress.

In a world where technologies are constantly being beta-tested by their users, a key feature of smartness is institutional immunity from responsibility. Nothing wasted, dysfunction becomes an occasion for sociological study in the cult of the technological bluff, and social collapse is just fodder for technological theodicy. Institutions behave as rent-seeking "stewards" who fix even the failures that they create in the perpetual beta-test of the world. The significance of this shift is that it simultaneously saps agency by turning the public into "subscribers" and

shirks responsibility by framing versional obsolescence as care. When questioned on the idea of "responsibility," Jacques Ellul's comment from *The Betrayal by Technology* is relevant:

> In a society such as ours, it is almost impossible for a person to be responsible. A simple example: a dam has been built somewhere, and it bursts. Who is responsible for that? Geologists worked it out. They examined the terrain. Engineers drew up the construction plans. Workmen constructed it. And the politicians decided that the dam had to be in that spot. Who is responsible? No one. There is never anyone responsible. Anywhere. In the whole of our technological society the work is so fragmented and broken up into small pieces that no one is responsible. But no one is free either. Everyone has his own, specific task. And that's all he has to do. (qtd. In Van Boeckel)

In the case of smartness, no one responsible. Our actions, to reference Herbert Simon, become like those of ants, reacting in the moment to what is in front of us. The true intelligence is embedded in the network itself (Halpern and Mitchell 146).

The consumer field is thus grammaticized, and life in the smart home is one surrounded by a vast structure of convenience that enables, promotes, and necessitates a system of commerce, entertainment, socialization, health, and surveillance. In this reality, Ellul's text comes across as prophetic. First as an "encirclement" (387) by technique in which "Man's traditional, spontaneous activities are now subjected to analysis in all their aspects— objects, modes, durations, quantities, results. The totality of these actions and feelings is then systematized, schematized, and tabulated. A human type is created which is the only recognizable 'normal'" (Ellul 395). Indeed, it would seem redundant to map out the many aspects of Ellul's 1964 text that resonate with the world we are rapidly redesigning.

So rather than provide a litany of the ways in which the smart world is anticipated by Ellul's warning, I would prefer to zero in on one aspect of smartness that we increasingly depend on. A key to understanding Ellul's argument is to consider the "know-how" embodied in a technical innovation as a form of instrumental memory. Whether we speak of a particular technology or a particular technique, the memory of accomplishing a task at hand is removed from the mind of the agent (or rather, it was never there in the first place) and situated in the formulaic application of a procedure and/or device. While travelling, following directions is qualitatively different than finding one's way. Following directions requires the ability to read road names and an awareness of certain conventions (right, left, North, South, East, West, numbers, distances). Finding one's way, on the other hand, does not necessarily require these skills, and instead can draw upon things like experience, an awareness of landmarks, a sense of relativity, memories of previous travels, conversations, and a wide field of imprecise information that can be organized by the operation of the mind. If we remove the goal of a destination from the equation, we can wander, meander, explore, etc. The key difference between the two methods of travel is that the technical method (following directions) is meant to require a minimum of attention and engagement while finding our way requires thought, interaction, and memory. In finding our way, we experience the value of knowledge and we develop a store of adaptable knowledge based in experience. In other words, we learn. And although the difference between storing know-how in an object or set of instructions and having know-how stashed in our brains is not always clear cut, memory is encoded in any of the techniques or technologies we apply to solve problems.[1]

[1] This passage is derived from Davin Heckman, *A Small World: Smart Houses and the Dream of the Perfect Day*.

What seems to many (or at least what seemed) a small *disruption* to the social can have catastrophic effects. Consider the way in which the idea of the "knowledge base" has currency within the discourse of digital culture. A richer, organic antecedent to the more streamlined database, the knowledge base contains data in context, not only preserving points of information but also putting it into relationship with other nodes in the network. In the past, we looked to our shamans, elders, or neighbors, and, generally, treasured human wisdom. In many instances, we formalized this wisdom through technical means, mythologizing, ritualizing, and writing. This communal orientation meant that every individual, in addition to holding personal knowledge, could avail themselves of a large repository of shared information, much of which has been vetted through use. With the help of Google, our access to socially and technically recorded knowledge has exploded. And while in many respects, this has made life easier, it is not without a cost to our very sense of self. According to Bernard Stiegler's formula, the human person gains a sense of individual value and perspective through individual psychology, through their network of social relations, and their place within the larger historical framework of cultural time. As one's individual labor contributes to both their own well-being and the well-being of those with whom they interact, so it is with one's affective and cultural integration. I need help solving a problem, so I ask you. You help me, which makes me feel loved. I express gratitude and offer to reciprocate, which reinforces your sense of value. Small, seemingly trivial interactions reinforce the ways in which we are uniquely equipped in some areas and deficient in others. When enough of these interactions stack up and are interwoven with other relationships, we thrive. Deprived of these interactions, an infinite array of dystopian alternatives present themselves.[2]

[2] This paragraph is taken from Davin Heckman, "A Portrait of the Artist as an Emergent Technology."

Just as industry can alienate workers from the means of production, the culture industry can alienate consumers from their own way of life. This begins to happen when we remove knowledge from individual beings and relocate it in a global network apparatus. It is completed when a generalized human knowledge is fully extracted, streamlined without regard for the particular, and handed over for machine calculation. When a senior citizen scratches out a roadmap on the back of a napkin, while spinning out a narrative of the journey, pausing to recollect the shifting landmarks of late capitalist urbanization, we are conditioned to impatiently whip out our phones to obviate an interaction that has been rendered inferior. We no longer turn to shamans, elders, neighbors, myths, rituals, or books to answer questions. Instead, we ask Siri or Alexa. And nobody turns to us. And we wonder why people are lonely, why people fear their neighbors, why people feel depressed, why people join anti-social movements, etc.[3]

By now, most of us have read the headlines about the Marubo tribe of the Amazon. A mere nine months ago, this remote indigenous culture was given access to Starlink Internet, to much acclaim. Today, the elders report that their young are addicted to porn and social media, sliding into indolence, and adopting the norms of global culture (Pan). Of course, we know the counterarguments: The benefits outweigh the liabilities. The stodgy elders have always reacted with "moral panic" to the wisdom of the youth. Evolution always comes with "growing pains." Tradition is "peer pressure" from dead people.

At some point, the bit rate of everyday life cannot compete with the liquidity of network space. Reality is a slow network. Nature runs background processes like hunger and boredom that chew up our bandwidth. Strangers are worms that bog down our machines. Even customer service plunges us into a labyrinth of robots and dislocations. So the network becomes a refuge,

[3] This paragraph is taken from Davin Heckman, "A Portrait of the Artist as an Emergent Technology."

first settled by those with the means or know-how to move within that space, but one that is increasingly cast as a universal human entitlement and, as more services become self-services, a requirement. It exists as a utopia of process, where the gear grinding impositions of the world give way to nomadism within smooth space. Again, we can look back to Ellul's text for a summary of the present:

> With the final integration of the instinctive and the spiritual by means of these human techniques, the edifice of the technical society will be completed. It will not be a universal concentration camp, for it will be guilty of no atrocity. It will not seem insane, for everything will be ordered, and the stains of human passion will be lost amid the chromium gleam. We shall have nothing more to lose, and nothing to win. Our deepest instincts and our most secret passions will be analyzed, published, and exploited. We shall be rewarded with everything our hearts ever desired. And the supreme luxury of the society of technical necessity will be to grant the bonus of useless revolt and of an acquiescent smile. (427)

In seeing Ellul's work so resoundingly vindicated, I am left with a question. Why is it that cultural theory ignores what Ellul seemed to see? What is concealed within critiques that radically upend the epistemologies of the 20th Century? From this vantage point, the pervasive irony of poststructuralism, the apathy of postmodernism, and the preference for surfaces over depth stops seeming like an honest account of indeterminacy or commitment to radical openness, and seems instead like a sardonic reflection on the situation: The technological society is a trap. Might it be that Ellul's relative obscurity is less a function of the works irrelevance, but instead a testament to its prescience? Perhaps the truth of our smartness is that it has made us utterly stupid.

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