Ghost in the Machine
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Abstract

Much of Ellul's thought is animated by the tension between technological determinism and individual freedom. To say that we are entirely free within our technological milieu is hopeless ignorance; to say that we are entirely determined by it is hopeless pessimism. The truth of our situation lies somewhere between, yet how can we imagine this dialectical tension? Here I argue that visual art has a role to play in helping us to not only understand technique as Ellul conceives of it—as a single, unified social phenomenon with a life unto itself, the aspects of which are "ontologically tied together"—but also to understand our place within it, neither fully able to control it yet not fully controlled by it. Keeping in mind Ellul's critique that modern art tends to capitulate to technique even–perhaps *especially*—while claiming to subvert it, I look at the photography of Lars Tunbjörk and the video game *Control* as examples of how uncanny, mundane representations of the workplace have generative potential for a critical awareness of technique.

"Technique has taken substance, has become a reality in itself. It is no longer merely a means and an intermediary. It is an object in itself, an independent reality with which we must reckon."[1]

I.

One of my first jobs out of college was technical writing for the IT department of a national insurance company. I wrote documentation about data systems for engineers. As one can imagine, it wasn't where someone with an interest in literature and sensitivity to language would do well, really where anyone with an active imagination would do well. Yet it was a job, and I needed a job. Thankfully, I didn't suffer in solitude for long. I became friends with a colleague who wrote short stories in the droll, self-aware, cringe literary style of David Foster Wallace, who was a professor of his in graduate school. His sardonic humor cast a welcome shadow on the bright, empty, sanitized spaces of our office park. He had worked at the company for a while and had stories to tell of the strange things people do and become in the modern corporate world.

Endlessly-on fluorescent lights, endless carpeted corridors, endless team meetings, endless salad bars in the food hall, endless small talk, lots of endlessness. We coped with our situation by narrating it in gothic, uncanny proportions. We imagined grimy, broken laptops and keyboards and mice dumped into our office at regular intervals through massive chutes in the wall because resourcing thought we needed new equipment. We imagined dated cybersecurity PSA posters as bearers of occult messages. We imagined the lonely interior life of the automated mail cart. We imagined the interior life of those around us who *didn't* feel the strangeness of it all. It was our way of comprehending the feeling of emptiness and endlessness.

Our vignettes helped me survive those early career years. They also began my interest in liminal spaces: places where, as Peter Heft describes, "the world-as-such becomes decoupled from its appearance," where vacuousness (physical, mental, emotional)

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[1] Ellul, Jacques. *The Technological Society*. Vintage, 1964, 63.

implies the uncanny presence of—or access to—something *other*.[2] Originally used by anthropologists to describe rites of passage and rituality, liminality is "fundamentally an idea about thresholds and grand moments of change…As a subject becomes separated and enters the marginal (or liminal) phase, not only does the world around them change in meaning, but they become Other."[3] In order to return to society as a mature adult, adolescents are cut off from the familiar world and required to overcome the ambiguous, overwhelming liminal experience. Imagining our insurance company as a liminal space, my friend and I were seeking to imbue our experience of it with a meaning greater than what it offered.

I also have the Internet to thank for this interest, where images of uncanny dystopian spaces abound. We see them in the r/LiminalSpace, r/UrbanExploration, and r/AbandonedRetail subreddits, where people share images of architectural decay and nostalgic oddities. We see it in the viral image, "The Backrooms," which spawned an online urban legend and helped inspire the TV show *Severance,* a show which focuses on corporate dystopia.[4] My Instagram feed is full of images from people like Availu and Brendon Burton, who depict people (usually alone) in derelict settings (usually urban). I've even contributed to the theme myself, publishing a photo book of empty spaces and detritus, called *Fallen Things*.

Why are we drawn to images of emptiness and entropy? Stephen Siegel, who photographed urban blight in New York, locates our interest in the fact that these are images of *ruins,* which evoke our inevitable deaths: "they remind us of our own mortality and of the simple fact that nothing – no matter how seemingly solid – will persist in time."[5] Yet our experience of ruins isn't merely morbid; they also evoke childlike wonder at the entry of chaos in the world of adult order:

> "As we grow up most of us come to accept the need to impose order on our
> living spaces and on our lives. Thus, the heightened wonder that we all

[2] Heft, Peter. "Betwixt and Between: Zones as Liminal and Deterritorialized Spaces." PULSE, volume 8 (2021).

[3] Ibid.

[4] Francisco, Eric. "Severance reveals the 'scary' and 'surreal' underbelly of office work in 2022." Inverse, 22 February 2022. https://www.inverse.com/entertainment/severance-apple-tv-plus-interview-dan-erickson-ben-stiller-adam-scott, accessed 6 June 2024.

[5] Siegel, Steven. "Ruins of New York and New Jersey." https://stevensiegelphotographer.com/ruins.html. Accessed 6 June 2024.

experience with ruins is a flashback to the child's view of the world. We are all fascinated by chaos and its effects."[6]

In a society fully enclosed within technique, empty malls, abandoned office parks, and derelict basements serve as a kind of comfort that *this isn't all there is*; that the endless corridors aren't in fact endless; that we aren't fully in control of our environment; that technique doesn't have the final say. If, as David Lovekin writes, "in modern society the ultimately real is absolute rationality," and therefore technique is "the current mystery,"[7] images of liminal spaces recalibrate our sense of reality by envisioning the porousness of the technological milieu: its artificiality, its vulnerability to entropy, its ultimate irrationality.

Perhaps these images give a false hope. Given Ellul's ambivalence about the truth-telling potential of images, elaborated in *Humiliation of the Word* ("Images are essential if I am to avoid seeing the day-to-day reality in which I live"[8]), and his confidence that technique cannot be transcended ("Enclosed within his artificial creation, man finds that there is 'no exit'"[9]), it's tempting to dismiss photographs like these as mere escapism from the strictures of unbridled rationalism and labor alienation in the technological society—scenes that give us the *feeling* of insight yet are powerless to effect meaningful consciousness of technique. And many of these images of liminal spaces don't rise above the level of being merely aesthetic chaff or, as the kids say, a *vibe*. However, I want to argue that certain images can arise from the technological society that play with its clichés, horror, recursion, and irrationality without succumbing to these things, or reinforcing them. That, in fact, these kinds of images are even *necessary* to a critical awareness of technique.

If technique's primary strategy of propagation is to pacify its subjects into acceptance of its irrationality, then as with the political illusion, we need means for "developing and multiplying tensions"[10]—to vividly and imaginatively represent its irrationality. Images can do that. The risk, of course, is that images can simply stun viewers into shocked passivity. As Ellul writes in *Empire of Non-sense,* "In the context of the technological society, given the nature of man as we know him, the depiction of horror produces no

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[6] Ibid.
[7] Lovekin, David. *Technique, Discourse, and Consciousness*. Associated University Presses, Inc., 2001, 15.
[8] Ellul, Jacques. *The Humiliation of the Word*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985, 128.
[9] Ellul, Jacques. *The Technological Society*. Vintage, 1964, 428.
[10] Ellul, Jacques. *The Political Illusion*. Wipf & Stock, 2009, 210.

positive reaction: it is simply an intensification of the horror."[11] Most dystopian imagery and sci-fi horror suffers from this overreach: showing the terror of being human in the technological wilderness yet not providing a vantage point for a deeper, radical awareness of the true situation, an awareness that Ellul argues is only possible through verbal discourse. Yet the humor and humility expressed in certain surreal works make them particularly apt for imagining the life of technique and our life within it, avoiding the pitfalls that Ellul rightfully critiques. I'll take a look at two—the photography of Lars Tunbjörk and the video game *Control*, each of which envision the workplace as a liminal space, the domain in which we're perhaps most vulnerable to technique's effects and incursions.

II.

Corporate office culture reached its sublime peak at the turn of the century. We survived Y2K, the British version of *The Office* premiered, social media hadn't rotted our minds, AI wasn't the specter it's become, and we worked together, in-person, every day. It was the height of a specific kind of techno-optimism that made highly visible our simultaneous admiration and resentment of the technological environment—sentiments that have since been smoothed over by our half-hearted cynicism toward technology and by cushier office design. Candid images of scenes from this time are understandably rare given corporate security concerns and lack of iPhone cameras. However, Lars Tunbjörk, a Swedish photographer known for his stark, wry portraiture, worked with the New York Times to gain access to corporate offices around the world to make his photobook, *Kontor/Office,* published in 2001. Describing his previous photo assignments and inspiration for the book, he notes that he,

> "'photographed a lot of empty interiors: welfare offices just after family therapy, empty reception rooms...I noticed that even after the people left, a feeling of them stayed in the room, a sense of sadness.' Tunbjörk wondered if he could capture that same lingering sadness in corporate offices, which he calls 'the most common - but closed and secretive - place in the western world.'"[12]

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[11] Ellul, Jacques. *The Empire of Non-Sense*. Papadakis, 2014, 97.
[12] Kors, Joshua. "Alien at the Office." https://www.joshuakors.com/tunbjork.htm. Accessed 6 June, 2024.

Tuned to the liminality of these spaces, their 'lingering sadness,' his images bear witness to human spontaneity in the midst of the irrational repetition and inhospitable space of office life. At first glance, they are painfully banal. A pair of suited businessmen looking out a window. An empty trashcan. A birthday cake set in front of rows of colleagues heads-down at their monitors. Yet taken together, they illustrate Ellul's insight that "the individual cannot be 'absent' from his work without great injury to himself. Work is an expression of life."[13]

The saving grace of Tunbjörk's images is their humor, and the tension they create between human spontaneity and technological determinism. Shot in a candid, documentary style, his images are ironic without condescending to their subject, surreal without drifting into dystopian fantasy, institutional yet intimate, horrific yet hilarious. What makes Tunbjörk's images remarkable is his discovery of unself-conscious play and irrationality in the midst of lifeless bureaucratic settings. His subjects aren't agitators actively protesting against the system; they're everyday people expressing individuality and imaginative resistance in a deadening environment.

This unconscious struggle for autonomy is central in also *Control,* the 2019 sci-fi horror video game that imagines the workplace in far more surreal terms. Playing as Jesse Faden, players explore the headquarters of the Federal Bureau of Control, a mysterious government agency in charge of protecting the world from paranormal forces. The game centers upon Jesse's role as the Bureau's new director and her search for her brother, locked somewhere in the building, and her efforts to rid the Bureau of a malevolent presence, ominously referred to as "the Hiss." The game takes place entirely inside the Oldest House, a shape-shifting office building that takes inspiration from mid century brutalist municipal architecture. It calls to mind Ellul's comment that "[man] was created for a living environment, but he dwells in a lunar world of stone, cement, asphalt, glass, cast iron, and steel."[14] His use of "lunar" is apt here, given the multi-dimensionality of space in the oldest house, how a subterranean floor, the "Quarry Threshold," contains a seeming universe unto itself. Space in the Oldest House is often distorted, paradoxical, and seemingly infinite.

With guidance from the "Board"—a disembodied voice that intermittently sends garbled messages—Faden gains paranormal powers over the course of the game that make her

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[13] Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 399.
[14] Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 321.

increasingly adept at manipulating her setting and combating the mysterious Hiss. By the end of the game, players can alter the configuration of entire floors, create shields out of desks and whiteboards, hurl chairs at enemies. Yet even as her autonomy grows, Faden is never fully able to control the Oldest House or her fate within it.

After finishing the final level, players are shown the game's closing credits which unexpectedly go haywire. The game seemingly starts over, with Faden now robbed of her powers and in the position of a new hire in the Bureau performing menial tasks for overbearing managers. At this point, players are essentially put through an office simulator game (endlessly delivering memos to empty desks) until Faden discovers that she's been possessed by the Hiss and is experiencing a surreal dream of servitude. The dream ends when she finds and kills the building's original director.

Control is a decidedly terrifying game. Pitting players against paranormal bureaucratic forces—at one point even fighting against *herself*—the game envisions life in Hegel's "Bad Infinity," in which technique becomes a "disembodied abstraction, endlessly embodied."[15] Yet what makes the game compelling is its liminal ambiguity. Faden is both threatened *and* empowered by the mysteries by which she's surrounded. Reality, in the game, is porous. Like Tunbjörk's photos, *Control* creates an uncanny tension between the banal and the fantastic as they visualize the lengths to which we go to survive our technical environment. What makes them particularly compelling is their absence of *ideology*. The liminality present in Control and *Kontor/Office*, is ambiguous, both a threat and a hope. The incursions of technique are countered by subversive gentleness and humor, hinting that the way to resist technique isn't by using its own devices—literally and figuratively—but by following a different rationality, one founded in wonder, play, and grace.

      III.

Ellul claims that "the technical system is in no danger from an art that is conditioned by that very system,"[16] and it's arguable that, of all media, photography and video games are the most open to this critique. However, if it's also true that "wonder is the enemy of technique,"[17] then it follows that genuine experiences of wonder—experiences that aren't

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[15] Lovekin, *Technique, Discourse, and Consciousness*, 104.
[16] Ellul, *Empire of Non-Sense*, 93.
[17] Lovekin, David. "Re-Imagining the Image, Re-focusing the Word." Ellul Forum, vol 70, Fall 2022, p. 13.

merely wonder at the marvels of technique, what David Nye calls the "technological sublime"—can draw us into a truer awareness of our human state in the technological society, both determined by the environment we've created yet free to act within it.

Depictions of workplace liminality are particularly apt for imparting this kind of vision. Images of people maintaining their humanity in technical environments beyond their control remind us of the "creation that humanity has forgotten but which it must not forget,"[18] as David Lovekin puts it. Images do this when they express the complex reality of being human in the technological society, and the experience of determinism and freedom, futility and potential, excess rationalism and irrational play that that entails. When images approach dialectic expression, in other words.

The phrase *deus ex machina,* "god from the machine," is a cliché often used to cast an ominous tone on technological progress, especially in the realm of AI. Its origins are in fact much more quaint, coming from Greek theater, when actors were brought on stage using a machine (either a crane or trapdoor) to swiftly resolve the central conflict. The "ghost" was a presence of literal and fictive artifice — disruptive yet necessary to the life of the narrative. I've come to think of liminal images in these terms, especially uncanny images of the workplace, which are particularly relevant in a moment when modern work is increasingly composed of false images, epitomized by the Zoom chat window. Our sense of reality and of ourselves—of ourselves in the technological society—is conditioned by reductive images which tell us our lives are either completely free, a form of hopeless optimism, or fully determined, a form of hopeless pessimism. Neither are completely true, of course, a point which Ellul briefly addresses in his second foreword, where he disclaims the pessimism of which he's been accused ("I do not seek to show, say, that man is determined, or that technique is bad, or anything else of the kind"[19]). Liminal images like the ones we've looked at undermine techno-optimism at the same time that they undermine techno-nihilism. They give visions of creative survival in the technological wilderness which, like Ellul's book, don't resolve the problems of the technological society as much as they convey the ambiguous truth of our predicament.

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[18] Lovekin, *Technique, Discourse, and Consciousness*, p. 97
[19] Ellul, *The Technological Society*, xxviii.