

## **The Empire of Non-Sense: Art in the Technological Society**

*By Jacques Ellul; translated by David Lovekin and Michael Johnson, edited by Samir Younés. Papadakis, 2014. 168pp.*

### **Reviewed by Zachary Lloyd**

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Nearly forty years after its publication in French, Jacques Ellul's seminal work *The Empire of Non-Sense* has been made available to the English speaking world. This beautiful, hardbound edition also contains two introductory essays by David Lovekin and Samir Younés, both of which constructively engage with the text and with Ellul's broader philosophical perspective. As the subtitle of the work ("Art in the Technological Society") indicates, Ellul's subject is art and those who create it—and indeed, a dizzying array of contemporary artists, architects, critics, and cultural movements are given due consideration. However, the pivot of these analyses lie in their relation to a complex set of phenomena that Ellul calls *la technique*: basically, the totality of methods of and for achieving absolute efficiency in every field of human knowledge. We moderns, as Ellul has it, are so beguiled by machine productivity that we reconstruct, almost unconsciously, all of our cultural and social institutions on this paradigm—namely, on the pursuit of unrelenting efficiency. In effect, technique surreptitiously predisposes a certain manner of operating not merely for our interaction with machines, but also with each other; it becomes as if our very substance, a mentality and an environment fully in and of itself. It is no coincidence, for example, that cognitive science draws heavily from computational models; today the line between brains and processors is nothing if not muddled. In the technical society as Ellul perceives it, human action is re-envisioned as function, something that may be tweaked and fine-tuned; the individual—the site of eccentricity and spontaneity—is increasingly unneeded, and, indeed, is nothing now but a potential source of error. Subsequently, this mentality subtends not only our desiccated assemblages of bureaucracy and economic productivity, but even the vaunted, ironically detached freedom of the artist. In a society where creativity has been co-opted by hyper-rational methods, the official art of the age is inevitably artificial.

The modern artist, consuming and consumed by the technical society, is placed in a position the likes of which human history offers no counterpart. Ellul, in his rich, slightly polemical, and overtly sarcastic style of writing (very faithfully captured by the translators), spends the bulk of *Empire* problematizing the theories and practices of the artist's position by dialectically revealing the contradictions that underlie it. Beginning with the notion that the Modernist art movement had purportedly freed itself from the shackles of tradition and authorial control, Ellul goes on to show that this supposed liberation has only amounted to a deepening technical captivity. In other words, artistic practices have become increasingly infatuated with their technical procedures or methods rather than with whatever it is they actually create. For example: An empty canvas hangs on a gallery wall. I am standing before it; sensuously, symbolically, there is nothing there but this blank object. Slightly confused, I glance down to the little placard next to it which

enables me fill in the void with some appropriately elaborate theory (e.g., “This is a painting that is not yet a painting”). What is emphasized here is not the painting, but the technical procedure of painting; theory and the generative procedure of the artwork have become the work’s very claim to art. The work, subsequently, no longer speaks for itself—the placard, or the art critic (which amount to the same), speaks for it and guarantees its place in the newly minted technical discourse of value. In other words, we are confronted with a situation wherein the meaning of the work is, like a sticky note, “tacked on” from the outside. But this need for the “tacking on” of meaning does, in fact, accomplish the very opposite of what it intends: it only reveals the vacuity and actual meaninglessness of the (non)painting itself. This veneration and overvaluation of artworks that are inherently devoid of sense or meaning is precisely what Ellul considers to be the sense of nonsense.

Once again: modern art professes to have been freed—free from tradition, free from material constraints, free from the godhead. Yet once art has refused the communication of meaning, it has refused itself; in keeping with its nihilistic trope art becomes anti-art. Ellul contends that in such a situation—when art obliterates meaning—all that is left is the bare process by which the artwork is created, along with an absurdly opaque technical discourse that attempts to veil the work’s own vacuity. What was once believed to be a revolution or a freeing has only become an emptying and a stripping of sense. Now the only value of art is in its ability to “question,” precisely because technological rationality and the homogenizing principles of technique throw into question the very value of the individual. In short, this is where Ellul locates the fundamental contradiction: art, as it attempts to revolt against the oppression and subjugation of the individual to technical ideology, profitably uses and proliferates this ideology even as it appears to denounce its value. Accordingly, modern artistic freedom has amounted only to one more capitulation: an enslavement to the technical mentality; an endorsement to a world in which technique is the absolute benefactor of value; a genuflection before the pervasive Empire of Non-Sense.

In the final analysis, *Empire* is a proleptic work, a kind of promise. It is reasonable to ask, after nearly forty years of sweeping technological advancement that would have surely surprised even Ellul, whether the situation looks more hopeful now; whether art has remained on the level of technique and ignored fundamental human issues or whether its particular capacity for immanent critique (i.e., for using oppressive methods in order to lend awareness to their very oppressiveness) can be successful in bringing to light the reality we are facing. In any case, the issues Ellul has presented are, no doubt, all the more pressing today—the meaninglessness of art he has described only mirroring the meaninglessness permeating our everywhere and everything—and to ignore these issues is as if to give in; to declare as a bitter necessity that which we have only chosen.