REVIEW
Fear of the machine, revisited

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Returning to Reality: Thomas Merton's Wisdom for a Technological Age, by Phillip M. Thompson, Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2013, pp. 112, ST £15.00 (paper), £13.80 (e-book).

Technological anxieties haunt our age of hypermodernity as illustrated by a renewed interest in classic publications by authors from an earlier period of neurosis, namely, Ivan Illich (Cayley, 2005), Erich Fromm (2013), Paul Virilio (2009), and Jacques Ellul (Jerónimo et al., 2013). Thomas Merton's critique of the technological society captured the *zeitgeist* of technological anxiousness threading through discourses of the New Left in France, Britain, and America during the height of the Cold War. Phillip Thompson, an American interdisciplinary scholar who fuses science with religion and religion with technology, argues that Merton's mid-century reflections on technology deserve greater critical consideration as part of a wider intellectual history of mid-century technological anxiety. How did Merton understand "technology"? What lessons might his "wisdom" teach our hypermodern age?

Phillip M. Thompson in *Returning to Reality: Thomas Merton's Wisdom for a Technological Age* brings together Merton's scattered reflections on technology in ways that may surprise readers familiar with Merton's writings and intrigue a new generation unfamiliar with his extensive literary corpus. For a generation of readers Thomas Merton (1915-1968) is best remembered as arguably one of the most prolific Catholic writers in mid-century America. Merton's less familiar social writings typify the interests of radical intellectualism during the mid-1960s in showing concerns for racial segregation in America, conscientious objection to the Vietnam War, Christian-Marxist dialogue, the effects of technology on culture and the environment. His most prominent meditations on socio-cultural effects of technology feature in two of his best-known anthologies: *Faith and Violence* (1968) and *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966), a book that amplifies a decade of reflections drawn from his private journals.

As an experiential theologian and socio-cultural critic, Thomas Merton cautioned readers to consider how technology mediated human relationships within the world. Although Merton was a prolific writer, the majority of his reflections on technology were fragmentary sketches revisited through secondary reflections over many years. This fragmentary nature makes any critical assessment of their continuing relevance especially challenging. Thompson has made a valiant attempt of threading together Merton's episodic discussions, previously overlooked as either too eclectic or unsystematic for serious assessment, into a coherent series of meditations focusing upon three pertinent topics: technological warfare, communication technologies, and the ethics of biotechnologies. Merton was far from being a Luddite; rather the basis of his criticism was predicated on the ethics of technological applications that resulted in social, economic and political reductionism from a position of expediency. Merton confided that he was protesting against a "complacent and naïve progressivism which pays no attention to anything but the fact that wonderful things can be done with machinery and electronics" (p xvi). In this respect, Thompson wholeheartedly identifies with Merton's ethical stance as he explains that his impetus for writing the book was to "challenge a technological mentality which is seeking to solve problems

at hyper-speed and is justified by the mandates of expediency and efficiency" (p. xx).

Phillip Thompson's central argument is that Thomas Merton's "wisdom", as a response to techno-positivism, cautioned a discernment that validated the integrity of human personhood within technological systems. In this respect, Merton's meditation clearly betrays the historical period of writing particularly in the stress he placed on the impact of technological systems, or technique, on human social ethics. In this respect, his conjectures perfectly align with mid-century "crisis of man" discourse that has been the subject of Mark Greif's recent study (Greif, 2015, pp. 47-51). Broadly considered, the aftershock of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 witnessed an intellectual crisis in western humanism that rippled out as fear of a total nuclear war leading to the erasure of humanity, but set against muted hopes that moral responsibility and technological restraint would prevail. Thompson adopts a hard determinist stance as mediated by his reception of Merton whereby "technology" is defined as "instruments or processes that control, shape, and modify our environments and to an increasing degree, in our own time, our selves." (p. xv). This problematization resembles proposals by Jacques Ellul whose book *The Technological Society* was enthusiastically embraced by the New Left in the United States (Ellul, 1964). Thompson highlights an Ellulian influence on Merton regarding his understandings of "technique" as relating to ethical implications of technology: "systems of warfare, work and consumption sought only the ends of efficiency, productivity, and progress. Ethical or spiritual considerations were marginalized or ignored. Instead, technique relied on the myth that each person was an autonomous creature capable of constant improvements leading to a liberation of the human condition" (p. 9).

Thomas Merton had argued that the culture of technique conditioning the war machine in Cold War America was not the product of "evil scientists but the result of a moral callousness in the fabric of a technological society that placed a priority on efficiency and progress" (p. 24). Merton's application of Ellulian technique to his criticism of the Vietnam War has potential to extend readings of Merton's critique to deployments of military drones in the Middle East by both the United States presidential administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Cultural geographer, Derek Gregory's paradigm of the "kill-chain" independently reinforces Merton's perception of the processes facilitating modern total war. The "kill-chain" describes the systematic abstraction needed to generate a military target. The "logical" expression of the "kill-chain" is a process of technical abstraction with the purpose of systematic dehumanization. Gregory argues that processes of exposing systems of violence must also acknowledge the "complicity of the public in the destruction" (Gregory, 2011, p. 158), frequently through imperceptible ways and means. French philosopher, Grégoire Chamayou reiterates this argument in his study of the philosophy of drone deployments by the United States to combat Wars on Terror whereby military drones, as technological prosthesis, deployed to hold international terrorism at bay, nevertheless, expose inherent vulnerabilities of the predator state to surprise attack (Chamayou, 2015). Vulnerability undermines faith in the technological deterrent.

Thomas Merton problematized techno-positivism by arguing that technology, while generating efficiency, also generates risk (p. 33). Thermonuclear accidents posed just as much risk of initiating a global conflagration as political crises during the Cold War (Schlosser, 2013, pp. 84, 92, 278-87). The threat of technical accidents continues to haunt contemporary geo-politics. Reflecting on the nuclear accidents at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl, Jacques Ellul in *Le Bluff Technologique* (1988), examined the

paradox of increased unpredictability linked to technological power defined in terms of efficiency. Catastrophes such as that which struck Japan in early 2011, as a result of the accident in the Fukushima nuclear power plant, show that an accident in a technological system on which there is significant dependence easily provokes a chain reaction in other systems supporting human life. An Ellulian principle, underpinning Merton's technological consciousness, is the centrality of humanistic perspectives in response to techno-positivism. Merton's "wisdom" converges with Ellul's idea of *prévoyance* ("foresightedness") as the basis of a political and social approach that can take on not only the uncertainties of the world, but also those generated by technical systems, in order to illuminate our choices and decisions. When faced with calamities and damages that appear to arise out of the blue but are, in the final analysis, the outcomes of our technological systems, their interactions, and our dependencies, foresightedness emerges as a response both rational and virtuous, however difficult (José Luís Garcia and Helena Mateus Jerónimo, 2013, pp. 130-131).

Phillip Thompson is to be commended for drawing together fragmentary aspects of Merton's reflections on technology scattered across his writings. Dimensions of Merton's environmental consciousness and his engagement with Shakerism for understanding the sustained use of technology, tantalizingly mentioned by Thompson, could have been teased out and fully developed. Nonetheless, Merton is read by Thompson as a foil for his own anxiety regarding media proliferation that has a tendency to degenerate his argument into polemic as is the case for consideration of the ethics of biotechnologies where Merton ceases to be a reliable guide simply because these issues post-date Merton's own career. Thompson justifiably stresses the Ellulian principle underpinning Merton's critique as manifested by a balanced techno-humanistic perspective. The experience of technology is not neutral it changes the rate and flow of information and in so doing it changes us in many imperceptible ways. We are experiencing a "disappearance" of technology as multi-platform tools become smaller, faster, and disappear from physical sight (Žižek, 2003, p.18). Behind the superficial harmony of the integrated technological world-system there is a "vast thoughtlessness" (p. 92) that has forgotten "the angel" in "the machine" (Merton, 1967, pp. 5-11), symbolizing the blunting of spiritual perceptiveness within materialist culture. In a culture guided by "technique" propaganda, and advertising, slogans became the culturally dominant communication form, adapted to the need for speed and simplicity of a technological society (p. 10). "Pacifying us with the seductions of slick advertising, wealth, and the possibilities of unprecedented powers, technology had the authority to massively alter the psyche of the human species" (p. 11). Merton adopted a hard determinist stance by arguing that technological society during the 1960s had paradoxically grown more reductive through rationalizations of personhood despite the affordances offered by automation. While this argument now reads as cliché, nevertheless, it is worth remembering that such thinking arose from a fearful time.

What lessons might Thomas Merton teach our hypermodern age? While new media builds capacities to forge "self-defined worlds" (p. 39) this media torrent has heightened social alienation. For Thompson, Merton's essay "The Angel and the Machine" (1967) invites readers to re-imagine holistic expansiveness, continuously subject to limitation through automated processes, in our media-saturated world. Thompson concludes that this essay marked a seminal moment in Merton's criticism, arguing that "wisdom" in technological society required finding a balance in order to regenerate the atomized self. Thompson conjectures how contemplative values can be integrated within technological society. He proposes the reclamation of slow time and promotion of technology-free zones in private life. In placing emphasis on

rediscovering a "hidden wholeness" (p. 49) Thompson pays homage to the balance Merton recommended for wellbeing.

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