

Electricity Enslaved:
Tonal Imagery of Progress, Incorporation, Extinction

Catalogue essay for *Necrospective*, a traveling exhibition curated by Thomas Johnson featuring work by Motohiko Odani, Takeshi Murata, Thomas Johnson, Alexis Milne and Craig Fisher
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In 1923, Aby Warburg concluded a lecture on serpent rituals in the American Southwest with a stunning lament for modern life.

Electricity enslaved, the lightning held captive in the wire, has produced a civilization which has no use for heathen poetry. But what does it put in its place? The forces of nature are no longer seen in anthropomorphic shapes; they are conceived as an endless succession of waves, obedient to the touch of a man's hand. With these waves the civilization of the mechanical age is destroying what natural science, itself emerging out of myth, had won with such vast effort – the sanctuary of devotion, the remoteness needed for contemplation.¹

We needn't necessarily agree with Warburg to be transfixed by the elegance of his prose. He so deftly envisions electrical wires – and the cultural understandings that envelop them – as unwilling agents of a dull devolution. The vivid, unpredictable event-time of lightning deadens, squeezed into a steady stream of mundane, utilitarian potential. The deathly feeling of the word “enslaved” takes a trip into the very tissues of our techno-genesis, rendering modernity as so many intricate folds of domination and subjugation. Warburg's statement, as we know, is only one in a long lineage of similarly-styled expressions. So many thinkers – from Marx to John Ruskin to Henri Bergson – have lamented the increasingly regular, rationalized and tame experiences of time, objects, labour – life – after the industrial revolution.

But what, exactly, is involved in an empathetic act of agreement with these sorts of statements – statements which represent complex configurations of affects, attitudes, descriptions, judgments and ethical orientations toward technological developments and the mindsets thought to accompany them? Perhaps we could say that there are several different conceptions of truth simultaneously staged in a passage such as Warburg's, which correspond to several different modes of agreement that we might experience when reading them. There is what I might call a structural idea at work here, according to which truth opposes a hegemonic ideology. A repressed Real – a loss of poetry, a deadening of experience – ruptures the ideological façade of technological progress, revealing the latter to be just fantasy.² (The true statement

¹ Aby Warburg, “A Lecture on Serpent Ritual,” trans. W.F. Mainland, *Journal of the Warburg Institute* 2, No. 4 (1939): 292.

² I am thinking of Žižek's (rather Hegelian) application of Lacanian thought as a model here – as when,

revealed, in effect, *judges* ideology to be ideological.) This conception of truth is an inherently unstable one, since according to it, the quality of truthfulness does not belong to any particular statement, but only to a particular symbolic *situation* in which a statement finds itself. (Having once been repressed, it is revealed.) If laudatory accounts of technological progress can be ideological, so too can lamentations: for instance, nostalgic constructions of an idyllic past “before” technological progress “began.” Further destabilizing this situation (as has been shown numerous times in the history of capitalism) is the fact that ideological critiques can often be recuperated, strengthening the very ideologies they once opposed.³

Second, there is, perhaps, a temporal sense of truth at work here. Warburg’s statement expresses a subjective experience of time – which, in being performed through writing, comes to represent a “true” impression of the cadences of technological change. (This is a subjective sense, according to which truth can only come into being by having been performed as such.) Lightning, of course, is not exactly “anterior” to electrical cable; it flashes on in spite of the wiring in human habitats. But Warburg has carefully staged a semblance of succession, a series of “befores” and “afters” which in their very construction bear witness to a subjective sense – almost like vertigo – of technical transformations happening too rapidly to be culturally accounted for. Paradoxically, this sense of a profound disruption in the experience of time is an irruption of over-regularity – a radical transformation from a heterogeneous field of unforeseen *events* to a regular flow of predictable *eventualities*. (Even car crashes – the most iconic of accidents – take on a premeditated quality, becoming infused with the “always-already-ness” of modern disaster.)

There is at least one more conception of truth at play here: an *affective* or *tonal* truth, according to which Warburg seeks to strike a chord, to pluck out a capacity for feeling that seems to already exist within the audience’s range of experience. According to this sense of truth, a feeling of discomfort with the ubiquitous “too-close-ness” of technology always already exists “within” the modern subject, waiting for a sympathetic image in which it can actualize itself, make itself legible. Warburg’s statement *organizes* a subjective relationship between affective registers of experience and reflexive attitudes toward technological “progress.”⁴

This is not to say that such statements dictate what, exactly, their emotional tenor might be for an individual reader at a given time. (I oscillate in front of a statement like Warburg’s, feeling alternating pulses in how much I choose to empathize: sympathy, agreement, sadness, discomfort, disagreement, sheer interest, an

for instance, he argues that the form of narrative “emerges in order to resolve some fundamental antagonism by rearranging its terms into a temporal succession” in *The Plague of Fantasies* (New York: Verso, 1997), 11-12.

³ On this topic, see Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2005). The authors examine the use of 1960s countercultural rhetoric in 1990s management discourse, arguing that once-anti-consumerist ideals later became part of yet another ideology (or spirit) of capitalism.

⁴ Throughout this essay, I am drawing on – but also reinterpreting – insights from affect theory and the study of feeling in literature. Particularly relevant is Sianne Ngai’s study of the recursive properties of minor, non-cathartic and more-or-less unintentional negative feelings – such as anxiety, irritation, and envy – in literature. She points out, for instance, that such feelings can sometimes produce a reflexive “feeling *about* a feeling,” such as feeling ashamed of feeling envious. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2005), 10.

appreciation of the craft of writing supremely executed, and even a slight indignation, a refusal of the statement's rhetorical power. And yet, for all this variation, the range of my feelings shows that I maintain, throughout, a sense of what I am "supposed" to feel, what the passage *wants* to convey to me.) An intensity of feeling – which might give rise to a wide range of emotions – attaches itself to fundamental structuring assumptions about culture, industry, and technological progress – so much so, in fact, that the feelings themselves seem to become extensions of the styles of thought *about* technological progress that they exemplify. So clear, in Warburg's passage, are the dialectical presuppositions that imagine "nature" and "technology" as separable entities, the latter of which will entirely incorporate the former.⁵ Electricity, one of the fundamental technological developments through which the total incorporation into capitalist life takes place, is rendered as part of a modern experience that will consume everything, leaving nothing "untouched," "outside." These dialectical presuppositions – though they are by no means intellectually inevitable⁶ – are nonetheless difficult to avoid *feeling* in late capitalism. Belonging to everyone and no one, they seem to have been "felt" everywhere, always-already. As tonal images, passages such as Warburg's cast lamentation, anxiety, or sometimes sublimity as reflexive properties of the dialectical presuppositions that imagine techno-capital as total incorporation. A feedback loop operates, in which the tonal qualities of the statement feed off of their own dialectical presuppositions.

Of course, in our time some aspects of Warburg's tonal passage no longer ring true; but there is no lack of more contemporary imagery. For instance: David Cronenberg's 1999 film *eXistenZ*, a sci-fi thriller about a game that plugs into a bio-port installed in the spine, which makes it impossible to tell the difference between reality and gaming. Enthusiastic gamers utterly revere the creator of the game they play, Allegra Geller; thanks to her (or so they think), they continually move between layers of game-worlds that go on and on, like a dream from which they can't wake up. Realities fade, brutal-cut and slow-bleed into each other, rendering the actual world dull by comparison. Players find themselves losing themselves, doing things against their conscious will. These instances, Allegra explains, are true character urges: things your game character was born to do. Her advice? Don't fight it.

In *The Gay Science* (1882), Nietzsche remarks that when people take on a profession, they often "become the victims of their own 'good performance,'" gradually losing

⁵ I am indebted, here, to Stuart Martin's insights on the dialectical understanding of capitalism as total incorporation. Martin traces the lineage of recent arguments such as Boltanski and Chiapello's – which basically argue that capitalism can incorporate anything – back to Hegel's dialectical presumptions that there must be something outside of the body. Via Marx, these dialectical presuppositions came to structure the ways in which capitalism came to be understood as incorporative. Stuart Martin, "Absolute Art" (paper presented at "Cycles of Recuperation," Art Research Symposium, Goldsmiths, University of London, May 15, 2012).

⁶ A number of more-or-less Deleuzian examples might be called upon to illustrate this point: for instance, Elizabeth Grosz's examinations of architecture and prosthetics in the animal world, or Gilbert Simondon's concept of technicity, which accounts for the ontogenesis of technical objects without deferring to an inventor. Both of these examples counter the assumption that technology must be thought of as something that was once "outside" of experience but now dominates it. Building their philosophies from an assumed multiplicity and heterogeneity of potentials, these philosophers do not need to harshly differentiate between human and animal invention, or between invention and nature. See, for instance, Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), or Gilbert Simondon, *L'Individuation psychique et collective* (Paris: Aubier, 1989).

their sense of “how many other roles they might perhaps have been *able* to play; for now it is too late. Considered more deeply, the role has actually *become* character; and art, nature.”⁷ (Here, Nietzsche brilliantly stages an erosion of dialectical thought; through habituation, the diametrically opposed poles of “artifice” and “nature” are brought into too intimate a contact for them to continue to be rendered as opposites.) In *eXistenZ*, the gamers avoid the oppressive sense Nietzsche describes of having lost sight of the “other roles” that they might have played. They live in a world rich with counterfactuals, switching activities and jobs constantly. Yet this seeming liberation becomes just another form of subjugation. The gaming paradigm takes over, to the point where the gamers no longer see their own actions – or even their own feelings – as their own. When they shop, eat, get horny, make friends, work, rebel and kill, they suspend themselves in the wills of their characters, co-determining the outcome of the game by following character urges “truer” than their own. Similarly to Warburg’s passage, this film produces a reflexive feeling about a dialectical conception of total incorporation into a technological fantasy. And like the characters in *eXistenZ*, there is a sense that the feelings we experience in watching this film are not entirely our own; they are also properties of the dialectical image of incorporation.

While *eXistenZ* brilliantly portrays the broad palette of emotional experiences bound up with the incorporative idea of losing oneself in the game, it cannot think beyond the dialectical demand for an *outside* to technologically-mediated experience. In staging that demand, it participates in the ideologies it ostensibly counters (which require an outside in order to function). Thus, the film’s most productive “truth value,” as I see it, is not at the ideological level (the unstable, structural conception of truth I referred to earlier). It is at the tonal level – in the way in which the film renders palpable questions about what delineates the affectivity of gaming from that of living. When gaming makes use of every imaginable feeling, but dislocates the means through which those feelings are distributed between characters, the slight meta-feeling that “something’s off” hints that there must be a limit, an outside to this structure of experience. And yet the very feeling of being “off” itself intimately registers the relations between a reflexive attitude toward the outside and the dialectical presuppositions within which that outside is understood.

The outside is, in a sense, that which *cannot* be understood – but toward which a subject seems to tend. *eXistenZ* produces a powerful image of an uncanny surplus life – a simultaneous extinction and extension of the individual into a matrix of extra-personal activity. In *Seminar XI*, Jacques Lacan offers a strange – and rather funny – image of the libido as indestructible life form, a “man-omelet” with no need for the constraints of biological life: the lamella.

Whenever the membranes of the egg in which the foetus emerges on its way to becoming a new-born are broken, imagine for a moment that something flies off, and that one can do it with an egg as easily as with a man, namely the *homelette*, or the lamella. The lamella is something extra-flat, which moves like the amoeba. It is just a little more complicated. But it goes everywhere. And as it is something - I will tell you shortly why - that is related to what the sexed being loses in sexuality,

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Aphorism 356, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 302.

it is, like the amoeba in relation to sexed beings, immortal - because it survives any division, any scissiparous intervention. And it can run around.⁸

Ultra-flat, the irrepressible lamella is an image of "the libido, *qua* pure life instinct, that is to say, immortal life, or irrepressible life, life that has need of no organ, simplified, indestructible life."⁹ For Slavoj Žižek, the undead in horror fiction perfectly exemplify the lamella, which in turn acts as a limit-image for "the Real in its most terrifying dimensions, as the primordial abyss which swallows everything, dissolving all identities."¹⁰ For instance (in Žižek's favourite example), Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) provides a terrifying image of an indestructible and infinitely plastic life form, which overlaps "pure evil animality... with machinic blind insistence."¹¹ But perhaps this exemplar of the lamella isn't quite flat enough – or tonally ambiguous enough – for me. (I'd prefer to think of the monster in Takeshi Murata's *Monster Movie* [2005], which dissolves into nothing but an ultra-light stir of activity in a screen space over-full with glitches.) Lacan does not seem to tonally code the lamella quite so strongly as does Žižek; although it has terrifying dimensions, he suggests that it also has a "jokey" side.¹² Like Murata's monster, Lacan's lamella spills forth a *disturbance* in tonality, which accompanies the imagery of irrepressible, extra-biological life.

Roger Caillois provides a remarkable account of biological processes for imaging self-extinction in his essay "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia" (1935). Caillois puzzles over the mimetic qualities of insects: moths whose wings are nearly identical to leaves, insects whose torsos look just like twigs, butterflies who instinctively rest in the bushes they most closely resemble. These mimetic traits, he points out, are not well-adapted survival mechanisms. Moths who so perfectly resemble leaves are easily picked out by their avian predators, who hunt by smell; in fact, the moths – who dine on leaves – are sometimes tricked into cannibalism by the perfection of their own camouflage! Mimicry is "a *luxury* and even a dangerous luxury,"¹³ produced by organs which allowed the insects' ancestors to photograph their surroundings: "a photography on the level of the object and not on that of the image, a reproduction in three-dimensional space with solids and voids: sculpture-photography or better *teleplasty*, if one strips the word of any metaphysical content."¹⁴ This teleplasty is part of a more general tendency Caillois identifies – with both biological and psychological iterations – toward a magical, incantatory logic, according to which "like produces like," and "things that have once been in contact remain united."¹⁵ Tempted by space, the mimetic insect participates in a disturbance in the field of actions and representations of space, until it is "no longer the origin of the coordinates, but one point among others."¹⁶ This extinction into a field of spatial

⁸ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), 197.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 198.

¹⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (London: Granta Books, 2006), 64.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹² Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts...*, 197.

¹³ Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," trans. John Shepley, *October* 31 (1984): 25.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

points corresponds closely to a schizophrenic conception of space:

I know where I am, but I do not feel as though I'm at the spot where I find myself... To these dispossessed souls, space seems to be a devouring force. Space pursues them, digests them in a gigantic phagocytosis... [The schizophrenic] feels himself becoming space, dark space where things cannot be put. He is similar, not similar to something, but just similar.¹⁷

This sense of assimilation, this “decline in the feeling of personality and life,”¹⁸ for Caillois, stems from an “*instinct of renunciation* that orients [the organism] toward a mode of reduced existence.”¹⁹ Yet seen in light of Lacan’s description of the lamella, such a decline could also be a move toward an excess, a persistence of life beyond the organic, discursive, sexed body. (In one of the most stunning descriptions of death I have ever heard, a heartbroken friend described hearing a deceased loved one speak while under the influence of hallucinogens: *don't you understand, I am in everything, everything – every blade of grass and insect wing.*) The total immersion of self into surrounding space may be interpreted as an uncanny inability to die; but it also proffers the promise of a complete transformation of the terms of subjectivity. The desire with which we imbue space to speak back to us, rendered tonally in terms of subjecthood, also points beyond the terms through which that subjecthood is rendered.

Without referring to technological progress per se, Caillois pinpoints so many spatial-subjective effects that could *also* be described as technological – as in the self-extinguishing effects of the game *eXistenZ*. And much like Caillois’ bugs, the artworks in *Necrospective* produce their tonal disruptions by charting a range of spatial and temporal disturbances in the figure-ground relationship. Does the figure reconfigure the space in which it acts, or does space redistribute the figure? Does the actor flatten the time in which he acts, or does time tear apart the actor? Who – or what – is pulling whom toward this self-extension/self-extinction, this uncanny surplus life? To whom is this lamenting tone – which carries the seed of a vast transformation – addressed? Such questions describe something of what was at stake in Warburg’s image of electricity enslaved: a tonal piece of work produced through tensions between various kinds of *relations* between concepts of truth and their staging. The works in *Necrospective*, which carry out their own tonal work, do justice to these questions’ immense conceptual and ethical proportions.

¹⁷ Ibid., 30.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 32.

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