

TECHNOMIMICRY

An Essay on Technology, Ornament and Function

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From my experience, technology¹ is often perceived as *reality* whereas design is perceived as *make-believe*. We have pried both disciplines apart – sometimes intentionally, sometimes unintentionally – by assigning to them specific characteristics that are, from our point of view, almost opposing each other: doing versus dreaming, science versus culture, function versus ornament, objectivity versus subjectivity. And I think this gap between the sciences and the arts is far from ideal. They ought to complement and enrich each other, balance each other out – which has become very difficult in the current situation. If you look at the aforementioned ‘characteristics’, you will notice that a couple of them are strongly associated with prevailing values. We love function, and doing, and objectivity: it is all very *useful*, and we appreciate usefulness more than anything else.

Another reason why we take technology very seriously is because we *believe* in technology. Technology is scientific, and science is stable and therefore reassuring in a world where

everything continually changes. Science is verifiable, reliable, and thus worthy of our trust. Experiments can be reproduced, claims and theories can be traced back to sovereign facts. And science – and with it, technology – equals development. Building onto the knowledge previous generations have unearthed, scientists are the ones who are moving forward, who are *getting* somewhere. And while they are at it, they are getting *us* somewhere, too. Science’s benefits are countless and we are eagerly awaiting the exciting new things they will undoubtedly come up with in the near future. Culture and the arts however, that is an altogether different story: human, shape-shifting, elusive, treacherous institutions they are. Culture does not seem to *proceed* like science does, it seems to merely *change*. A never-ending cycle of trends and deeply felt but seemingly arbitrary preferences and values that go in and out of fashion as they please. Especially in comparison to culture, science is a delightful certainty: firmly founded on the principles of reason and logic.

Reason and logic freed us from superstition and led us to advancement. And yet, enlightened and modern as we are, we associate technology – especially the kind that is electrical and digital – with a notion so old and charged that it seems to be an anachronism: *magic*.

When you compare several descriptions of what *magic* means you will find these recurring themes and terms: ‘producing marvels’, ‘using hidden forces’, ‘the power to make impossible things happen’, ‘special power’, ‘supernatural’. These words speak of things that are beyond comprehension, out of the ordinary, beyond the visible and observable, hidden from our sight – things that seem impossible to us and yet someone is making them happen. I believe that for magic to exist, a certain distance is required between the magic performed and the observer. This distance is not necessarily spatial but rather a distance in understanding and initiation: the observer is an outsider, he witnesses what is inexplicable to him and calls it magic.

Comedian Dara Ó Briain highlights the absurdity of the outsider perspective when he asks his audience to imagine falling through a wormhole and landing in Renaissance Italy,² ‘in front of a council of the finest minds at the time: Leonardo DaVinci, Botticelli, Michelangelo... and we think we’d be *gods*. ... We’d jumpstart science, we’d be the wonder of the age ... it’d be *incredible*... No! We’re *three* questions away from looking like fucking idiots. Question one: “What do you have in the future, traveler in time?”’ upon which we would proudly tell them of computers. The council would be mightily impressed and ask us how it keeps going, to which we would reply, ‘ “Well it’s connected to the wall, by a cable.” “And what happens there?” “I don’t really know. They’ve tried to explain it to me any number of times but I never... really got it, to be honest. Basically there is a thing that lives in the wall and it makes the pictures change.” They’re walking away at this stage ...’ and who would blame them. I do not necessarily think anyone who does not understand the inner workings of electric power deserves the

label ‘fucking idiot’, but Ó Briain’s tale nicely illustrates both our confidence and our ignorance. On a similar note, writer and critic Justin McGuirk poetically describes the alienation between us and the technological object many of us use daily: ‘Regarding our phones – it is all in the black monolith behind the black mirror: inscrutable, a void, a vessel. Hyperfunctional magic.’

Both McGuirk and Ó Briain note that we can be fully emerged in something and still have no clue as to what it *is*. We live in symbiosis with technology, it is right under our nose all the time. We closely interact with it daily and still it is magic. We may consider the *occurrence* of smartphones to be an ordinary and common phenomenon, but that doesn't mean our understanding of their inner workings has increased. We just stopped being amazed at technology because that got tiresome after a while, so now we shrug and say, ‘who are we to question what the gods have bestowed upon us if it works just fine?’ Somehow science – and again, with

it, technology – ended up on this sterile, lofty, shiny pedestal. Highly exalted, inscrutable to us outsiders, *unassailable*.

And that distance bothers me. Technology shapes our world and we become increasingly inseparable from it, yet most of us consider ourselves outsiders with no say in the matter. That does not seem right to me. If something is a major force in our lives, we should be able to ‘touch it’ rather than be at its mercy. We are at the mercy of many things every day and most of that is inevitable, but this not. Because I am kept from ‘touching’ science not by sheer inability but by the widespread notion that it simply *should* not be touched because it is a playground for experts only. Even in Dara Ó Briain’s story, as witty and observant as it is, I am exposed and shamed for being an idiot since I do not know how technological devices work. And idiots should keep their mouths shut. We tell each other it is sacred ground, and we obediently keep our reverent distance and gratefully cheer whenever a finished, tightly sealed

product is thrown over the fence. Because scientists *know* things, special things, things we often vaguely feel we ought to know but still do not.

These things we are told and tell each other – the clarity, certainty and reliability we like to ascribe to science – are partly fictional.

Engineers and scientists themselves are keenly aware of the trials and the many errors, the obsolete theories and refurbished assumptions, but mostly only the successes are presented to the outside world. And ironically enough, outsiders themselves are partly responsible for the polished, self-assured manner in which science presents these successes. Take for example a magazine like National Geographic, where scientific principles and discoveries are being transcribed and made accessible to the general public by means of clarifying – and often out of necessity, simplifying – illustrations. Take for example our solar system, home to us all, Bryson observes that ‘we have been spoiled by artist’s impressions and imagine a resolution

that does not exist in actual astrology’.³ He also mentions that *all* maps of our solar system found in text books are merely schematic since it is practically impossible to draw it to scale: were planet Earth reduced to the size of a pea, then Jupiter would be 300 meters away. Science is different from how it is made to appear to us, it has much fuzzier and unattractive original imagery, and less convenient dimensions. I will not deny there is a paradox at work here, because artist’s impressions *are* an attempt to make science accessible and bridge the distance. But the slick, bright imagery excludes rather than includes: they again present us gems from another realm to marvel at – no touching, please.

We hoisted science on a pedestal and shaped its image into the beacon of advancement we longed for as a modern, civilized, enlightened people. We made it into the god we wanted to have. Technology then significantly developed and began to hold real power over our lives – something we initially accepted and welcomed.

But at some point our set-up backfired and now the joke is on us: we are ruled by a sovereign god of our own making.

Now let us have a closer look at the creating of images, and at ornament and function in particular. During the Modernist period ornament itself was repudiated with a zeal that bordered on the religious – and that zeal had everything to do with technology.

Industrialization enabled mass production of artifacts, and the uncoupling of expense and ornament led to ‘decoration for the sake of it’ that was frowned upon by the artistic and intellectual elite, who diagnosed a general decline in decorative taste. Decoration became linked to disguise: something superficial, a mere attempt to hide faulty manufacturing and poor materials. Industrial production, with its inherent focus on efficiency and utility, required and induced a radically new idiom in design and architecture. Le Corbusier praised products of industry that ‘soothe our spirits by

the luxury afforded by ... the purity of their execution, and the efficiency of their operation.’⁴

So strong was the desire for advancement and a new era that ornament became the scape goat: ‘never before had so fundamental an expression of the creative spirit been singled out for elimination.’⁵ Ornament was declared obsolete and uncivilized, and the intellectual debate culminated in Adolf Loos’ ‘Ornament and Crime’ where he proclaims humanity has outgrown ornament and the lack of it is a sign of intellectual power: ‘What is natural for a Papuan and a child, is degenerate for modern man. [Cultural] evolution is equivalent to the removal of ornament from articles in daily use.’⁶ Function was the single leading principle to the Modernists. Verifiable, objective, sensible. Efficiency and optimization were regarded as pure and fundamental and truly modern, telltale signs of civilization and progress.

James Trilling writes, ‘Ornament is the only visual art whose primary if not exclusive purpose is pleasure. In functional terms, that

makes it superfluous by definition, but our definition of function is unfairly restricted to the mechanical.⁷⁷ Ornament, decoration, illustration and pattern making: to me, these things are play. They are all closely related to each other, and – almost by default – flow from our hands when we react to the world we see and live in. We observe, transcribe, render. We highlight and compare and organize and derive and copy and take pleasure in doing so. This playing is an intuitive way of analyzing and digesting information and learning from our observations, and I believe intuition is good at finding patterns because it involuntarily always keeps the bigger picture in mind: in its naiveté it transcends disciplines and ignores traditional divisions. Ornament and play have a lot in common: their main purpose is enjoyment, and neither are very serious or practical minded, which by no means makes them superficial or insignificant. They are not constrained by logic and reason and function, they could not care less about efficiency, and that very freedom and light-heartedness are their most valuable assets.

I have no intention of playing off science and reason against intuition and play, I believe that they should be regarded as complementary.

Now back to technology. The need for its *function* has called a technological object into existence, it is its sole *raison d'être* – and its outer appearance is directly derived from the desired function. To detach the one thing from the other and then take the lesser part – the appearance – out of its original context as if it has a right to exist on its own could, in the light of Modernist reverence towards function, be considered downright blasphemous. And this happens in science fiction. I am by no means a sci-fi expert, I have not yet watched all the must-sees nor have I read all the classics, but what I *have* encountered so far has been liberating, inspiring and exciting. There is playfulness and poetry in it, it is unbelievably imaginative – the absurdity and inventivity of things often makes me laugh out loud. Sci-fi is generally considered low culture, it flies below the radar of good taste and the opinions and

rules that come with it. It is so *unbothered*.

So free. And it may be the only area in our culture where ‘technology’ and ornament are good friends.

The art directors turn the whole thing upside down: they merely *suggest* (fictional) technological purpose and function by the design of the object’s appearance. Evoking the magic but lacking the intrinsic reason to exist, we see objects that are ornamented to appear technological – and yet I do not think of it as superficial. We have assigned so much meaning to technology, that when you take its original heart out but keep the shell, you are still holding something of value. It is a delightful joke, an exploration, a play with words but in 3D. What visual ingredients are crucial symbols for technological advancement? When do we buy into it and at what point do we tumble off the tightrope? ‘The world of man is not only a world of things; it is a world of symbols where the distinction between reality and make-believe is itself unreal’,⁸ wrote art historian

E.H. Gombrich and I think he is right. This is exactly why things that are supposedly ‘make-believe’ matter. In my opinion there still is an austerity in design that reeks of haughtiness – I would love to take the liberty and energy that meets me in sci-fi to the area of design.

Again – back to technology and the distance between that shaping force in our lives and ourselves. We consider ourselves outsiders. We take whatever we are given, and we take it *as* a given. But I *want* to react, and I want to *play*. Do not get me wrong, I have no desire to march into a lab and mess around pretending to know what I am doing. We cannot all be scientists, and I believe we do not *have* to be in order to ‘touch’ technology. If you want an opinion on what type of solar cells is most promising, an expert’s opinion is obviously more valid and of more value than mine. But regarding ‘observing technology from a human point of view and reacting to it’, I am an experienced expert – *everyone* is. We all are valid players in this game, just as we are.

And I think we should assail precisely that which we considered unassailable. Bridge the distance, touch it with our dirty human hands, reclaim science and technology as *human* terrain instead of acting like we are merely guests in an increasingly technological realm. Science and technology are amazing human achievements, they truly are. But these forces are not neutral nor can they any longer completely be controlled. We really cannot afford to let it all wash over us. I believe we should start imitating and transcribing technology. To get to know it better. To get a better understanding of our relationship to it, to acknowledge and understand the myths and the fiction. Because no matter how technological our environment: we are not machines. We are fickle and irrational and we are ancient. In this part of the world we now live *in* technology and the only real option seems to be to embrace it and work with it. But please let us embrace it *as humans*. We should let go of our inhibitions and of our obsession with function. Let us make analogies and wild associations and visualize interpreta-

tions. Because when we 'go over' something, so much happens, and there is so much to learn from that. And heaven forbid we drown in all sorts of sorry meta-difficulties, let us by all means keep it simple: let us have some fun, let us not take ourselves too seriously while taking play very seriously. Let us tame technology and laugh in its face. Let us explore its visual idiom and have our way with it, let us adorn ourselves with these symbols of advancement.

Let us break the spell.

Notes:

- 1 When I say technology, I think machinery, industry, computers, chemistry, engineering, electrical devices and the digital world. One could argue that strictly speaking, things like knitting and fire-making are also filed under technology, but that is not what I have in mind when I use the word in this context.
- 2 Dara Ó Briain, *Craic Dealer – Live 2012 (DVD)*
- 3 Bill Bryson, *A Small History of Almost Everything (2003)*
- 4 Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today (1925)*
- 5 James Trilling, *The Language of Ornament (2001)*
- 6 Adolf Loos, *Ornament and Crime (1908)*
- 7 James Trilling, *The Language of Ornament (2001)*
- 8 E.H. Gombrich, *Art & Illusion. A study in the psychology of pictorial representation (1960)*

