

Writing Technologies

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Special issue on Heidegger, writing, and technology

Guest edited by James Holden

Heidegger and Jünger on the 'significance of the century': technology as a theme in conservative thought

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Writing Technologies, vol. 2.2 (2009), 9-34
ISSN 1754-9035

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Introduction: Heidegger, Jünger and the philosophical significance of the twentieth century

According to contemporary philosophical commentators, the significance of Heidegger's later philosophy — at least when it is considered in broad historical terms — is a consequence of its inauguration of an entirely new way of understanding the significance of the classical, post-Parmenidian, Western philosophical tradition and the modes of thinking with which it has become traditionally associated. In 'orthodox' accounts, Heidegger's purported 'radical re-conceptualisation' of this philosophical tradition is seen as demanding a new form of 'historical attunement' that allows the contemporary philosopher both to inhabit and reform philosophy's original pre-Socratic appearance.¹ Here, the overall importance of the later Heidegger's philosophical reflections is discerned in its facilitation of a return to 'Greek primordality' and in its outright rejection of modern philosophical theses based upon the incorrigible certainties of the self-founding modern subject. To this extent, Heidegger is typically viewed as the quintessential 'counter-modern' philosopher who paved the way for the turns to poetic language and the problematics of ontological difference that dominated so called

'continental philosophy' and its academic spheres of influence in the latter half of the twentieth century.

In what follows, I will argue that this reading is something of an appurtenance to a much more general, more fundamental and, when viewed by contemporary philosophical lights, more 'politically resonant' concern of Heidegger's. In making this claim, I will propose that any interpretation of Heidegger's historical significance as a thinker — a significance that is still very difficult to discern at present, as we are still, historically, 'too close to him' — will require departing from a number of Heideggerean orthodoxies in important ways. Specifically, I will suggest that the habitual focus on Heidegger as a philosopher of art and/or language has obscured Heidegger's position as the most significant philosopher 'of the twentieth century'; more specifically, as the philosopher who attempts to articulate the world-historical significance of the twentieth century via the — then emerging, but now ubiquitous — ontological issues surrounding modern technoscience. Here, I will submit that many orthodox interpretations of Heidegger's later philosophy have caused contemporary philosophers to have overlooked one of the most important and apposite trajectories of Heidegger's later philosophy: namely, the question of how to articulate an ontological conception of technology as a site for the emergence of *historical truth*. Heidegger, I will suggest, offers a radically new conception of truth; one that, in the context of the dynamics of twentieth-century modernity, allows technology — the source of modernity's dynamism — to be understood as a form of 'ontological authority' that conditions modern life as an ordered and numerical utilitarian totality. Moreover, I will show how he achieves this from a position immanent to the putative truth-destroying and ontology-concealing potentials of the technological nihilism of Western modernity itself. In this way, Heidegger, I will argue, rather than being simply another very audible voice in 'the end of philosophy' choir that dominated the philosophical scene at the end of the last century, is

much better conceived as a *philosopher of technology* who attempts to show how philosophy can, in teaching us how to relate to what is most essential to the modern epoch, appreciate the forms of historical truth at play within technology, and thus modernity, itself. As such, he begins the process of showing modern individuals how they can 'cross modern nihilism's line' and in so doing he demonstrates the extent to which they can 'meaningfully dwell' in a modern world. Overall, Heidegger, I will claim, is a philosopher who attempts to think the philosophical significance of the twentieth century — the century of technologically-driven world-transformation — in terms that are simultaneously ontological, historical and political. Effectively, I will suggest, he offers us a conception of the century via a 'redemptive of ontology' conceived through, rather than against, the world-disclosing powers of the technological.²

In this regard, I will also suggest that Heideggerean philosophy is in many ways a variation on Jüngerian political-philosophical themes — something that, especially in regard to his philosophical writings on technology, is now well recognised.³ However, there is a good deal of controversy surrounding the exact nature of Heidegger's relationship to Ernst Jünger in this regard. According to Michael Zimmerman, for example, Jünger's relationship to Heidegger was complex and contradictory and Heidegger, in effect, 'used Jünger against Jünger'.⁴ Although in a narrow way clearly correct, such claims fail to take into consideration some highly significant similarities, especially when viewed in the light of recent debates about the 'eliminative' ontological potentials of technology and quasi-theological claims surrounding the emergence of a post-historical and 'post-human' future.⁵ Thus in opposition to those who want to view Heidegger as a self-contained source of unique philosophical insights, I will claim that Heidegger and Jünger form something of a pair in terms of the history of twentieth-century ideas; largely because both of these philosophers sought to locate and articulate the possibility of a new sacred-yet-modern onto-

political order in the wake the technologically induced emaciation of the meaning-giving structures of the traditional *Lebenswelt*. They both attempt in their own way to 'divinise' traditional philosophical conceptions of technology to the extent that the most fundamental philosophical question for both, I will suggest, was theologico-political in nature — namely, 'how can *we* live in a modern technological world where the world appears as a new historical spirit yet something devoid of 'significance' as traditionally conceived?' Heidegger's answer is that this can only be achieved if we fundamentally rethink the meaning of 'technology' and appreciate that technology, as *modern* technology, has now ceased to be a thing or device but has emerged as something much closer to Hegelian '*Geist*' and as such is a much more fundamental ontological phenomenon that now occupies the historical space that was formerly occupied by 'the divine'.⁶

Ernst Jünger, the twentieth century and 'Aladdin's Problem'

In this way, Heidegger and Jünger offered the century a modern yet 'conservative/traditionalist' revalorisation of modern technology as the basis for a new kind of modern social and political order. They were philosophers who attempted to 'think the century' in ways that pointed beyond it, and as such they strove to articulate a sense of technological futurity that is, albeit in different ways, continuous with the meaning-providing discourses of the pre-modern world. However, in many ways it is Jünger's philosophy of technology that has priority in terms of both time and position; especially with respect to the intellectual field that helped to shape the post-war German critique of the technologisation of the world. In fact, Jünger's profound philosophical intuition that the twentieth century represented the beginning of an emergent technological epoch — that can only be understood via the 'infinite intensities' generated by a holist 'techno-ontology'⁷ — provides the opening for a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of

Heidegger's later philosophy.⁸ For Heidegger, Jünger provided a new framework for understanding the world-historical significance of the twentieth century's planetary technologisation and the basis for his attempt to link 'modern technology' — as a historical site of revealed truth — to questions of the meaning of Being and the nature of metaphysics and in so doing to understand technology as signifying the completion of the philosophical history of 'the West'.

In Jünger's writings modern technology functions as the onto-historical basis for a new modern civilisational order. It is an emergent force for ontological and ultimately political stability in an age of ontological chaos and uncertainty, and for him the authority of modern technology is conceived through a return to a primal and mythical understanding of twentieth-century modernity: specifically, as the return of 'the Titans' incarnated in the ontologically mobilising power of modern machines. The attempt to search for a new primal, 'irrational', basis for political authority within the context of twentieth-century modernity is one reason why Jünger is often (mis)understood as a proto-Nazi philosopher who celebrated the arrival of twentieth-century modernity as the *emergence* of a dynamic ontological movement based upon a new principle of 'totalised aesthetic value'.⁹ The basis for this interpretation of his work was his experience of the First World War, the *Fronterlebnis*, most famously articulated in his autobiographical account of trench warfare *Storm of Steel (In Stahlgewittern)* — a work famously criticised by Benjamin for its aestheticisation of both war and politics. In his later philosophical work *der Arbeiter*, Jünger attempted to make the *Fronterlebnis* the foundation for a new Nietzschean politics of modernisation: the politics of *die totale Mobilmachung*, or total mobilisation¹⁰ — an idea that was later to become the cornerstone of Paul Virilio's 'dromological' theory of modernity. According to two other recent commentators, this clearly shows that Jünger's account of the twentieth century must be conceived as the expression of a Heraclitean techno-ontology of war — where war, conceived as 'a nihilistic will to

destroy and ... a will to reconstitute along the lines of power and rationality',¹¹ is understood to be 'essential for human excellence'.¹² However, these 'militaristic' readings of Jünger's thought are based on an assumption that Jünger's philosophy essentially valorised the fusion of humanity and technics into a radically new and hardened ontological condition: the condition that Jünger famously referred to as the new *Typus* of the planetary worker-soldier that was the forerunner of the militarised 'cyborg' of the contemporary neo-liberal era. However, as already mentioned, a close reading of Jünger's work clearly shows that he was no simple advocate of the war-like purity of technological modernisation, but, on the contrary, was someone who attempted to come to terms with the power and significance of this via a profound 're-mythologisation of the technical'. Rather than presenting himself as a philosopher who exemplifies the martially-oriented 'reactionary modernism' of 1930s nationalist politics, Jünger is much better conceived as a thinker who attempted, perhaps more than any other twentieth-century philosopher, to understand the revolutionary significance of the ontological situation confronting thinkers in that century and, more importantly, was someone who was perhaps the first to grasp the relationship between the world-historical significance of the twentieth century and the technologically conditioned planetary dimension that was just beginning to have a significant effect upon basic canons of western thought. Thus the critical accounts mentioned above fail to see that for Jünger the wars of the century were not to be celebrated *per se*, but were merely 'transitional phenomena': the first painful movements produced by a new incendiary ontology, the technology of an emergent 'dynamite civilisation' — the civilisation of the 'explosive technological event' that would propel humanity into a new post-historical technological future.¹³ Thus if one examines the totality of his work, both pre- and post-Second World War — especially his ideas encapsulated in the late novels *Aladdin's Problem* and *Eumeswil* — Jünger's philosophy can be seen to be much closer to the 'cynical' and 'politically disengaged' forms of conservatism that dominated the late

twentieth century's intellectual and political landscape (represented in the neo-liberal and neo-conservative modes of conservatism by Fukuyama and Wolfe). For Jünger the emergent technological world is in some sense *historically inevitable*; it cannot be overcome, it can only be endured through a profound re-mythologisation that creates a sense of historical continuity with those worlds that it threatens to destroy. It is here that we can clearly see the significance of Jünger as a philosopher who attempts to understand technology as the potential source of a new kind of understanding and wisdom that reconnects humanity with its lost primordial origins.

In Jünger's view, twentieth-century technology represents a new global existential condition where the relationship between technology and human phenomenology — the way the world appears to us — becomes a rising philosophical and political concern. More specifically, for Jünger modern technology represents a radically new existential condition that opens up the horizon of experience to a new virtual planetary phenomenology. In the novel *The Glass Bees*, for example, Jünger explores the rise of the techno-entrepreneur and the now widely associated visions of a global synthetic 'virtual' empire. Technology, here, amounts to a new and all-encompassing synthetic world where everything functions to a higher degree of instrumental perfection and where numerical precision becomes its own quasi-sacred form of value. The political dimension of this world can be discerned in its striving for the execution of 'great plans' that look only to immediate successes rather than the achievements of the past. In this way, for Jünger, in the age of technology individuals are no longer concerned with the liberal futurity of progress but possess a new modesty in relation to historical temporality and to the power of the infinite as manifested in the precision and perfection of technological design, distribution and use.¹⁴ As such, for Jünger the twentieth century is the first century 'without history', a century that, as Manuel Castells was later to point out, will ultimately reside within a 'timeless time' conditioned by the precision of

the self-absorbed immediacy of technological activity.¹⁵ As such, the era of technology for Jünger represents the radical forgetting of historical time and it is the job of the thinker to forge a connection between the, eternal, technological present and the ideas and hopes of the ancient historical past in order to make the former authentically thinkable and inhabitable.

Thus 'technology', for Jünger, if its nihilistic consequences are to be overcome, not only needs to be thoroughly historicised but also to be conceived *sub specie aeternitatis*. For him, it is not a quasi-natural state that should be un-problematically assumed — as it often is today — and neither can it be viewed as a radically new condition without spiritual precedent, but rather for him it signifies the return of ontological forces initially banished by the Gods of reason (this is Jünger's Nietzscheanism and it also resonates with the submerged *Dionysian* aspects of Heidegger's later philosophy). Thus in Jünger's view, to experience the technological dramas of the twentieth century was to experience what he terms 'the labour pains of Titanism'¹⁶ — an experience that implies a new theological-politics that celebrates the destruction of familiar Gods and anticipates the arrival of new ones.¹⁷ In Jünger's philosophy these divinities — they will supercede the tyrants of the technological epoch — will emerge as sacred forms of authority that reconnect humanity with experiences of 'the infinite' that modernity, in its championing of ontological finitude, appeared to have relegated to the status of emotive marginalia. As such, Jünger suggests that the ancient yearning for 'new worlds' has taken on very distinctive technological features for modern individuals. As one of the characters in the novel *Aladdin's Problem* claimed '[r]ockets are not destined for alien worlds, their purpose is to shake the old faith; its hereafter has been shown wanting'.¹⁸ Moreover, as Jünger himself wrote in 1981:

In 1932 I saw a new type of planetary man was putting itself in place and that he bore within himself a new metaphysics of which, on the empirical plane, he is not yet really conscious. Today still his visage remains partially hidden.... But in this [technological] process, one must avoid representing it from an historical economic, social or even ideological angle. The phenomenon transpires at a much greater profundity.... Today we live a transitional age between two immense moments of history, as it was the case in the time of Heraclitus. The latter found himself between two dimensions: on the one side there was myth, on the other, history. And we, we find ourselves between history and the appearance of something completely different. And our transitional era is characterized by a phase of Titanism, which the modern world expresses at all levels.¹⁹

For Jünger, myth allows us to situate the modern technological world within primordial historical time. However, there is no way of avoiding or denying the transitory condition of Titanism; for him it can only be endured until the new world that it portends becomes a post-historical reality. His is thus a position that in many ways represents a conservative retreat back to myth at a historical juncture when the nineteenth-century liberal gods of progress were beginning to flee. In his view, only 'myth' has the existential significance required to counter the nihilism of the modern technological age and to contest the reduction of lived experience to the spiritually empty but gigantic formalisms of technological plans and programs. In the meantime, he suggests that the authentic thinker can escape the global nihilism to which the modern technological epoch has given rise by either 'fleeing into the forest' — the response of *der Waldgänger* — or by expelling all social values from oneself and becoming the serenely nihilistic *anarch*; a position that is close to those who advocated 'inner emigration' in the face of modernity's techno-conditioned catastrophes (and to the individualistic forms of conservatism, referred to above, that have

dominated the politics in the latter half of the century). Jünger famously opts for the latter response; Heidegger, as we will see, for the former. Jünger's *anarch* waits without hope for what he terms the 'wall of time' to make manifest 'the immovable centre' of modern technics as the sublime stillness of the void of a technological absolute that could form the basis for a new authentically modern post-historical *Kultur*. In Jünger's later novels this technological absolute is personified as *Phares*, the bringer of light who speaks for the technological world as 'a mentor with Gnostic instruction'.²⁰ *Phares* speaks to the initiated in a new primal language and in so doing brings a kind spiritual peace, wisdom and understanding to those left desolate by the technologically-driven catastrophes — war, disease, unemployment — that gave the last century its apocalyptic *Stimmung*.

For Jünger, then, technology is to some extent the Cartesian '*malin genie*' of twentieth-century modernity; the ancient demon that is the destroyer of old certainties and worlds. However, for him the modern technological demon is also a *messenger*; albeit one whose message cannot yet be understood (one thinks here immediately of the image of the monolith in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*). With Jünger, the task of the philosopher today is to decipher the demon's primal language in order to make sense of the nature and the significance of 'its world to come'. This, according to Jünger was the task facing the twentieth-century philosopher — to recognise and confront *Aladdin's problem*, or the problem of how we are to 'decide' in the face of the primal cosmic, titanic, powers now steaming towards us.²¹ For him, moderns have the power, but modern philosophers, as they remain tied to old theologies, are incapable of telling them what they ought to wish for with it. It is only by recognising the historical inevitability of this power and its status as the harbinger of a radically new civilisation and culture that contemporary philosophers will be able to understand it and forge a conception of a way of life that will make sense in its wake. Only by understanding modern technology as a new

theologico-political authority, a new metaphysics, that represents a historically decisive way of relating to everything that is — a condition that, as Heidegger would have put it, ‘worlds the world’ in a radically new way — will we be able to think through the ethical and existential contours of the transitional world within which twentieth-century humanity dwelled (and this in many ways was Marx’s error; he failed to understand that technologies are much more than *machines*). Indeed, for Jünger it is only when we recognise that in the twentieth-century technology ceased to be an assemblage of productive machines but became for the first time an ontological *habitus* that possesses all the phenomenological powers and social and cultural significances that were formerly associated with the ‘transcendent’ — the modern equivalent of Aristotle’s ground of the world, as the unmoved technological mover of twentieth-century modernity — that we can begin to ‘think its significance’ and thus begin the task of creating meaningful and significant forms of *modern* life.

**Heidegger and the twentieth century:
truth and the ontological authority of ‘technological disclosure’**

Heidegger’s later reflections on modern technology are now well known and his specific claims do not need to be repeated here. In sum, however, we can perhaps say that Heidegger’s later philosophy of technology can be viewed as an attempt to articulate the ontology presupposed by the ‘artificial’ *logos* of modern technological reason — the non-rational basis of technological rationality.²² In opposition to the contemporary *doxa* that proposes an instrumental conception of technology, Heidegger viewed technology as an ontological process of ‘ontic ordering’ — *das Gestell* — that reveals an ordered world of interlocking *objects* that stand over and against the modern self-willing subject as ‘ready and available for use’. In this way, for Heidegger the ‘truth of technology’, a truth that is itself simultaneously ontological and historical, can be discerned as the very essence of ‘modern metaphysics’

as it makes possible a world divided into realms of 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity'; where objects are quantified as stock, *Bestand*, and subjects are qualified as will.²³ The 'truth of technology' is thus a radical ordering and division of the world that makes everything available to the will: to projects, plans and designs. As such, in the context of modern technology the forms of truth sought by the classical philosopher become eclipsed behind a veil of the 'objectively real' conceived as mathematicised utility.²⁴ Mathematics and utilitarianism thus become the ontic realities that disguise the deeper ontological truth of technology. They in effect become its 'historical symptoms'. Beyond and beneath these, modern technology must be conceived as an ontological process that 'worlds the world' as something ordered, calculable and useful, and as such it must be understood as a form of 'ontological authority' — as 'a revealing that *orders*'.²⁵ In Heidegger's view, it is the forgetting of this deeper ontological dimension of modern technics that leads to the modern subject's acceptance of its own ensnarement in the representational truths of science that conceives of the world as 'mere beings'.²⁶ For him, science is not true and 'does not think' because it is based upon a radical forgetting of its own implication in the technological disclosure of being that stands as its condition of possibility. This, of course, is Heidegger's philosophical innovation in one important sense: to uncouple truth from subjectivity and to reconnect it with Greek / medieval notions of truth as unconcealment / revelation. It is only when 'technology's truth' is grasped in this way — as a *radically modern* form of unconcealment — that we can begin to understand its non-instrumental and world-historical essence and significance.

As a mode of disclosure Heidegger argues that modern technology must be understood through the idea of *work* — not however the effective work of technician but the *work* of art, or the *art-work*.²⁷ For Heidegger, it is art, especially poetry, that sets being to work primordially and thus for him, in essence, humans dwell poetically in the world. For Heidegger, truth is always the setting to work of Being, and technology as the

setting to work of modernity's Being, as *das Gestell*, must itself be viewed as the 'truth of Being' in modern historical guise. We might say that for Heidegger, humans, in creating their own inhuman world, at the same time reveal themselves as a site — or an 'ontological space' — through which the significance of their activities is revealed back to them as 'historical truth'. However, for Heidegger the modern triumph of *technē* has eclipsed *poiēsis* and the task of the contemporary philosopher is to return the latter to its position of philosophical priority and pre-eminence. In this way, in its attempt to understand technology in relation to 'the truth of Being', Heidegger's later philosophy is essentially a 'theologisation of the truth and Being' that conceives the truth of technology as a hidden process that *reveals* itself historically as *world*. Importantly, for Heidegger, it is only once the truth of technology has been collectively and historically understood that the modern world will become an inhabitable one; one in which 'man can dwell'.

As is well known, Heidegger's conception of truth as unconcealment is related to the idea of the forest clearing, of 'making the forest free of trees at one place'.²⁸ This is perhaps the defining philosophical orientation of the modern *Waldgänger*: a flight from the nihilism of the technologically ordered world of modernity into a detached position through which the technological disclosure of Being can be discerned and authentic thinking can again become possible.²⁹ From that vantage point 'technology' is no longer perceived 'in the midst' of technologically produced and conditioned things but is rather seen 'as a whole'; as an ontological condition that discloses a new human ecology, a *technosphere*, that must be understood phenomenologically *as world*. For Heidegger, it seems that it is only from a position of historical detachment that the thinker can think 'technology' in its full historical significance and philosophically articulate the relationship between 'historical Being and the essence of man', by 'letting' technologically revealed Being stake a claim on him / her as something remarkable and important. When seen from such a position, modern technology can be

seen to stand in relation to the modern world in the same way that art and its sacred traditions did to the pre-modern world: as the 'all embracing onto-historical context' that structures and patterns the existential contours of both individual and collective lives.³⁰ When the 'truth of technology' is understood via the trope of the 'forest clearing', the modern world appears as something disclosed by a dynamic and ontological organising principle that threatens to bring about a nihilistic global new order that stands at the completion of western thought and history; an order that places the world itself in the position of the *solider* by being in a state of perpetual readiness to act. The parallels with Jünger here are obvious — although with Heidegger technology is viewed as something 'phenomenologically absent'; in his view, something more authentically philosophical and less metaphysical rather than the basis for a new lived myth. And it is here that the difference between Jünger and Heidegger resides. Heidegger gives Jünger's philosophical intuition greater intellectual significance and depth by linking questions of the historical and political importance of modern technology to deeper questions pertaining to its philosophical import and the authority that secures its ordered world-revelation — for him the authority that grants it the status of a historically conditioned ontological truth.³¹ Heidegger thus radically eschews the language of myth; and in his search for a more primordial philosophical lexicon with which to make sense of the nature and significance of modern technology he views it as the expression of a philosophically degenerate, but historically necessary, *poiēsis*.³²

In this way, both these thinkers eschew the philosophical discourse of traditional conservatism. In their attempt to view technology in relation to more primal origins they refrain from calling for a wholesale return to a 'golden age' before modernity's 'fall'. Thus for Heidegger, as with Jünger, existing conceptions of intellectual and cultural tradition, the refuge of the traditional conservative, are no longer a source of insight and wisdom when the philosopher is faced with the historic and 'world-

challenging' ontology of modern technics. In Heidegger's view, traditional conservatism simply makes no sense in the contemporary technological era as 'the flight into tradition, out of a combination of humility and presumption, can bring about nothing other than self-deception and blindness in relation to the historical moment'.³³ For him, what is required in this context is rather a 'creative questioning' and 'genuine reflection' on the philosophical significance of modern technics. This mode of questioning suggests a new 'counter-hegemonic' authority for Greek notions of philosophical truth and Being in relation to the authority of modernity's technological revelation of Being — the counter-hegemonic authority of the philosophical 'truth of technology' grounded in an understanding of technology's primordial relations and fundamental ontologies. This is a truth that can be used to prise open the common sense 'technological' understanding of technology, the conception whose acceptance ensures that we remain enslaved by it. More specifically, for Heidegger we might say that 'philosophical truth' is deployed in order to counter modern technology's ersatz authority — its ontological authorising of the world as an ordered system of interlocking calculable utilitarian elements that threatens the oblivion or forgetting of Being that is its true ontological source.

Moreover, Heidegger's account of technology is also profoundly Jüngerian to the extent that it views modern technology as a world-historical condition that challenges and sets upon the world by a process of unlocking, transforming, storing, distributing and switching.³⁴ Like Jünger, Heidegger argues that the key to understanding the significance of modern technology is via an appreciation of its ability to 'mobilise' the world — *to set it to work* (for Heidegger we might even say that modern technology, in a non-technological way, mobilises the world as *a work world*). Moreover, like Jünger, the later Heidegger accepted that thinking today must begin with an attempt to think through and ultimately 'beyond' the nihilistic implications of modern technology — at least as it is currently conceived — in order to move thinking towards a new

understanding of a future that will in some, yet to be fully articulated, sense be profoundly and inevitably 'technological'. Thus, like Jünger's, Heidegger's philosophy of technology is without any sense of a politics of refusal of the modern and he rejects the claims of traditional conservatives who demand a return to pre-technological harmonies via fantasies of the philosophical and political superiority of pre-modern rural idylls. For, as Heidegger stated as late as 1955:

The assessment that contemporary humanity has become the slaves of machines is ... superficial. For it is one thing to make such an assessment, but it will be something quite different to ponder the extent to which the human being today is subjugated not only to technology, but the extent to which humans respond to the essence of technology, and the extent to which more original possibilities of a free and open human existence announce themselves in the response.³⁵

For Heidegger, like Jünger, the aim of the philosopher is to articulate the 'essence of modern technology' so as to begin to question, and thus to 'think', that which in the essence of technology radically carries us forward whilst at the same time constraining the future through its continuity with the ontologies of the past. For Heidegger specifically, the task of the philosopher of technology is fundamentally one of remembrance — that technics was once *poiēsis* and that this aspect remains, albeit concealed from view by technology's metaphysical accounts of the world as objectively given to subjectivity. In this remembrance we recognise the more original possibilities for a more free and open human existence made possible by the technological disclosure of being. Modern technology, for Heidegger is thus a transformative, perhaps even a 'progressive' historical force, but only when it is reconceived as a historical and poetic mediation between 'man' and 'Being'. Thus for Heidegger, contemporary thought must now appreciate the historical *necessity* of modern technology as the radically

new appearance of what has already been. In this way, modern technology, as the *historical destiny of western thought and life* that opens the way for a radically new dawn for humanity, is at the same time a return; a resurfacing of a more ancient sense of the divine, the Greek divine conceived as poetic dwelling. It is as a new mode of 'poeticised spirit' that modern technology will become the 'matter for thought' in a technological age that calculates but does not yet think, and it is this that will ultimately provide a mode of thinking that will allow the modern thinker to appreciate the possibility of a more free and open form of human existence engendered by the new spirit of machines — the techno-poetic disclosure of being. Only then, in his view, will the 'decisive confrontation' with technology take place and another post-nihilistic world become possible.³⁶ In sum then, we can say that, in Heidegger's view, the possibility of modern freedom, the philosophical goal of the Enlightenment, presupposes a new 'de-subjectivised' and open conception of technology as the site of poetic truth articulated from a position within the technological understanding of being itself (this, of course, is very much his solution to Jünger's 'Aladdin's problem', albeit in a more orthodox philosophical guise. However, whereas Jünger tries to re-enchant modern technological power, Heidegger attempts to find a new philosophical language that allows the essence of technology to be articulated).³⁷

For Heidegger the world disclosed by technology is very much a worldless world. It is a nihilistic world that can only be overcome *in thought*. Unlike Jünger, Heidegger retains a classical philosophical faith in the power of reflection, more specifically in finding a way of 'thinking the technological' that does not reduce technology to calculable use and to the manipulation of 'self-standing' entities. It is for this reason that Heidegger believes that we must 'look with yet clearer eyes into the danger' posed by technology in order to hear its 'saving power' — the ancient call of Being that creates in its wake a new conception of the historical and the technological.³⁸ Thus Heidegger's conservatism is thus

rather different from Jünger's. It is not an attempt to articulate a new conception of the world based upon a return to a new global myth of technology but one that recognises modern technology's ability to 'save' — to 'conserve', in the strong ontological sense of the term — stems from its retaining a minimal sense of self-standingness, or worldhood, in a worldless world (the paradoxical term 'worldless world' for Heidegger contains the non-dialectical basis of its own redemption).³⁹ In response to modern technology, philosophical language itself is forced to become simpler, more poetic and more direct in order to counter the precision of technological disclosure of being. In this way, it is not myth but philosophic-poetic truth that becomes the new model of sacred authority in the context of modernity's technological worlding powers. Perhaps contrary to his intentions, as a critic of the technological epoch Heidegger emerges as the quintessential Platonic philosopher 'of the twentieth century' — castigating the democratising errors of technological disclosure in the name of a more profound philosophical wisdom: a philosophic-poetic wisdom that would allow us to stand in a freer relation to a technological world that currently dominates us. We might say here that for Heidegger, the poetic-like ability of modern technics to save 'Being' from total dissolution in the void, that is its capacity to retain a minimal sense of worldhood even in the midst of worldlessness, *is* the saving power of technology and the basis for a civilisation based upon a freer relation to it — a power that will, in the end allow us to approach the technological world with the senses of sacred awe that characterised the Greek understanding of Being.

Heidegger, Jünger and the 'techno-conservative' response to modernity

It is this way that Heidegger and Jünger, in combination, represent a distinct moment in the history of Western philosophy, a moment when what Gadamer was to later refer to as the ontological authority — as opposed to the epistemological authority — of technoscience first

emerges as a significant philosophical theme, when philosophers become aware of technoscience's negation of the life world. In Jünger in particular, but in Heidegger also, this idea provides the basis for the articulation of a new politico-philosophical position: *techno-conservatism*. The techno-conservative advocates a 'conservative modernity' in opposition to both liberalism and socialism in a rapprochement between the world-revealing powers of modern technology and those mytho-poetic modes of world-disclosure that emerged in the pre-classical ancient world — a position that, as Jünger states in his late novel *Eumeswil*,⁴⁰ must be viewed as the final refuge of a conservative who has lost all political and religious hope.⁴¹ Both Heidegger and Jünger can be seen to have endeavoured to open up a path of philosophical and, ultimately, political possibilities consonant with the conservative valorisation of metaphysical order and historical continuity. Both recognised that the twentieth century was the century dominated by a radically new form of 'ontological encounter'; a point echoed by recent commentators such as Alain Badiou, who has recently attempted to understand the twentieth century as an 'encounter with the real'; that is, as the century that strives 'to have done with the Romanticism of the ideal' and 'to abide in the abruptness of the effectively real'.⁴² Both Heidegger and Jünger tarried with the abruptness of the technological disclosure of Being in order to find a new home within it. However, we have to ask today whether their philosophical privileging of 'technology' as the nodal concept in the philosophical discourse of twentieth-century modernity still makes sense and has value at the beginning of the twenty-first century or whether they concede too much to the 'the authority of technoscience'. In our post-postivist age, where technoscience is widely perceived as ontologically dangerous, the authority of technology has been weakened and as result there may now be other starting points for philosophical critique.

Modernity, it is often claimed, is a historical era characterised by the attempt to universalise European culture in the name of 'rationally grounded truths': the political truths of 'human rights' and 'international law', the 'theoretical truths' of science and the 'truths' of aesthetic taste. In contradistinction to this, Heidegger and Jünger point out that twentieth-century modernity represents a profound departure from the Enlightenment conception of universal subjectively grounded rationality, because in their view it is at this juncture that modern technology emerges as the site of primordial ontological truth and in so doing it threatens and undermines the external institutional authority of the philosopher through the weakening of the inner epistemological and ontological authority of the subject. For them, the solution to this problem is to search for a new form of ontological authority within the technological itself; one that will form the basis for a new post-bourgeois social order in a radical reversal of the Enlightenment desire for total break with heteronomy and the 'immaturity' of the past. In this way, their thought represents an attempt to show how a conservative thinker can swim with the tides of technological modernisation and they demonstrate the extent to which modern technology, in dismantling bourgeois philosophical culture — the culture of 'the subject' — can become the basis for a new conservative modernity grounded in older 'traditions' and forms of ontological authority. For both these thinkers the technologically induced 'nihilism of the century' cannot be overcome by finding new forms of social relation, nor via a radical philosophical account that allows for the overcoming of the alienation and 'psychic numbing' of the technologically manipulated and dominated masses — *à la* Marx. For them, the line of modern nihilism can only be crossed via a new focus on 'that which endures' — myth or philosophic-poetic truth respectively — within 'the world' of technology: something that demands a concern with that 'fixed point' within technology that will allow humans to develop a meaningful relation with techics over an extended period of historical time. Only then, in their view, will moderns be able to see beyond the 'carceral' aspects of *das Gestell* and appreciate how modern

technology can support a sense of worldhood that is no longer the fleeting and transient world celebrated by Baudelaire and Benjamin, but a world touched with the ancient glamour of 'eternal truth'.

In conclusion then, we can say that the Heidegger-Jünger vision of the twentieth century allows us to understand why the twentieth century *must* be viewed as the century of the technological understanding Being; of the technological worlding of the world in terms of both utility and precision. For both, the *arché* of the century is one of an 'organised inorganics' that makes possible what later commentators have termed 'the self-disciplining of subjects, the incessant whisperings of disciplinary logics'.⁴³ In this way they permit us to see the twentieth century as inflicted by the horrors of a hidden Gnostic technological God who destroys worlds in order to order, control and perfect existence. By opening up 'the century' to a wider techno-ontological articulation of its nature and significance, Heidegger and Jünger are very much the first ontologists of the wider 'techno-global' political cosmos that we now all, often unwillingly but inescapably, share. For both these thinkers, this technological cosmos threatens a new nihilistic cosmo-political condition within which every particular 'we' must struggle to find its position and sense of destiny. In this way, Heidegger and Jünger show the extent to which the task of the philosopher today is thus to articulate a sense of a meaningful yet local political existential possibility from within an emergent planetary political horizon. This is the real basis for a new kind of philosophy after the demise of nineteenth century liberalism and its many and various progressive variants. However, it may require a mode of thinking that goes beyond modes and styles of thinking with a Greek provenance. For several reasons, this is the most significant weakness of their techno-conservatism. The twentieth century may represent a new technological globalisation of conceptuality that began the process of philosophical de-centring and deterritorialisation in ways that they, perhaps understandably, simply could not appreciate.

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Notes

¹ See, for example David Wood, *Thinking after Heidegger* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), p. 175.

² See K. Ward, "'In the Blink of an Eye": Apocalypse and Redemption in Martin Heidegger' in *Messianism, Apocalypse and Redemption in 20th Century German Thought*, ed. W. Chrisaudo & W. Baker (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2006), pp. 153-165.

³ See Michael Zimmerman, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 35-36. See also *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader* ed. Richard Wolin (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), p. 121.

⁴ Zimmerman, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity*, p. 67.

⁵ Like many others, Zimmerman seems to have been seduced by the Nazi-like affinities between Jünger and Heidegger and he claims that in the 1930s Heidegger was significantly influenced by Jünger's hyper-masculine rhetoric of hardness, courage, self-sacrifice and hardness. However, this is clearly complicated by Heidegger's almost scholastic commitment to the quietism of engaged activity.

⁶ See Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn The 'Ister'*, trans. William McNeill & Julia Davis (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996).

⁷ See Alberto Toscano, "'European Nihilism and Beyond'" in Alain Badiou, *The Century* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), p. 189.

⁸ Thus in overall terms, Heidegger, I will suggest, is first and foremost a modern conservative *philosopher of technology*, who attempts to rethink conservative political philosophy, a mode of philosophy concerned with the problem of metaphysical and political order, on the ground of a revised conception of philosophical truth and technological modernisation. Heidegger links the modern question of truth with the mediaeval doctrine of the *incarnation of truth* — that is with the question of how truth manifests itself in beings. For him, the question of truth today is not a question of an *adequatio* between thought and truth, but a matter of a question of how it manifests itself *in the world*. In this way, Heidegger views technology as a way of incarnating truth in the world in machine technology, thus rendering the world modern. This is truth as the mathematical ordering of the world for the purposes of the mass mobilisation of persons and things.

⁹ Goran Dahl, *Radical Conservatism and the Future of Politics* (London: Sage, 1999), p. 46.

¹⁰ See Ernst Jünger, 'Technology and the Gestalt of the Worker', in *Philosophy and Technology: Readings in the Philosophical Problems of*

Technology, ed. Carl Mitcham & Robert Mackey (New York: Free Press, 1983), pp. 269-289.

¹¹ Carl Mitcham, *Thinking through Technology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994), p. 249.

¹² Charles Taylor, *The Secular Age* (Cambridge Mass.: Belknap, 2007), p. 630.

¹³ Ernst Jünger, *The Glass Bees*, trans. Elizabeth Mayer & Louise Bogan (New York: New York Review Books, 2000), p. 93.

¹⁴ Jünger, 'Technology and the Gestalt of the Worker', pp. 284ff.

¹⁵ See Manuel Castells, 'Materials for an exploratory theory of the network society' in *The British Journal of Sociology* 51:1 (2000), 5-24.

¹⁶ See Jünger, 'Technology and the Gestalt of the Worker', p. 47

¹⁷ As is well-known, the Titans were the pre-Olympian Gods of ancient Greece the most famous of whom was Prometheus (many of these have since become symbols of overreaching, hubris and a lack of concern for 'ethical harmonies' of the cosmos).

¹⁸ Ernst Jünger, *Aladdin's Problem*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Quartet Books, 1983), p. 120.

¹⁹ Jünger, cited in Zimmerman, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity*, p. 63.

²⁰ See M. Meyer in Jünger, *Aladdin's Problem*, p. 134

²¹ Jünger, *Aladdin's Problem*, p. 118.

²² When seen in this way, Heidegger can be usefully viewed as a philosopher who breaks ranks with the Enlightenment tradition that links truth with 'method', 'system' and 'experimental protocols' and as philosopher that returns to scholastic/theological conception of truth that articulates the connections between 'truth' 'revelation' and the 'ontological receptivity' of the thinker.

²³ Thus the truth of technology is, famously for Heidegger, not a technical truth but neither is it a subjective one either, as for him these two seemingly contradictory notions of truth are in fact fundamentally related. Heidegger's main point here is that in the age of modern technology 'truth', on one level, becomes reduced to 'technical correctness' but that such ideas of technical correctness conceal the ontological condition of pre-representational activity — what might be usefully termed 'the work of technics' — through which such modes of understanding are disclosed and maintained.

²⁴ *Das Gestell* represents the supreme danger of modernity for Heidegger as it is a 'destining' — an epochal sending of Being — that drives away and dominates every other form of revealing. But within this danger, and at its height, we become aware of 'the technological' as something 'granted to us' by Being itself and at this point 'the saving power' begins to grow.

²⁵ Martin Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', trans. William Lovitt and David Farrell Krell in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 324; my emphasis.

²⁶ This, of course, is to assume that there is an important and possibly internal relation between authority and order as such. Clearly, any thing

or process that orders can be conceived as a mode of authority to the extent that order, even out of chaos, presupposes a more fundamental ordering principle that produces and maintains the order in question. This is equally true of both the state and wider and deeper ontological processes. In fact, in Heideggerian terms, the authority of the modern state should, essentially, be conceived as a mode of technological authority — an idea that was later to be deployed to powerful critical effect by Foucault.

²⁷ Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', trans. by Albert Hofstadter, in Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, pp. 139-212.

²⁸ Martin Heidegger, 'The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking', trans. Joan Stambaugh & David Farrell Krell, in Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, p. 441.

²⁹ Also, Heidegger himself was at a personal level an accomplished *Waldgänger* — and his phenomenology of the forest was an attempt to connect 'truth' with the ideals and values of a 'historical people' rather than blind facticity.

³⁰ Seen thus, Heidegger's philosophy is based on a profound recognition that technology must be understood 'holistically' as interconnected arrays or assemblages of tools, machines and devices — what Jacques Ellul, very much after Heidegger, was later to call a 'technological ensemble'. See Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), *passim*.

³¹ See Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', p. 318.

³² Of course this is, philosophically, a highly counter-intuitive claim and it is important to point out that according to Heidegger the 'truth of technology' is not an 'instrumentalism' — a conception that has been dominant in western philosophy since Aristotle and one that understands technology as a neutral means to externally determined human ends. Heidegger, famously, also points out that the instrumental conception of technology views technology as an efficient cause and there is more to causality than mere efficiency. This is only one way in which causality can be understood and it represents a forgetting of the ethical and spiritual aspects of causality as conceived by the Greeks. The same move is made by Heidegger in relation to technology: technology needs to be understood in a deeper, more ontologically complex, and more spiritual way.

³³ See Martin Heidegger, 'The Age of the World Picture', in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. & ed. W. Lovitt (New York: Harper-Row 1977), p. 136.

³⁴ See Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', p. 322.

³⁵ Martin Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, trans. Reginald Lilly (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 19-20.

³⁶ See Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', p. 340. For Heidegger, humanism involves a pernicious misinterpretation of the essence of the human because for him the problem with all forms of humanism is that they attempt to define 'the human' in essentially subjectivist terms; effectively shifting the locus of humanity away from

something radically other to it onto the terrain of the ego where the human is defined solely in relation to its ability to be conscious of itself. Thus one of the bugbears of Heideggerean thought is the self-reflexive and solipsistic Cartesian *ego cogito* and the modern rationalist philosopher's claim that it is capable of providing an indubitable cognitive foundation for inquiry. According to Heidegger, it is through the Cartesian idea that *ego* has the power to know the world solely through its own self-reflection that modernity has conceived the world as simply an extension of the human: with all the devastating consequences that have ensued for our ontological ecologies.

³⁷ Although Heidegger was notoriously vague about what such a conception might look like, we can say that for Heidegger, as subjective decision and representation are now only a small part of a wider, deeper and more complicated ontological process where the human is more a site of a productive 'happening' (*Ereignis*) that reveals a truth, then thinking ceases to be the essence of the human — and Descartes' *res cogitans* is no longer at the centre of things. In this way, Heidegger paves the way for a new ethics of the subject; an ethics that views the human as the receptive *site* for the truths disclosed by the worlds that modernity has opened up.

³⁸ See Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', p. 334.

³⁹ For the later Heidegger, we might say that in order to articulate that which endures within the technological, language and technology need to be brought 'closer together' — but for Heidegger modern technology destroys the word in its attempt to process it; to reduce it to mechanical symbolic manipulation.

⁴⁰ Ernst Jünger, *Eumeswil*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (London: Quartet Books, 1993).

⁴¹ 'Techno-conservatism', rather than being a position that is only of marginal interest to the already culturally marginal philosopher, in fact represents perhaps one of the most important philosophical positions taken up by a variety of different thinkers in the last century. It is a position that attempts to find a new principle of order within technology — albeit one that rejects all existing traditions and institutional forms. Thus the American sociologist Daniel Bell can be viewed as a techno-conservative and all those who follow Schumpeter in viewing technology as the basis for new kinds of traditional forms of life.

⁴² See Alain Badiou, *The Century*, p. 153. Heidegger would have concurred with Badiou's assessment; but his interpretation of the significance of the century is more specific, more world-historical and more sensitive to the notion that the 'effectively real' in the case of modernity is always and already a 'technologically real'. More specifically for Heidegger, the twentieth century, as the apotheosis of the 'darkening of the world', must be conceived as dominated by a new epochal ontological force — technology — against which the philosopher is forced to rediscover and return to the ancient lights of philosophical illumination; with the result that the boundary between the philosopher and theologian, the boundary that had demarcated modern from

classical and mediaeval philosophy since the Enlightenment, collapses and philosophy begins to make its first tentative steps towards a reconciliation with theological modes of thought that were dismissed as speculative illusions by Hume and Kant. As many have pointed out Heidegger's new 'onto-theological' modes of inquiry and Heideggerean philosophy can be seen as profoundly *maieutic* with respect to what is being called the 'theological turn' in contemporary philosophy. See J. Peacocke, 'Heidegger and the problem of onto-theology', *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology*, ed. Phillip Blond (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 177-94.

⁴³ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001) p. 330. See also Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth & George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).