

## A response to Piers Greville's *Sublime Artifice*

Not even the moral conversion of the technicians could make a difference. At best, they would cease to be good technicians. In the end, technique has only one principle: efficient ordering.  
Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 1964

The study of political events and their human impact increasingly employs the full range of aesthetic arts – including photographs, music, paintings, film, literature, architecture, and poetry – as source material. Aesthetic politics acknowledges that any artistic expression of the world as it appears to be is subjective. There is, therefore, an inevitable gap between the ‘reality’ of what an artist seeks to present, and the ‘representation’ he or she achieves in their art. It is how this gap between reality and representation is treated that gives aesthetic sources the potential to enhance our capacity to comprehend and deal with the world’s many conflicts and dilemmas – by providing a reflective understanding of how the world is “internalised in our minds and our habits, as well as our collective political consciousness” (Bleiker, p.8). Thus the greatest contribution might come not as we would expect from politically committed or activist art, but from less conscious representations.

Nowhere is the need for an intellectual synthesis between the aesthetic arts and political science more necessary than in the study of violent and non-violent harm in world politics. For instance, ongoing peaceful protests in Melbourne and on Wall Street, as well as the violent displays of the London riots earlier in the year, are all manifestations of a broader frustration towards the rampant combination of flows – of people, goods, services, capital, technologies, ideas, news, images, and data – that are having unintended, uncontrollable, and in many cases, irreversible effects on human and non-human species, as well as the natural environment. Long-term responses to such events require not just a forensic examination of “what happened”, but also a deeper understanding of how these frustrations were individually and collectively internalised in human society. Simply put, the problems of the modern world are too complex for us not to employ the full register of human intelligence to make sense and deal with them.

Of all the flows, technology is perhaps the most ubiquitous, and anything but its continued prominence unthinkable. For Jacques Ellul, technology is especially tyrannical since it has embedded within it “social and psychological consequences independent of our desires” (Ellul, p.18). Whereas in ancient times technology was tempered by the rules of tradition, today even incremental technological advances are afforded a perverse reverence traditionally reserved for the sacred. Those in ancient Egypt and Hyksos, for example, had long known about the wheel but did not employ it in labour because the zodiac, which it resembled, was forbidden from being put to material use. Today we see less of this type of transformational ingenuity due to a myopic obsession with hyper-efficiency and order, which is less concerned with solving basic needs and problems than it is about manufacturing new ones. In this way, technology demands instantaneous responses governed only by ‘reflex’, leaving neither the time nor freedom necessary for any meaningful inner ‘reflection’ of the consequences.

Over the past decade, humanity has come to see the treacherous consequences of technology on the natural environment. Writing in 1989, the environmental activist Bill McKibben pithily remarked that, “What was once considered nature is now merely an

artificial approximation, changed forever". McKibben's observation is most brutally evident in sites of industrial production such as the ancient copper mine located near Huelva in southernmost Spain, which the indigenes named "red river" because of its disastrous environmental effects. Originally operated by the Spanish government, the mine had supplied the Phoenicians, ancient Greeks, Carthaginians, and the Roman Empire. Its copper had paid for Carthage's numerous wars on Rome and had been held by both Scipio and Hannibal. However believing they could extract yet more from the earth, in 1873 a group of opportunistic foreign investors, equipped with modern techniques and machines that favoured mining aboveground, acquired it from the Spanish government.

What exists there today is a 58-mile-long river flowing through one of the world's largest deposits of pyrite, or fool's gold. Because of the mine, the river has a pH reading similar to that of automobile battery acid and contains virtually no oxygen in its lower depths. In the late 1980s, temporary flooding dissolved a power substation, a mandibular crusher, and several hundred yards of transport belts. More recently, the LA Times reported that NASA astrobiologists are using the conditions of the river to replicate the conditions of Mars. "If you remove the green," one of them remarked, "it looks like Mars." The thinking goes that if something could live in such an acidic river, then there is likely to be life on Mars too. Whether humans relocate to Mars or stay on earth, the grand irony is that future peoples will have to adapt to equally "natural" environments.

I view Piers Greville's *Sublime Artifice* as a meditation on both of the above concepts: Ellul's dire warnings of the treachery of technology, and McKibben's observation that human activity alters and harms the natural environment through time. However, in many key respects, Greville's worldview violently differs from that of McKibben and Ellul. Indeed, whereas Ellul saw only disaster in revering technology, Greville draws attention to sites where there is aesthetic delight to be found in its presence. And whereas McKibben explored the possibility of appropriate human responses to protect our once 'natural' habitat, Greville appears taken by the sublime in technology's destruction of, and synthesis with, nature. Greville's *Sublime Artifice* therefore eschews any attempt at a mimetic representation of reality characteristic of the landscape, instead choosing to fictionalise his observations of Iceland based on memory and fantasy. This may be troubling for those seeking moral, ethical or spiritual guidance. However in my view, Greville does hint at our future by leaving absent the actor most responsible for nature's battle with technology: people. For in Greville's world, we have become silent witnesses to the destruction of nature, and insignificant to its synthesis with the technology of our creation.

NAJ Taylor  
*October 2011*

#### **References:**

Bleiker, R., *Aesthetics and World Politics*, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire, 2009.

Ellul, J., *The Technological Society*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1964.

McKibben, B., *The End of Nature*, Random House, New York, 1989.