

A Theory of Technique

by Philippe Mesly

In 1973, Ivan Illich stated that our industrial society had only two paths ahead of it: “Faced with these impending disasters, society can stand in wait of survival within limits set and enforced by bureaucratic dictatorship. Or it can engage in a political process by the use of legal and political procedures.”¹ By the nineties, he believed the opportunity to take the second path had lapsed:² henceforth, revolution is foreclosed; henceforth, we live in a world of consequences following the trajectory of actions already taken—or not taken. Our options have dwindled, our capacity to alter the state of the world has narrowed.

Climatologists appear to concur. At any given moment, the window of opportunity for mitigating climate change only presents a limited set of options. With each passing moment, the next window offers more modest capacity for change, and less time within which to make it. By now, 1.5 °C of warming in the next 10 years is practically guaranteed.³ More than likely, we will miss the chance to keep it below 3.5 °C even in the long run.⁴ The force of momentum is too strong, the scope of action too limited, and the defendants of the status quo too well-armed. This is life after “action into

1 *Tools for Conviviality*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 100.

2 *The Rivers North of the Future*, (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2004), Ch 13, “Age of systems” pp.157 and passim.

3 Relative to pre-1850 global averages. <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/resources/spm-headline-statements>

4 <https://www.cbc.ca/news/science/ipcc-climate-target-1.6782625>

nature,” a phrase Hannah Arendt used to describe the deployment of irrevocable processes into the natural world.

David Cayley has articulated the sentiment that the fire this time may very well turn the world to ash.⁵ After millennia of millenarian doomsaying, a massive climatological shift could spell the true and final doom. Surely, there will be great unrest: migrations, famine, pestilence, war, and death. Will the human race perish? I don't know. But until it does, windows of opportunity remain. It is a matter of determining what and where they are, for opportunity always sets its own terms.

The apocalyptic narrative exposes the question at the heart of all environmentalism: *whether life is worth living if it means giving up everything but life*. It is one of the oldest questions of philosophy. Socrates sought the good life and, when he was given the option to trade it in for survival, replied no. Most recently, Agamben has been making the case against “bare life.”⁶ He has argued, controversially, that the pandemic revealed the extent to which the governments and cultural leaders rejected the philosopher's answer to the question, electing to promote survival at the cost of even the most basic of Maslow's needs: shelter, family, culture.

But the climate crisis has failed to elicit the same concern. It may be argued that in this case the threat is less immediate. Yet, for the vast majority, the Covid pandemic was equally removed from imminent, bodily danger. However, a consensus of what to do quickly emerged in that case which has not appeared to combat the threats of climate change. This is not a matter of “values” making themselves known in new, objective scenarios, but of the co-creation of values and facts,

5 *Ivan Illich: An Intellectual Journey*, (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2020), 399-400.

6 Beginning with public statements gathered in a book titled, *Where Are We Now? The Epidemic as Politics*.(London: Rowan & Littlefield, 2021).

organisms, interests, and power.⁷

The question imposes itself on us because it is a commonly held position in environmentalist circles that if great change doesn't occur democratically, if it demands unilateral action (which is supposed to only be possible via "fascism"—an unexamined assumption which serves a polemical function to make the idea of change seem impossible), it wouldn't be worthwhile.⁸ Illich expresses disdain for a technocratic management approach to our dilemma when he observes "Man would live in a plastic bubble that would protect his survival and make it increasingly worthless" (116). Now that a "political process" is beyond the reach of ordinary citizens, the choices we are given are apocalypse or apolitical social control, whether fascist or techno-bureaucratic.

However, I suggest we revise the concept of political action on environmental issues, as no longer merely instrumental to some future bliss but rather as itself a mode of good living, as itself a source of meaning. The current situation demands a renewed concept of agency. As Illich did in his later writings, I contend that the sphere of the vernacular represents the best opportunity for effective action which bypasses the binary of doom or tyranny, by elevating the abilities of individual people so that they may make meaningful changes

7 Often, to determine whether "bare life" or "the good life" wins out in a given issue it is sufficient to find out from which one corporate power stands to gain. For example, Big Pharma safeguards our survival at the expense of our higher needs, while Big Oil furnishes our lives with endless conveniences and commodities by destroying the foundation of life. More instructively, we may observe how the locus of the "life" in question, varies with the interests and powers affected. When it is the workers vs. the 1%, "we" are absent from media and policy. When it is the Global South and people of colour vs. the privileged nations and the wealthy WASPS, again, no "we" is to be found. But when it is the elderly vs. the young, the multinationals vs. small, local business, or the work-from-home/vacation crowd vs. the frontline workers and the unhoused, then a "we" is formed that must work together to stop this terrible threat. The construction of a collective whose lives are threatened is obviously a highly selective enterprise.

8 E.g. the discussion by the IPCC experts in Philippe Squarzoni, *Climate Changed*, (New York: Abrams, 2007).

in their environments. And like Illich, I turn to a resource we already possess. I sketch a theory of technique, which I argue is a mode of action that bridges the personal level with the systemic. In the practice of technique, we not only alter our world, but we exemplify what it is to live well.

Snowboarding as technique

In my teenage years, I was an avid snowboarder. Though I could not be said to have achieved mastery, this was my closest approximation to developing technique. In what follows, I shall draw on these experiences as well as examples of technical masters in various domains to examine the nature of technique. The concept of technique provides a link between systems theory (broadly speaking) and phenomenology which, in my view, is one of the only viable philosophical stances that can account for subjectivity, and therefore, for action against the grain. This does not mean it is the only such link. But it is one, because it exposes scenarios in which the individual and the environment are indistinct and, yet, in which the individuality of the individual is paramount. Let us examine how this is the case.

To begin, it may help to distinguish technique from skill and method. Technique is more specific than skill. A skill is an ability that is largely transferable, such as writing or riding a bike, whereas technique is a set of actions with defined parameters, such as writing detective fiction or bicycle racing and bmx tricks. Both the latter require knowing how to ride a bicycle, but no other domain requires knowing how to do a handlebar spin with flair or navigating the hills of southern France among a mass of hundreds of cyclists. A skill can be developed to a greater or lesser extent, as when we say a person is “very skilled,” but technique implies a certain standard; it must be well done to suggest technique, as in “having great technique” or “having poor technique” (the

skill is there, but the technique is lacking).

This in turn distinguishes it from method, which is a program for accomplishing a definite end, while technique suggests a certain art in its execution. Anyone, in theory, can learn the appropriate method for a task, but technique requires finesse, a personal contribution. There can be no predetermined method to achieve technique. It is not end-oriented, but appreciated in itself, as a process. When we admire the technique in a product, such as a painting, a carpet, or a hand-made desk, we suspend our attention to the piece itself and imagine the process by which it was painted, woven, or built. In short, we admire technique *through* the work, though this is, of course, not the only thing we may admire about a work.

Technique and Genre

The parameters according to which technique is assessed, which are both specific and yet admitting of personality, are those of *genre*. A technique is coproduced with a genre. Genre, in turn, emerges from the recognition of those aspects of action which are not solely utilitarian. To be a good driver may be useful to reach a destination, but to be considered as technique is to ignore such aims and to consider the driving in itself. It is therefore common, though not necessary, to formalize venues for viewing technique, such as racetracks, detective fiction publishing, or concert halls. Each of these presupposes a genre and typically involves a mechanism for evaluation and criticism according to the standards of the genre, such as panels of judges prepared to award winners on the spot or critics who later review concerts in the newspapers. In any case, technique bears the nature of performance; it exists to be seen (or heard, or touched, or tasted). Again, the action itself may serve a function, but technique refers to the flair of its execution, which in itself has no function. When I practiced snowboarding, my activity served no purpose, it did

not produce any result. Yet it made visible a way of becoming integrated with a world, and this novel relationship between human and surroundings could in turn be conventionalized, formalized, and assessed. Thus, snowboarding has come to be seen as a genre itself, with many subgenres—halfpipe, slalom, slopstyle—which are presented in various events every year.

If technique leads to prizes and awards, this does not invalidate the idea that technique is not end-oriented. The rewards of a good performance are not a result of that performance, as a house would be a result of building. Rather, they are awarded by peers on the basis of social standards, in the context of contingent ceremonies. In fact, the consequences of technique are retroactively determined: first we develop technique and notice it as worthy of recognition, then we devise means of recognizing and incentivizing it. On a more philosophical level, we may observe that the “ends” served by technique are not those of utility or of need. The difference is captured in ordinary language, as Arendt points out, when we distinguish “in order to” and “for the sake of.”⁹ Those who seek mastery of a technique do not attempt to do the most possible good, nor to put food on the table, but to achieve excellence, honor, prestige, beauty, and so on. These values are the byproduct of human ceremonies that commemorate actions which in themselves have no inherent end.

It should be obvious from these examples that genres are not natural kinds. They are historically situated and developed over time, in accord with the development of technique. The establishment of the criteria for judgment can occur over a period of time via multiple iterations, as is common with sports, or as the byproduct of a work of such originality that it simultaneously creates its own genre, as is frequent in the arts. Borges’ writings on Poe exemplify this phenomenon, in

9 *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 154.

which he made Poe the founder of detective fiction.¹⁰ This instantaneous production of genre often leads to the misconception that the original is the best and that no fundamental change to the parameters occurs afterward when, in fact, the original is often identified much later in the process of genre-production and frequently breaks the rules it eventually (or ostensibly) gave rise to. Again, one can look to Borges' writings on Kafka.¹¹ This focus on origins also draws a comparison to legal judgment, which in our Roman tradition, depends for its legitimacy on a constitution. However, in neither the technical nor the legal domain is this dependence obligatory. Other legal paradigms are possible. What matters is the institution—formal or informal—that regulates the parameters for accepted judgment, a point to which I shall return.¹²

The coproduction of genre and technique is typically a function of technological innovation. However, it is not so straightforward as that a new technology invites new opportunities for technique. Rather, the first change wrought by a new technology, along with the transformation of the subjectivity of the user, is a pressure over its environment to produce a space for its use. The famous adage that to someone with a hammer every problem looks like a nail, encapsulates this dual movement—from the tool back toward the user and out toward the world. It further illuminates the complex relation between science and technology, at least to the extent that science cannot progress without demanding the implementation of its hypotheses through experiments. The motto of science is best expressed in Robinson's *Red Mars* by the

10 See, for example, "The Detective Story" in *Selected Non-Fictions* (New York, Penguin, 1999), 491-499.

11 "Kafka and his Precursors" in *Ibid.*, 363-365.

12 We should have to simultaneously reconsider the word "institution" which carries this bias toward to the original in itself, in order to creatively reimagine the formalization and regulation of genres.

character who says “we can do it, so we will.”¹³ Technology is not simply the result of scientific research, but its precondition and its process—Galileo’s revolutionary discoveries of lunar cycles were the result of his access to the newly invented telescope. The scientist can only gain the required alienation for investigation by means of technological mediation, and similarly considers the technologization of the world as the method of making it knowable.

The world according to technique

Snowboarding requires a very specific and artificial environment. Natural slopes ideal for snowboarding are comparatively uncommon, particularly if one is performing a “tricks” style of snowboarding. My friends and I used to spend hours carving ramps out of plywood and snow to be able to practice our craft on small suburban hills. So too, cars and bicycles require smooth surfaces to function, at least to their maximum (imaginable) potential. It follows that their invention calls forth a paved world.¹⁴ Likewise, computer technology needs a wired world to sate its insatiable appetite for energy and to realize its potential for instant communication.

It is, strictly speaking, not the technology with which the user interfaces, but the world through the technology. As with any mediator, technology acts as both revealer and concealer. Consider the word ‘screen,’ which refers to both that on which something distant can be projected and that which can hide what is right in front of you. Each technology poses problems to the user, as a snowboard would be a burden to someone who did not know how to use it, or who

13 Robinson, Kim Stanley. *Red Mars* (London: Voyager, 1996), 213.

14 The social implementation of a technology will therefore often require the simultaneous development of other technologies as is the case with cars and asphalt. Who can say how many inventions are already now just waiting their environmental counterpart to re-paint the world?

tried to use it to go uphill. Nevertheless, the environment can change without technological innovation or through a technology unrelated to the technique in question, such that a new technique is born using older technologies as a means of interacting with this new world. A familiar technology may become an impediment in such a case, at least until a new technique is used to adapt it to the new world. Poe's founding of the detective genre did not require a new technology, but the world had changed sufficiently that the baffling mystery and secrecy it presented to the average person required a new literary mode to represent it.

Technique intervenes at this stage, providing the mode which enables one to use a technology to breach the gap between oneself and the world, to make most use of the environment, and at its most exalted, to expose a new way of being that was somehow always possible. It is the opposite of the scientist's approach to technology. The technical master interposes technology between him/herself and the environment, not to remove his/her personal involvement but instead to become contiguous with that environment, to become integrated with it, and to *make changes* in it. And so, while technique is non-instrumental, it does require instruments. In this case, the tool is not so much a device for appropriating the environment as knowledge or as a resource, but a way for the user to interact with the environment with ease. As anyone who has excelled in a technique can attest, it provides an experience of *seamlessness*. Above all, technique is a means of integration between the individual and the environment.

The process of learning how to navigate the mountains with a snowboard involved several recalibrations of my sense of balance, the development of unused muscle combinations, and many tailbone injuries. Eventually though, on my snowboard, I could traverse this environment with ease. Without having to think through the chain of cause and ef-

fect, I could make decisions on the fly; to decide where to go and what to do was at the same time to start doing it.¹⁵ The acquisition of technique involves a kind of training by which the body is formed to ultimately be transcended. The body must be made highly present in the process of learning. Its instincts and habits must be surfaced before being deconstructed and replaced with new ones. Finally, upon achieving technical mastery, the body becomes ‘transparent’. The master can express his/her will without any thought given to the series of actions involved, proceeding smoothly and directly from thought to result. The result is “making it look easy.” It follows Elaine Scarry’s logic by which the presence of the body makes the world absent and vice versa.¹⁶ Technique allows one to ignore one’s own body to meet the world, as it were, directly.

In short, the parameters of a technique create the arena in which the will can be exercised. There is an intimate connection between the establishment of rules and creativity. In the Midrashic tradition, it is common to thank the Lord for the commandments. The divine rules are a great gift and likened to a wife. It is difficult for contemporary liberals to understand this deeply felt love for restrictions, but they make sense when one considers just how much of the intellectual and artistic tradition of Judaism, not to mention its legal and religious traditions, revolve around playing with these rules, interpreting them, trading them, blending them. Certainly, nothing impressive could be achieved in chess, in poker, in football, in literature, or in dance if there were no

15 A more radical description of this process is given in Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder*. Someone who has received a traumatic injury who must relearn basic actions from scratch, including walking and eating carrots. As a result, he becomes fixated on experiences of seamlessness as depicted in movies and in nostalgic reminiscences. We might construe this experience as that of someone who has lost even the techniques of basic functions.

16 See *The Body in Pain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 33-34.

rules to create conditions and obstacles.¹⁷

Technique and climate change

The analysis so far may hopefully be amenable to multiple projects. However, I want to focus this inquiry on how technique relates to the question of political action in the context of climate change. The major point to make is that not only our political action but also our modes of relating to the environment cannot be taken for granted. They are not inherited in the way birds know to migrate at the change of seasons but require a challenging process of unlearning some basic instincts and acquiring new skills. This pedagogy, furthermore, occurs at the individual level, and must be re-learned with every generation. Technique is the name for the mutual transformation of organisms and their environments but viewed from the perspective of the particular, self-conscious organism. Contrary to the ecologist's view, it reveals the extent to which this calibration is not a given. If it were, we would not celebrate it, without concern for its usefulness, by setting up fora for its display and assessment.

Dipesh Chakrabarty has traced the history of understanding natural and human history as separate, and suggests that anthropogenic climate change breaks down this barrier.¹⁸ The traditional humanist view held that human history could be understood because it was the product of our actions, whereas natural history was impenetrable because it was either created by God or uncreated. Nature was believed

17 I have so far emphasized technique as a bodily and tool-based activity, but this begs the question as to the place of so-called intellectual techniques. It is unclear, for instance, whether language is a tool in this sense. Moreover, can there be a technique for thinking? At present, a fully elaborated analysis of techniques of thought is beyond the scope of this paper.

18 Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), "The Climate of History: Four Theses", *Critical Inquiry*, 35(2), pp.197-222.

to have “no inside”.¹⁹ Chakrabarty suggests that the agent of anthropogenic climate change—the human species—is a negative universal, that is, an abstraction about which we cannot effectively think. The human species is an emergent category for describing the combined actions of all individual human beings, yet we can have no sway or control over such an abstraction. But neither have we any sway over global human history. Rather, the fields in which we can effectively influence history have always remained rather limited. They consist of micro-systems carved out of the surrounding, inflexible conditions of the world, both human and natural. Natural history has not become something made as human history was thought always to have been; rather, human history and natural history become equally changeable, yet equally beyond control. Thinking through climate change disproves the theory that we could ever understand world history, while making clear the ways in which our interiority can meet the wider environment in limited, but important ways.

The now collapsed distance between natural and human histories has led thinkers to attempt to reduce the distinctions between human and other living beings. In particular, they argue that all beings possess interiority, or else that none do. For as humans we observe species behaving in consistent and reproducible ways, so to say that such action is self-conscious is to assume that our own self-conscious actions are equally deterministic. Some major currents of thought today, such as actor-network theory (ANT) and post-humanism, appear to equate form with ability, such that a given *kind* of actant can only and will always perform only those actions appropriate to its kind. But an organism capable of learning and being taught is one in which form and ability are discrete. Technique must be learned. The individual must be taught to rewire its body and its language to participate in the environ-

19 Ibid., 202.

ments that have been altered, and its capacity to do so is heavily variable. In my view, we must stand our ground on the fact that humans have an inside, yet remain agnostic as to whether (all) other beings do and to what extent, or at least until we communicate with them.²⁰

The concept of technique clarifies how an actant can change from an intermediary to a mediator, in Latour's terms.²¹ An intermediary is a mere vehicle in the transmission of forces, involved but essentially passive. It has no say in *how* a force will be directed through and beyond it. By contrast, a mediator is an active participant in material-semiotic exchange. It is not sovereign, as it does not generate forces from itself, but it is a co-creative participant in the system that emerges from the concerted and conflicting actions of all mediators involved. In Latour's view, this distinction is perspectival—we either acknowledge *all* actants as mediators, or fail by thinking of them as merely intermediaries. In contrast, by my analysis, the distinction is a function of the relative technical abilities of each actant in a given environment.

An important component of this view is that the same entity can be both mediator and intermediary depending on which environment and forum it finds itself in. The world is not one system, but an infinite and changing array of systems within, adjacent to, overlapping, and in conflict with one another. Michel Callon's study of framing in the practice of accounting sheds some light on this phenomenon, showing how subjects selectively, and not always "rationally", choose

20 "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 223. I do not agree that humans are the centre of the world, or possess the highest or only mode of consciousness that exists. Rather, I think that, since I am a human being, I can only think as a human being. Therefore, I must limit my understanding according to the limits of my physiological form, just as I further limit it by my historical and cultural situation. I can trust that other forms of life will act responsibly, intelligently, and so on, but I can only expect to reach other human beings in my appeals for them to do so.

21 Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia*, Polity Press, 2017, p.71. n69.

what to include and what to exclude in any given accounting system.²² A part of the analysis of systems must include the subject's own acts of framing by which it determines which techniques to employ, to judge, to separate or to conflate. *It is only in creating these frames and in acting within them that people are capable of transcending the determined course of action derived from their species being.* Our lives are composed of multiple nested spheres of engagement. So no one is master of all, and absolute power is nonsensical.

The imperative of industrial society is to reduce, as far as possible, people into intermediaries, by eliminating the value of technique or relegating it to specialized and benign arenas like professional sports. Incidentally, it is worth considering whether the highly paid nature of these “professions” is a means of further removing technique from everyday life and pacifying its practitioners to prevent them from carrying its lessons into other spheres. Increasingly, jobs boil down to pressing buttons to enable machines to carry out pre-scripted operations. Creativity is distilled up to the privileged few, like bubbles rising to the surface, where it is primarily used to devise ways to further reduce the input required of “users,” who are paid correspondingly. In the name of utility and efficiency, agency is systematically removed from the majority of people and non-human beings, in both the formation of subjectivity and the material organization of the world. It is no surprise that the only relationship to rules maintained by many people today is as constraints, and that creativity consists in finding ways to break them.²³ For example, consider the rise in popu-

22 “An essay on framing and overflowing: economic externalities revisited by sociology” in Michel Callon, *The Laws of the Markets*, John Wiley and Sons, 1998. See also, Michel Callon *Markets in the Making: Rethinking Competition, Goods, and Innovation*, Zone Books, 2021.

23 Progressive education bears some of the blame for this situation. For one, it has consistently deemphasized the body. As Ursula Franklin was known to point out, despite all the moralizing to the contrary, we live in the least materialist society of all time; the one thing our leaders and teachers do not understand is materiality. Further,

larity of street racing, drug dealing, hacking. Under such conditions, democracy is a joke.²⁴

The restoration of agency demands a rejection of these false alternatives and the restitution of spheres of engagement in which individual character is foregrounded, the stakes are real, and technique is necessary. I noted above that the arenas for the performance of technique are upheld by institutions. Politics, the domain of appearance *par excellence*, according to Arendt, is no different. Contemporary politics consists of highly conventionalized and controlled performances: broadcast addresses to the nation, smiling-heads-of-state-shaking-hands photo ops, candidate debates. The behind-the-scenes action is no less institutionalized, though its audience is different. In that case, it is a matter of impressing lobbyists, influencers, funders, interest groups, and one another. But is it truly just *circuses* that, together with an increasingly limited allocation of bread, is meant to distract us while democracy is slowly subverted? It is well-known that politicians are all liars and that campaigns are a series of staged and contrived enactments. One avenue for action is to enter this field and use it to open up formal democracy once more and to institute policies to support the future thriving of people and the non-human world alike.²⁵

by taking for granted that the self-directed education of the child will ensure an “un-oppressive” and fulfilling development, it excludes the training in submission which is required to become a creative participant in any system.

24 Or worse, an evil. Here is a telling story: In an undergraduate seminar on medieval philosophy, I found myself struggling to understand the version of free will articulated by these thinkers. Increasingly frustrated, I tried to get my professor to explain this idea in what I thought were “concrete” terms, i.e. how it works when an individual is offered this or that choice. In response, my professor exclaimed, “My dear, those are *sins!*” Freedom has as little to do with choosing one commodity over another as does the good.

25 For instance, by cracking down hard on the real estate speculation market.

However, the greater part of our current needs lies in developing a parallel set of institutions where technique matters and climate-conscious activity is valued. To establish modes of integrating with the environment that do not involve widespread catastrophic environmental disaster requires establishing venues, fora, parameters, conventions, rules, etc. which not only make sustainable activity possible, but in fact incentivizes it, by appealing to the higher needs of honour, fulfillment, meaning. By creating spaces that are removed from the logic of the market and the state, more people may be convinced to shift their activity to these zones. Of interest are, of course, the kinds of activities Illich examined: education, medicine, transportation, manufacture, and agriculture. If activities in these domains can be viewed as more than merely utilitarian, but as requiring and demonstrating levels of technique, we might be more willing to value other ways of undertaking them. And in turn, we might find we enjoy the practice of them, rather than viewing jobs as a means to gain leisure time to enjoy entertainment or distraction.

Formal, industrial institutions have little to offer us anymore in these domains. They pit us against each other to produce poor-quality goods and pollute the biosphere in the process. By establishing our own, self-organized versions of these institutions, and simply turning away from their mainstream equivalents, we can once more enjoy the process of being technical, of being mediators, and of being agents in our own lives. Illich had a name for these modes of action: the vernacular, which is “not an alternative to anything but an ever-present reality at hand.”²⁶ Though this transition would require some concessions, notably a reappreciation of the value of enoughness and a commitment to stabilizing imperfect institutions, in my opinion the benefits would

26 Sajay Samuel, e-mail communication, September 5, 2023.

be worth it. As in any technique, a return to the vernacular would reveal a domain enjoyable and worthy in itself, while its form—political economy—would gear its stakes toward the material necessities.