

Technik

Against Nihilism

Dirk Leach

1987

Dirk Leach began working on an assembly line at a Mercedes-Benz factory in 1977 to finance his studies at a German university. His work, and his reflections on the nature of modern technology intersected with his reading of existentialist texts by Martin Heidegger and Ernst Junger's *Der Arbeiter* ("The Worker").

The result is an essay by Leach which recognizes the nihilism created by the technological age and seeks to discover, in spite of it, a philosophical space from which to struggle against despair and to affirm life. What appears here is a short excerpt from the longer essay published as *Technik*.

The complete text is illustrated with Leach's photographs of the plant and its workers, creating a flat ambience of an alienated industrial landscape. It has been published by Gris Banal publishers, Paris, in a bilingual French-English edition. It sells for \$14, but is available through Fifth Estate Books for \$9.00.

I arrived five minutes early. It was disorienting to stare at the girders and no one was near to talk to so I sat right to work at my place, put my books out on the top of an old steel slot-shelf the crew kept their things in, and started to write in my notebook, seeking the words to describe my station. I stood by the rail out of some of the glare behind a cement support. From a more distant vantage point, the place could have seemed to be a bridge-section laden with boxes of supplies, but from my actual perspective I found no satisfactory simile for it.

The line was like an elevated, open-ended gazebo with the lines and lights of a display case. The chrome and the paint on the cars were inspected there for flaws.

The books I laid out were a German-English dictionary and my copy of *Zur Seinsfrage*. Though few men read books at work, everyone read the newspaper or talked to his neighbor whenever he had a space of time to wait out. They were short spaces, but there were thousands of them in the day and they were all the same.

I read in the spaces between cars for the first three hours—a sentence or two at a time before I had to look up a word in the dictionary. This was usually interrupted while I did the work on two or three passing cars. Heidegger wrote to Junger about the present time and called it the time of consummate nihilism, *vollendeten Nihilismus*, when the entire world was mobilized in the effort to dominate the earth with technology. We live, he said, in the border-zone between historical ages, on the line separating an only partially nihilistic past civilization from a future which, being beyond the present of complete nihilism, was either utter annihilation, the destruction of the planet, or a basic and presently unimaginable change in the direction of history.

Junger had written of crossing the line. Heidegger proposed examining the line itself, referring to it as a zone of indefinite temporal duration, perhaps centuries wide, the zone of active nihilism. He spoke of the difficulty a thinker faced in attempting even to define nihilism and complimented Junger for his likening this attempt to the

search for the cause of cancer. The words I read seemed to fuse into an ever-increasing distress. “Nihilism” weighed with a dreadful, apt utterness, its meaning unclear but promising to prove appropriate.

In between cars I read this philosophical letter about the bleakness of the world-situation, or I waited. To stand still while the machines I operated “quickly” did their jobs, to wait to remove them from under the hood of one car and replace them under the hood of the next, was strangely hard to endure. I listened to the ventilator overhead. It groaned without gasping, never pausing for breath. It labored but was tireless. When I waited I heard uninterrupted and lifeless power at work. I was dead but active. I compared it to my living activity and found it stronger. I paused, I stopped to think, to adjust my stance and grip, to breathe.

Only because Heidegger’s respect for Junger was genuine could he criticize him as thoroughly as he did revealing the basis of Junger’s attempt to grapple with the challenge of technology as one nihilistically misconceived. Nihilism, said Heidegger, is the labeling as “nothing” whatever cannot be encountered for technological research or metaphysical conceptualization. What such perspectives overlook, said Heidegger, is nothing negative, and if it is to be called “nothing” it must be understood as a “positive” nothing: the unmeasurable qualities of life, the unverifiable intuitions of truth (mathematical and philosophical), the natural communion of life and death.

As my days at the factory wore on, I began to notice a sort of experience that exemplified what Heidegger, in contrast to the “positive nothing” that nihilism strove to nullify, called the “negative nothing” that nihilism promoted. The negative nothing was a plenitude. I found it everywhere at the factory and described it several times. The box of gas caps supplying me was as big as a medicine ball and stacked with five others between the tire covers and trunk mats. I was tempted to say its poetic significance was “work” and call myself lazy for feeling repulsed by the sight of it. But I could not quite accept that laziness controlled my perception. It was what the work meant that repulsed me. It meant too much of the same thing—so much the same as to be the same as nothing. This was the negative nothing, the nothing at all that lurked in pallets of parts on the assembly line. Working with the caps, handling each one singly, taught the sense of this nothing.

At the factory, it was difficult to admit that there was a nature to nothing. It came to me as I read at the job. I couldn’t settle down and think for myself, take the time to compose statements of any adequate length, but I did have my small recorder and when I became tired of reading I put it in the bib-pocket of my overalls and carried it with me as I worked on the cars.

I made observations. They were incomplete, disconnected bits and pieces, all of them lacking the conclusive closure that makes prose. They usually concerned the twisting subtleties of the routine I performed, subtleties gigantic in their structure but so minuscule in their relevance to anything anyone else was concerned with that they seemed submicroscopic.

This was a poverty for which I knew no remedy and I did my best in spite of the sense of futility it aroused. I made futility a recurrent question, itself an aspect of the job to be observed and described whenever it presented itself from a new angle.

If anyone had tried to interest me in the idea of the “different aspects of futility” before I had come to think about it as I had, I would have told him the theme was a circle of hopeless and depressed reflection best ignored. “Futility,” “absurdity,” “nihilism”—these words robbed a person of words, made it impossible to think. But they were the right words. They were dangerous and strange, but proper.

About the empty plenitude that I found surrounding me as I worked—the crates of parts and the complicated logic of petty jobs—Heidegger had much to say. He identified this plenitude as nothing less than the essence of technology. As a self-augmenting growth, technology has one supreme command for mankind the world over: to store up replacements, to collect and alter the material of nature into stores of homogeneous supplies.

Heidegger told Junger that the traditional conceptual methods were incapable of dealing with the relation of being and nothing. This incapacity of traditional metaphysics was the sustaining source of nihilism. Traditional metaphysics was essentially a working vocabulary providing thought with a means by which to comprehend magnitude and power. It was a conceptual aid in difficult thinking that, for all its cleverness and ingenuity, excused itself from considering being and nothing. It spoke only of what “was” and conceived of it quantitatively. It was arrogant first in that it presumed itself to be sufficiently comprehensive to think all thoughts and secondly, in that it gave itself a pragmatic justification for opposing what should not be opposed. Its arrogance drove it to perceive

being as that which was positive and calculable and to perceive nothing as mere negativity. It thus deprived being of inherent value and deprived nothing, the source of difference and death, of any welcome in thought.

Paradoxically, to ban “nothing” from thought was nihilistic. Only by welcoming nothing into his life, said Heidegger, could a mortal person cease serving nihilism. To welcome it, he had to be able to contemplate it and for that he needed a different attitude toward language, one entirely other than what his practical and incessantly-practiced inclination toward acquisition employed. For practical purposes, one’s own death was something to be defended against and the transience and corruptibility of the things of the world were to be combated by gathering a reserve of replacements. But replaceability, our practical solution to the “death” of material things, actually enhanced the mortality of what we handled. We refused things the care and consideration intimate acquaintance with their frailty could afford.

We abused them until they broke and then we replaced them. And we treated ourselves that way, hiding from our own deaths, frightened and unwilling to understand ourselves as properly mortal. The result was that we did not know ourselves and did not take proper care of the world.

I didn’t write much in the off-hours now. Whenever I did a motor somewhere always seemed too loud. Work at the factory had become a duller, more massive, and less eventful experience. It seemed to consist of nothing so much as getting especially close to the noise one heard everywhere all the time. After work, the work of others dominated the air. An urgent drone was the basis of the sound and internal combustion engines or sputtering power tools usually clattered in the foreground. When I tried to write, more and more often I became distracted and wondered at the noise. It was fast and regular. It went on. It approximated constancy with a battering push punctuated by the shortest of pauses.

I knew that a long time at the factory would eventually destroy my ability to write altogether—and that my being aware of this would not even survive to witness the end. Heidegger’s first words in his essay “What Are Poets For?” identified this situation as a dying of the critical capacity. The destitution of the technological age increased, he said, as the ability to recognize this destitution faded.

For weeks I had been giving great amounts of energy to the sharpshooting of transitory moments. Why? It was saddening to watch the finished Mercedes automobiles slide by under the inspection lights. The absurdity of the pretense of being one of the leading automobile manufacturers in the world of gasoline-powered transportation, a rank achieved through the appeal of the luxury car, was a pompous parade before me which no statement could stop. This parade of wasted resources which we tended all day was pushed forward by a struggle for survival, a race. We were all driven to work at the speed of the belts in the factories. It had been calculated, estimated, how fast we had to work to keep up. The military economy set the pace for our forty hour week. We needed the money to pay for the guns, soldiers, and bombs—to defend ourselves from the “Great Enemy,” and to exploit the populations of poor neighbor nations.

Building Mercedes Benzes was one of the most lucrative of the different enterprises constituting the war effort: these automobiles were a powerful weapon in the fight for more power. In this period of active nihilism, the entire world was mobilized in the fight for power, power to fulfill ideas and realize projects. And power, as far as technology understood it, was fuel. Fuel was the life in a dead machine. We were mobilized by machines, fighting each other for the power to animate the dead products of our technological skill. They would all stand useless without fuel. And if we understood this we were challenged to overcome the voracious system we had created as our slave. It was our own incomprehension of strength made metallic and automotive.

When I had worked to the limit allowed a foreign student and was laid off for the Winter semester at the university, I began to go over my notes and organize the material in them. For the first two weeks following the lay-off I found I was unable to sit still and did most of my work with the tape recorder as I walked around Tübingen. Everything reminded me of the factory: waiting for the bus I remembered the assembly line. The most difficult part of the job had been to stand there, be there, with essentially nothing to do. After two days I had not only thoroughly memorized my job but also relegated it to habit. I did the work and despite all the photographs, jotted notes, and interviews spent most of the time staring at the cars and lights and girders. I remembered how often I found myself straining to find something worth seeing.

It was the same at the bus stop. I felt leashed to a light post and perplexed: at a loss to fathom how it could be that something among the familiar details around me was so important that I had taken my position there again

to look for it. It had to be important or I wouldn't have spent so much time on it. The spending of time was how we paid for valuable things. Valuable things were what we spent our time on. This was a natural feeling we couldn't help, but in situations like these it led to frustration. We could not walk away. We could only sing a song that echoed off the corners of an environment we hadn't chosen.

fifth Estate

Dirk Leach
Technik
Against Nihilism
1987

<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/326-summer-1987/technik>
Fifth Estate #326, Summer, 1987

[fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/326-summer-1987/technik)