THE TECHNOLOGICAL IMAGINARY: BRINGING MYTH AND IMAGINATION INTO DIALOGUE WITH BRONISLAW SZERSZYNSKI'S *NATURE, TECHNOLOGY AND THE SACRED*

by Michael W. DeLashmutt

Abstract.   Bronislaw Szerszynski's *Nature, Technology and the Sacred* (2005) offers a fresh look into the historical, cultural, and political implications of technology use in our contemporary situation. By challenging the standard interpretation of the secularization thesis, the book opens the door to a new kind of postmodern ordering of the sacred, which includes our ever-developing perception of the environment and our ongoing use of technology. In my discussion of the text, I suggest that Szerszynski's argument could have been furthered by exploring the role played by both imagination and myth in creating the postmodern sacred that he describes. I argue that by giving consideration to Friedrich Dessauer's Christian theology of technology and the mythical imagination of contemporary science fiction literature and film, a more explicitly religious dimension of technology can be allowed to emerge in the form of the technological imaginary.

Keywords: Friedrich Dessauer; Michel Foucault; imagination; invention; inventiveness; myth; *Nature, Technology and the Sacred*; philosophy of technology; science fiction; secularization; Bronislaw Szerszynski; technology.

For some time, I have been advocating a two-pronged criticism of certain strands of the science-religion dialogue. It seems to me that in our close investigations into the conflict between religion and science we often fail to take seriously the role played by technology in shaping the scientific worldview and, furthermore, we tend to neglect the ways in which both

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science and technology are expressed and experienced within culture. For me, as a practical theologian, the science-religion dialogue becomes most interesting and most significant when its implications to the lived life are most explicitly addressed. I was pleasantly surprised by Bronislaw Szerszynski's *Nature, Technology and the Sacred* (2005), which attempts to engage the science-religion dialogue precisely at this often-forgotten nexus of technology and culture by attending to the meaning-bearing practices that emerge from our technological and scientific society. It is a heady task that Szerszynski pursues and one in which he is mostly successful. Herein I outline some of the strengths and weaknesses of his recent contribution to the study of technology and religion and advocate, by way of my conclusion, a few areas where the text's argument could be improved by having more seriously considered the place of imagination in texturing our encounter with the sacred and the technological.

BOOK REVIEW

Szerszynski analyses the "implicit religious understanding of nature and technology" that is "widespread within Western societies" (2005, x). Rather than "religious" in a properly theological sense, he identifies this religiosity as a diffuse spirituality that is made evident in social structures and meaningful human practices. *Nature, Technology and the Sacred* does not attempt to define a natural religion (or a nature-religion, for that matter) but rather offers a "social scientific" analysis that seeks to make broadly sweeping claims about "the sacred" as a sociological or psychological facet of experienced reality.

The text is divided into five main sections. Part I, "Modernity, Nature and the Sacred," introduces the reader to an alternative reading of the secularization thesis, drawing primarily from Marcel Gauchet's *The Disenchantment of the World* ([1985] 1999) and John Milbank's early *Theology and Social Theory* (1990). Indeed, one can almost hear the Milbankian refrain "Once there was no secular" (1990, 9) echoing in the pages of this book. Central to Szerszynski's argument is the belief that the sacred has never fully been exorcised from Western "secular culture." Contrary to Max Weber's thesis, which argues that society has steadily become more secular in the face of ruined sacred truths, Szerszynski contends that theories of disenchantment neglect the implicit religious behaviors that are expressed by the West's relationship to nature. Through our relationship to nature an implicit religiosity is evidenced in such practices as involvement in environmentalism, supporting green politics, or finding physical comfort through complementary and alternative medicines. Furthermore, despite claims made to the contrary in Lynn White's 1967 article "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," Szerszynski argues that Christianity has indeed not robbed nature of its sacral potency. Rather, the increased turn to nature as a source of meaning and fulfillment—that is to say the percep-

tion that nature constitutes a holism to be cared for and offers a place to humanity that is both context and home—hints at a postmodern ordering of the sacred that includes nature and technology as a part of this sacral system.

This is expressed more fully in Part II, "Nature and Technology," where the text gives a historical overview of religious thinking about the natural world. The survey begins with the Classics and culminates in a description of what Szerszynski calls the postmodern "technological sublime." The material in this section shows familiarity with major works in the philosophy of technology. In particular, an understanding of Aristotelian *techne* is developed around a similar thesis voiced in Carl Mitcham's *Thinking through Technology* (1994)—a seminal text with which all parties interested in the philosophy of technology should be prepared to engage.

Whereas Part I attempts to outline the shape of the sacred and Part II attempts to examine key developments in the philosophy of technology, Part III, "The Body and Its Environment," explores the interface between technology and nature in terms of the technologization of the human body through medicine and habitation. Chapter 5, "The Body, Healing and the Sacred," provides a fascinating study of the postmodern sacred at work within complementary and alternative medicines. Szerszynski makes an interesting correlation between holistic medicine and a holistic philosophy of the environment, arguing that the goal of both is the forging of a unified human relationship with nature.

In Part IV, "Against the Technological Condition," we see how the postmodern sacredness of nature that is manifested in theories of health and the environment are expressed in politics and domestic life. Of particular note is chapter 8, "Nature, Virtue and Everyday Life," which gives a fascinating history of the vegetarian movement and issues concerning green consumerism. The book concludes by examining how concepts of globalism may shape future national identities. The kind of global politic about which the text's conclusion speculates hints at an increased awareness of human solidarity with nature and technology that would in turn represent its own kind of postmodern sacred community.

As a whole, the text tackles an exhaustive array of sources and dialogues with a broad range of ideas. In both content and methodology, I was very much reminded of similar analyses undertaken by Michel Foucault. Foucault, who described himself as a historian of systems of thought, investigated such systems by paying attention to how they contributed to the shaping of contemporary beliefs and practices. He likened his method to an "archaeology of knowledge." Digging through the strata of philosophy, history, religion, and politics, Foucault was able to uncover key historical developments in thought and action and link these developments to life in the present. His investigations covered a wide spectrum of topics ranging from medicine (*The Birth of the Clinic*, [1975] 1994) to the prison system

(*Discipline and Punish*, [1977] 1995) to human sexuality (*The History of Sexuality*, [1984] 1988). Clearly Szerszynski is familiar with Foucault's work, though Foucault is by no means the principal dialogue partner of the text. Szerszynski judiciously introduces themes from Foucault's corpus in his discussion of the secularization thesis (Szerszynski 2005, 19, 21), the historical relationship between the Christian West and nature (pp. 40, 58, 59), the body and medical technologies (chap. 5), and the political usage of nature (chap. 7).

Although Foucault is employed throughout, it was rather Szerszynski's thorough archaeology of the history of technology that I found to be the more reminiscent of a Foucauldian method. The historical depth to which Szerszynski explores his topic spans broad periods in Western history, giving one a real sense of the "systems of discourse" that contribute to contemporary technological society. These titular components of technology, nature, and the sacred are tied into intricate social, political, and historical networks that surreptitiously influence our contemporary patterns of habituation. Given the breadth of this project, perhaps one of the most unique contributions to knowledge made by *Nature, Technology and the Sacred* can be measured in terms of its ability to synthesize and systematize knowledge. In so doing, it reveals many of the trends that underpin the contemporary ordering of the sacred.

DISCOVERING THE "TECHNOLOGICAL IMAGINARY"

In his preface, Szerszynski states that one of his aims is to foster a more "authentic" approach to nature in light of our current problematic relationship with technology and the environment. Such authenticity would be put into practice through "political" means that would offer new ways of ordering our relationship to the environment. His position, he adds, is a reaction against the seemingly unfruitful attempts by theology and philosophy to address nature. He laments that political responses to the present "ecological crisis" are "barely recognized by most of what today passes as environmental philosophy and theology" (Szerszynski 2005, xii).

I agree that theology often has failed to address the practical implications of our contemporary relationship with nature and technology, but I am not convinced that *Nature, Technology and the Sacred* achieved its stated goal by offering anything substantially more lucid or pragmatic than what had come before. Furthermore, although Szerszynski's aims may be political, it is a politics that seems to attend only partially to our relationship with technology. What I found strangely missing from the work was any reference to the significant power of both myth and imagination in the postmodern sacred world. This is especially acute with regard to the myths and imaginings that surround and infuse contemporary technologies. In what remains of my article, I want to suggest two ways in which Szerszynski's argument could have been improved by placing *Nature, Technology and the*

Sacred into dialogue with Friedrich Dessauer's Christian theology of technology and with the technological imaginary at play within science fiction.

DESSAUER—TECHNOLOGY AS DIVINE IMAGINATION

Dessauer (1881–1963), an early radiologist, viewed technologies as an extension of divine creativity that was channelled through human action. Dessauer's position grounds technology in a collaboration between divine inspiration and human creativity. In his first philosophical work, *Philosophie Der Technik: Das Problem der Realisierung* (The Philosophy of Technology: The Problem of Realization),[1] he sought to create a dialogue between technology, social theory, metaphysics, and theology as a way of establishing technology's place within the broader lifeworld (Dessauer [1927] 1972, 317). To define technology, Dessauer began by analyzing "everyday talk" about technology, which centered upon "industrial manufacture and technical commodities." Dissatisfied with the ability of these "visible manifestation[s]" to reveal technology's "essence," Dessauer posited that the key to understanding technology rested in the initial manifestation of a technological entity—at the point in which "new forms are created for the first time" ([1927] 1972, 317). For Dessauer, "the core of technology is invention. Everything is fundamentally contained therein, if not resolved into it" (p. 318). Yet creation occurs according to very specific parameters, and not everything that is technological reveals the essence of technology.

Even though for Dessauer the technological essence originates from the Divine, his philosophy of technology endeavored to recover the meaning of technology at the location of its application within the service of human needs. Technology was neither an ethereal object created for an external end that rested in the mind of the Creator, nor merely a means of domination, nor exclusively a means of revealing. Indeed, all three characteristics could conceivably be ascribed to technology—yet technology's principal characteristic was described by Dessauer in terms of its ability to work productively for the will of God on Earth.

The inventor actualizes (and gives form to) unrealized potentialities, hinting at the spiritual dimension of inventiveness: Technology creates a way of seeing the world as it is intended by the mind of the Creator.

An inventor's reunion with the object which in the first instance "has come to be" out of himself is an encounter of unprecedented experiential power. Of intense revelation. Worldly wisdom passes it by. The inventor does not view what has been gained from his creation (though not from it alone) with the feeling, "I have made you"—but, rather, with an "I have found you. You were already somewhere, and I had to seek you out for a long time. . . . You could not appear sooner, fulfilling your purpose, really functioning, until you were in my sight as you were in yourself, because that is the only way you could be. . . ." ([1927] 1972, 318)

As a product of a sublimated human consciousness that is given a brief glimpse of divine creativity, the human creative act is a unique extension, or prosthesis, of divine creative activity in the world. The inventor is a participant in the creative process who merely uncovers that which is already existent in the mind of the continually creating God. As a means of participating in the creative activity of technology, inventiveness allows humankind to enter into "a day of creation . . . caught up in it and renewed through observation, participation, and suffering" (Mitcham 1994, 32). The revelation of divine creativity appears to the inventor as a "rapture when after long effort the invention 'comes'" (Dessauer [1927] 1972, 327). Technology, therefore, is a reflection of the human imagination, taken hold of by a divine spark.

Dessauer is an obscure figure mostly forgotten among contemporary philosophies of technology. He nonetheless played a central role in the early formation of the philosophy of technology alongside other more noteworthy figures such as Ernst Kapp.[2] Dessauer initiates a trajectory of thought about technology and divinity that highlights the significance of inventiveness as an expression of a divinely influenced imagination working in the background of human creativity. As Szerszynski points out in *Nature, Technology and the Sacred*, the beliefs and practices that surround our contemporary technological productions can evince a subtly sacral character. However, beyond the implicit postmodern reordering of the sacred discussed by Szerszynski lies a rich tradition that explicitly regards the theological significance of human creativity itself.[3] To this end, I would have found it a useful addition to his book had he included some recognition of the interweaving of imagination, creativity, and technology within the postmodern sacred.

Like Dessauer, Szerszynski seeks to find the meaning behind technology by attending to the use of technology within a wide assortment of disciplines. Unlike Dessauer, he seldom examines that originary point of inventiveness where human imagination first encounters technological creativity. Given the explicitly religious connotations of imagination, it seems that this would have been a useful starting point for some of Szerszynski's observations. For example, I think that by addressing imagination he could have smoothed the transition between his archaeology of technology in Parts I and II and his discussion of the cultural and political applications of technology in Parts III–IV. Though the reader is clearly aware of the trajectory of Szerszynski's thought, I think that a discussion of the power of the technological imagination would have helped to make greater sense of how it is that we become so enchanted by the potential of technology. Indeed, one unexplored cause for his postmodern ordering of the sacred seems to me to be the godlike power of the human imagination to actualize potentiality within the technical-creative act. Attending to the instance of technology's first emergence in the mind of the creator allows

us to ponder the source and power of imagination, not just the material products that imagination helps us to create. I would argue that it is in contact with human imagination and creativity that the implicit religiosity which the text seeks to discover in the contemporary use of technology is made most explicit.

TECHNO-MYTHS: SCIENCE FICTION AS AN EXPRESSION OF THE POSTMODERN SACRED

In addition to imagination's role in producing material technologies, the imagination also enables us to articulate the ambiguities of technology by giving rise to the myths we tell about contemporary and future technology. Szerszynski briefly addresses the topic of myth in terms of the creation myths of modern science (2005, 7, 34) and the various ancient myths that figure in earlier orderings of the sacred (pp. 16, 39, 52), yet strangely absent is any discussion of current myths being told about technology. It seems to me that one of the chief evidences that nature and technology still retain sacral powers—in spite of our protestations of secularity—can be found in the stories and myths that we tell about technology and the hopes we place in the power of technology to offer us some form of salvation. Myths about technology allow us to explore what are perceived to be the innate limits of human creativity. Whether these be the myths that are reflected in science fiction, those applied within critical theory and cyborg-feminism, or those created by speculative science, technological myths illustrate sacred truths, revealing through the imagination scientific and technological possibilities that science and technology would outright decry as impossible. Myths allow us to explore the narratives to which technologies give rise.

In some of my recent work I have explored how information technology is often viewed as a salvific technology that can offer to society unbridled freedom of communication as well as hope for liberation from the toil of hard labor. Yet without the imagery and narratives of science fiction, neither technologists nor cultural commentators would be able to articulate such technotheological mythologies (DeLashmutt 2006). Science fiction serves as a source of language and inspiration for both the development of our technological culture in general and within posthuman and cyborg theories in particular. Indeed, the ubiquity of science fiction literature and film within culture is the first indication of the general habituation of culture to the technological and scientific ethos (Fuller 1995, 3).

In the imagination of science fiction, science "tends to slip away, to evade its own evidence or facticity" (Telotte 2001, 3), making way for the creation of a fictive world where the means-ends system of technological control and scientific reasoning can be challenged and undermined by a concern for the ethical. Science fiction appears on the surface to be about

science and scientific possibility, but these elements are only devices used in the service of a narrative that takes into consideration images from technology and science that are often neglected in other forms of literature. In such narratives, the implications of human inventiveness are explored on a stage set in either this world or another. As a result, science fiction problematizes dominant assumptions about the human use of science and technology through unfettered fictive imagining.

Within science fiction, despite fantastical language, far-fetched plot lines, and gadget-ridden scenarios, the genre retains a point of contact with "reality" by maintaining an interest in ethics and praxis. Science fiction reveals cultural anxieties regarding technologies by providing a story that subverts the tendency toward a blind faith in technology. In the fictional approach to science and technology a fuller expression of the lifeworld is made possible which illustrates to the reader that "my surrounding world is more than what the scientist calls nature . . . scientific objectivity is itself subordinated to the common elaboration of a common cultural world" (Ricoeur 1967a, 70–71).

Science fiction is a form of literary discourse that provides insight into human creativity. According to science fiction writer William Gibson (author of *Neuromancer* [1986] and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* [1988]), rather than describing the world as it may be in the future, science fiction narratives attempt to "come to grips with an unthinkable present" (Gibson 2004). For him, a science fiction "author's toolkit" allows the author to engage with the "weirdness" of the present and to project this present on the backdrop of a fictive future. In science fiction, these imagined possible worlds lay bare the reader's unrealized anxieties about the present by tapping into concerns about the limitations and consequences of science and technology. Something of this dark side of technology is explored in Szerszynski's notion of "techno-demonology" in one of his more recent articles on the negative agencies of technology (Szerszynski 2006). In *Nature, Technology and the Sacred,* however, the counterpoint to the positive ordering of the sacred by contemporary practices such as vegetarianism and green consumerism needs further exploration. This could be provided by the language of techno-demonology or through an analysis of the kinds of apocalyptic anxieties that infuse much science fiction literature and film. The ability of science fiction to articulate technology's ambiguities and to point to the issues of meaning and depth that underpin human creativity and imagination would have given further substance to the functionalist approach to the sacred defined in the book.

A NEW LANGUAGE OR A FULLER LANGUAGE?

In *Nature, Technology and the Sacred* Szerszynski argues that he wants to come up with a new type of language that will provide some way of react-

ing to the current ecological crisis. Yet in his lengthy archaeology of the history of thinking about technology he seems to offer a descriptive rather than a prescriptive solution: "in this book I do not intend to engage deeply with questions about how to explain cultural change. . . . I am not using the idea of transformations of the sacred to explain changes in our understandings of nature and technology, but to understand them better" (2005, 26). Again, perhaps to find a new language from which *Nature, Technology and the Sacred* could lead us to an ethical or political reaction to technology, Szerszynski would have done well to reflect on the two kinds of technological imagination discussed above—technological imagination as creativity and technological imagination as myth-building.

Technology's power within the cultural sphere is more than material, more than political, and more than social; it is also imaginative. Fabricators of technology often discuss experiencing that kind of innovative promethean spark that captures the heart of human aspirations. Tillich, in his reflections on technology in *Systematic Theology*, notes how even for the technology user or viewer there is a kind of *eros* involved in our appreciation of the creative spirit at play within technology (Tillich 1964, 274). Szerszynski has made a very important contribution to contemporary reflections on religion and technology. His analysis of the cultural situation of technology use is laudable and shows a real dedication to explicating the sacred approach to nature in subcultures, politics, and economics. However, for his new type of language to become a full language it must be one that attends to the fantasies, imaginings, and myths that infuse technology and inspire our practices (Ricoeur 1967b, 19).

NOTES

1. Published in 1927, the same year as Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*.
2. In addition to his intriguing theory of technology as a form of organ projection, Kapp was the first person to refer to his own work as a "philosophy of technology" (Kapp 1877).
3. More recently this was a theme addressed by George Steiner in his 1990 Glasgow Gifford lectures, "Grammars of Creation" (published in 2002), where technology is described explicitly as a kind of creative imagining—becoming more poietic than even the poiesis described in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

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