

## Epistemological Luddism

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### Abstract

In the 2020 Prague Virtual Conference of the Society for Social Studies of Science (4S), Langdon Winner was awarded the society's John D. Bernal Prize jointly with Sharon Traweek. The Bernal Prize is awarded annually to individuals who have made distinguished contributions to the field of STS. Prize recipients include founders of the field of STS, along with outstanding scholars who have devoted their careers to the understanding of the social dimensions of science and technology. This response to Winner's Bernal lecture traces the roots of his epistemological luddism to 20th century modernism, politically as well as aesthetically.

### Keywords

epistemological luddism; autonomous technology; dialectical images

### Introduction

In a recent interview, Langdon Winner revisited his [1977](#)-book *Autonomous Technology* ([Winner 2020](#)). Whereas current discussions about autonomous vehicles and the like are all concerned with ascriptions of responsibility, his book addressed the question more profoundly, more sweepingly. Autonomous technology constrains human autonomy, diminishes our freedom. Technology constrains human freedom most pervasively and subtly in that it already exists. While we debate whether or not to accept, regulate, even ban this or that emerging technology, we take for granted as an immutable given that we live in a world of cars, power plants, packaged meat, antibiotics, international travel. How are we to take a critical stance and attitude of freedom towards technology if we have to begin by uncritically accepting the human built world into which we are born and which we perpetuate, slightly modifying it at best?

Langdon Winner is a political theorist and philosopher of technology with 20th century sensibilities. There is for him no “back to nature” or “escape from technological civilization” and no simple-minded contrast between authenticity and alienation: Luddism and the more or less violent dismantling of technological infrastructures is not an option, and if we find ourselves estranged in our technological workplaces or homes, we have to find a path forward, most likely one that involves more and better technologies rather than fewer. Accordingly, the striking experience of seeing at the California coastline, side-by-side, a whale and a reactor does not present us with the alternative of opting for one at the expense of the other ([Winner](#)

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[1986](#)). Instead, the juxtaposition of different forms of life prompts a thought experiment, namely an experiment in epistemological luddism which, in turn, prompts a luddist experience. It is this experience that is central to Winner's work—cultivating it is the best he can do and the best we should do.

We find this in the film *Koyaanisqatsi: Life Out of Balance* ([Reggio 1983](#)), to which he contributed as a philosopher, we find it in his books, and we find it in his Bernal lecture, which laments the demise of a rather insignificant institution for small experiments in epistemological luddism that it did make and might have continued to make. And as he arrives in the years 2020/21—mostly worried and somewhat hopeful about the prospects for critical thinking about technology—he finds himself in the midst of large-scale real-world experimental luddism in the form of a virus that tests the boundaries of our seemingly well-established technological forms of life.

So, what is that epistemological luddism as described by Winner in a recent interview?

My suggestion, therefore, is to try taking some tiny, modest steps – the epistemological luddism experiment. »The idea is that in certain instances it may be useful to dismantle or unplug a technological system in order to create the space and opportunity for learning.« As the device or system is removed, even if only briefly, what jumps forth as significant? What does such learning suggest as regards any large scale or small changes in technology related patterns of living? I do not say it explicitly in the book, but the basic thought here was, »OK, big shot. You're proposing to map a thorough reconstruction of the technological society in quest of a more favorable set of social, political and environmental patterns. That's excellent! But let's start with a more modest test of concept. For a short period of time – a week, a month or so – you and I will disconnect from a clearly crucial part of the overall techno-system and adapt our perspectives and activities to this condition and see what problems and possibilities come into view.« ([Winner 2020, 299](#))<sup>1</sup>

Langdon Winner here describes an experimental strategy which applies also to his Bernal lecture. Ostensibly it is dedicated to the ambitious concept of creating a more inclusive institutional setting for societal deliberation of technological novelty. Upon closer scrutiny it becomes apparent that public participation in deliberative processes is no end in itself and certainly no guarantee that any institution for technology assessment will actually provide a space or opportunity for learning. Prerequisite for such learning is the modest test or imaginative thought experiment that fuses two worlds in one image, two worlds that disrupt or distort each other, two worlds that cannot be resolved within a single image but, in a sense, explode it, thus opening space for critical reflection.

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<sup>1</sup> He continues: "In fact, over the years I have asked my students to do the epistemological luddism experiment in various university classes. I ask them to identify a technology upon which they depend in their everyday comings and goings and to disconnect from it for just one week. They should notice what happens, and write down their experiences so we can discuss their findings" ([Winner 2020, 299](#)).

Two worlds in one image, that is the coastal view of the whale and the reactor, those are the colliding worlds of the pedestrian and car-driver, that is a world with and a world without air-travel, that is a Long Island Parkway for privileged drivers and a Long Island Freeway for the masses, that is Trumpism and a political culture which encourages public deliberation of technology. With Walter Benjamin, we might refer to these as “dialectical images”—an experimental constellation and epistemic strategy which Benjamin discerned in Soviet film-editing, the theatre of Bertolt Brecht, or the collage aesthetics of Dadaism and Surrealism ([Benjamin 2002](#)). The dialectical image is a historical development arrested in time, it fuses fragments of reality and fiction in a way that does not yield a seamless view of things, but exposes instead the fissures at which even a firmly given technological world becomes questionable. As such, the image may be visual in origin but unfolds as a text in our imagination. The dialectical image arises when, at the moment of awakening, features of the outside enter and disrupt our dreams ([ibid.](#)). Taking up another one of Winner’s themes: Sleepwalking through our technological world, we need to be awakened by a luddist experience.<sup>2</sup>

“Until now, you’ve never really seen the world you live in.” This was the tagline to Godfrey Reggio’s ([1983](#)) film *Koyaanisqatsi* which credits Winner as a consultant. It shows us our modern world—or: our contemporary worlds—almost relentlessly, in striking beauty, sped up, with fast edits. It ends with a sustained sequence, a single film clip in exquisitely slow motion, almost at a standstill—with a dialectical image *par excellence*. We see the failed launch of a rocket which explodes and breaks apart soon after take-off, testimony to Promethean hubris. And as the fragments fall back to earth, one, in particular, stands out: It falls serenely, vessel of an undying flame, perfectly evoking the Promethean gift of fire, a gift from the heavens—fusing into one image beginning and end, or rather: the end and a beginning of technology. The search for beginnings, the luddite experience, a 20th century critical aesthetic and experimental attitude—Langdon Winner does not offer grand designs for social arrangements, but small occasions and modest tests to jolt us sleepwalkers from an unquestioned technological condition.

### Author Biography

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<sup>2</sup> With the metaphor of sleepwalking through a world of technological change a stylistic affinity between Winner and philosopher of technology Günther Anders comes into view. They appear to share an interest in dialectical images and Brechtian aesthetics. The work of Günther Anders, however, has not been available in English, for the most part: “Since the world comes to us only as an image, it is half-present and half-absent, in other words, phantom-like; and we too are like phantoms. When the world speaks to us, without our being able to speak to it, we are deprived of speech, and hence condemned to be unfree. . . .When the event is no longer attached to a specific location and can be reproduced virtually any number of times, it acquires the characteristics of an assembly-line product; and when we pay for having it delivered to our homes, it is a commodity” ([Anders 1956, 20](#)).

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