THE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE OF SENSE:
THE HISTORY OF SENSE AND TECHNOLOGY AFTER
JEAN-LUC NANCY (BY WAY OF GILBERT SIMONDON)[1]
Erich Hörl, translated by Arne De Boever

The 'question of technics' is nothing other than the question of sense pushed to its limits.
Jean-Luc Nancy[2]

I

Jean-Luc Nancy has philosophically analyzed the twentieth century as the era that brought about a fundamental transformation in the history of sense. In "The Forgetting of Philosophy", the text from 1986 in which he first put forward his proposal about the history of sense, Nancy focused on the classical formation of sense as the era of fixed, closed sense: sense in the sense of "meaning" [*bedeuteten Sinns*]. For Nancy, however, what is uncovered and exhausted in the twentieth century—a century of distraction, disintegration, and collapse; in short, the century of the end of meaning—is not sense as such, but merely a specific sense of sense. This specific sense of sense appeared to have emerged with the Western, occidental sense of sense, and to co-exist with the occidental as such. Up until the time of Nancy's writing, this sense of sense was understood as *the* sense of sense: that is to say, as the age-old figuration and interpretation of sense, the *doxa* or dogmatic image that conceives of sense as meaning—"*sense in the sense of signification* (which is the most ordinary meaning of the word 'sense' in our language and in philosophy)",[3] as Nancy puts it. Today, "this inevitably delivers us over to *another history* which opens up before us beyond meaning, a history whose sense can never consist in the return of 'meaning'".[4] Instead, it will involve being exposed to the withdrawal of meaning, and to this exposition as sense. For Nancy, that is the rupture in the history of sense that our contemporary condition represents. "The reality of this time", he writes, "lies entirely in the caesura that everywhere inscribes the open rift of meaning: in world war, extermination, exploitation, hunger, technics, art, literature, philosophy…"[5]

From such a perspective, it is not at all surprising that in the twentieth-century, the "care of sense" [*Sorge um den Sinn*] has become the key item on the philosophico-political agenda. It represents thinking's concern [*Sorge des Denkens*] not so much with the restitution or closure of meaning, but with the "questioning of the opening

and openness of sense and of another 'meaning' of sense".[6] Of course, there have been programmatic attempts in the second half of the century to turn away from meaning and understand it, for example, as a mere effect of the material aspects of communication.[7] The aim was to ban meaning from the humanities, and go from there to the foundation of new discursive politics as well as extensive archaeologies of the history of media, culture, and science. Today, these projects appear to be merely symptoms of a more foundational transformation in the historicity of sense. In the end, their attempts to be post-meaning cannot escape the history of sense.

From 1986 until today, Nancy's thought has been driven by a peculiar interest in the history of sense. His entire diagnostic and philosophical work on the "great rupture of sense"[8] is marked by a noteworthy fascination with "the open" and "the outside". It unfolds as a questioning and a working through of these notions. This fascination is not arbitrary; it indexes the contemporary moment. It is thus not surprising that Nancy's recent book on the deconstruction of Christianity would be informed by it as well. Programmatically entitled *Dis-Enclosure*, its horizon is "the essence of Christianity as opening", Christianity as "the absolute transcendental and the transcendental absolute of opening".[9] The book aims to investigate "all the forms of opening" and "exiting from self". Nancy is very clear about the unprecedented historicity of the powerful archeological question that allows for the entire problem of sense to appear: "Our time is thus one in which it is urgent that the West—or what remains of it—analyze its own becoming, turn back to examine its provenance and its trajectory, and question itself concerning the process of decomposition of sense to which it has given rise".[10]

By the time when this new description of the situation of sense comes about, i.e. by the time Nancy combines the question of sense with the question of the transcendental of the opening and the outside so as to add historical depth and nuance to the question of sense, it has already yielded a wealth of concepts and categories that can all be read as echoes, figurations, or derivations of the central and epochal concepts in the history of sense, namely: the open (*ouvert*) [*Offene*], the opening (of) [*Eröffung*], opening [*Öffnung*], openness (*ouverture*) [*Offenheit*], and the outside (*dehors, extérieur*). But what to make of the potential historical transcendental of this fascination with opening and exteriorization [*Entäusserungsfaszination*]? Indeed, what to make of the general excitement in the second half of the twentieth century—in particular after Heidegger—for "being outside oneself" and "being outside" that, in Nancy's thought and conceptual framework, becomes so powerfully prominent? What supports Nancy's most serious thought, this absolute transcendental of the opening? What drives it? Could there perhaps be something like an origin or evidential ground for this fascination?

In this article, I argue that the fascination with the open and with the outside that erupts in the twentieth century within a history of sense that had always resisted the exterior and the open, is related to the history of machines and objects. *It is because of dramatic changes in the culture of machines and objects that the enthusiasm for the open and the outside has risen to prominence in the history of sense.*[11] More precisely, it is the appearance of "open machines" and "open objects"—as discussed by the French mechanologist Gilbert Simondon, to whom I will turn in a moment—, that destroys the exhausted, traditional culture of sense with its related ontological registers and concomitant relations of the production of the economy of meaning. Following the emergence of new technical objects and transformed object relations, it gives rise to a new culture of sense that is post-meaning.

In his book on technical objects, Simondon has characterized these transformations from a closed world of meaning to an open world of sense—a world that cannot be closed because it is in principle a world of supplementarity and prostheticity—as a transformation of the status of the technical object from minor to major. In such a vision, the technical object no longer features as a meaningless tool, or as an instrument that is a mere means to achieve the ends of an already constituted and meaning-giving subject. It is no longer a separate, minoritized object situated at the abyss of non-sense; no longer the accursed share, or the impossible outside of meaning. This inferior object that was always considered a mere thing in the work of interiority and the theatre of intentionality now appears at the very heart of the culture of sense, opening up a new stage and a new environment of sense. Whereas sense used to come about through a meaning-making act, it now becomes a transcategorial notion, an assemblage emerging from the non-signifying collaborative practices of humans,

objects, and machines.

With the notion of the "open machine"—introduced in his work at the end of the 1950s—Simondon takes a first shot at describing the open coherence of sense in the metatechnical world. "The set of open machines", he notes, "thinks of the human being as the permanent organizer and living interpreter of machines in their relation to each other".[12] In a short text that was discovered after his death, and that was probably written around 1970, Simondon appears to intuit the coming of a network-like culture of sense that would operate prior to all meaning. Such a culture emerges from the regime of new objects. In "Technical Mentality", he writes:

> But here's what's essential: in order for an object to allow for the development of the technical mentality and to be chosen by it, the object itself needs to be of a reticular structure. If one imagines an object that, instead of being closed, offers parts that are conceived as being as close to indestructible as possible, and others by contrast in which there would be concentrated a very high capacity to adjust to each usage, or wear, or possible breakage in case of shock, of malfunctioning, then one obtains an *open* object that can be completed, improved, maintained in the state of perpetual actuality.[13]

Simondon develops his terminological choice further by saying that the open object "is necessarily a *network reality* [*realité de réseau*] before being a separate object [*objet séparé*]".[14] In contrast to the "closed object" (*objet fermé*) of industrial production, and entirely in line with what the cybernetic promises of the 1960s and 1970s called a "postindustrial technological object",[15] it needs to be understood as a "unity of two layers of reality":

> a layer that is as stable and permanent as possible, which adheres to the user and is made to last; and a layer that can be perpetually replaced, changed, renewed, because it is made up of elements that are all similar, impersonal, mass-produced by industry and distributed by all the networks of exchange. It is through participation in this network that the technical object always remains contemporary to its use, always new. … The object is not only structure but also regime.[16]

At the end of his text, Simondon presents "openness"[17] (*l'ouverture*) as the "sign of the perfection of the technical mentality"[18]: openness is what determines the technical mentality's cognitive schemas, its modes of affectivity and its codes of operation. Finally, the "technical reality" itself appears to "[lend] itself remarkably well to being continued, completed, perfected, extended".[19] In other words: technical reality is in principle a reality of the supplement, of the openness of the prosthesis. Thus, open technical objects as they are described by Simondon (as objects that bear both a logic of supplementarity and of the transcategorial) reveal themselves to be the transcendental of an epochal fascination with openness—a fascination that runs parallel to the massive distribution of technical objects in the culture of sense and in philosophical description. It may very well be that the rise of the logic of the supplement in philosophy from the 1960s until today, as well as the simultaneous return and radicalization of a prosthetic thinking, is merely a reaction to the from now on undeniable primacy of technical supplementarity. What is certain is that the transformation of sense that Nancy describes by means of a philosophical politics of the open and the outside, emerges in this context as a *technological* transformation of sense.[20]

Jacques Derrida has come very close to uncovering this inscription of the technological caesura in Nancy's thought. In *On Touching*, he highlights Nancy's lexicon of ex-, which marks the specificity and exactitude of Nancy's new description of the situation of sense.

> We recall that the concept of the "ex-scribed" (a word that Nancy formed or coined) finds itself increasingly inscribed at the heart and inmost core of this writing that thinks: there remains a need to wonder about the body, the force, the compulsive drive that sets this syllable *ex* in motion and keeps it alive. Of course, we shall have to configure this syllable in accordance with a whole thinking of ex-pulsion, ex-pression, outward ex-cretion—this thinking itself conditions the "sense of the world"—and with the thinking of "excess" that "inexorably" pushes outwardly, until it is *throwing* or

> *jettisoning* (ejecting, dejecting, objecting, abjecting) the ego's subjectivity into exteriority. […] Here Nancy underscores the trait, or more exactly the traced outline or *tracings*, of their exteriorization of exteriority.[21]

The list could be extended with other outside-oriented concepts that together underline the consistency of Nancy's thought of the outside: "ex-action", "ex-traction", "exemption", "expansion", "extension", "partes extra partes", "ex nihilo". And one shouldn't forget, of course, "existence" and "exposition"—the latter is arguably Nancy's motto, as it refers to a placing or putting outside, a being placed or put outside, an ex-position that designates the key moment of our ontological constitution. On one occasion, Nancy has even referred to "the ex- as proper".

In spite of Derrida's scattered but highly significant suggestions about the important role that the question of technics plays in Nancy's conceptual politics and discourse, he never quite arrives at thinking technics as such as the power of exteriorization and of being outside oneself—even though Nancy's use of the lexicon of the ex- turns out to be the imperative of our time, which is technological. This is all the more surprising given that Derrida himself, following André Leroi-Gourhan (the great anthropologist of artefactual extensions) and in response to the epidemical spreading of the thought of exteriority caused by cyberneticization in the 1950s and 60s, put forth technics as the constitutive outside of Western sense-making. He suggested that since Plato, philosophical discourse—with its enthusiasm for figures of the inside, of the proper [*das Eigene*] and the authentic [*das Eigentliche*], of presence-to-self [*Bei-sich-sein*], being-at-home [*Zu-Hause sein*] and the autochthonous—had constituted itself against technics. Indeed, Derrida's own grammatological proposition drew out the essential technicity and exteriority of sense. And yet, Derrida concludes that there is a drive at work in Nancy's thought: the drive to repeat the first ex-pulsion or ex-odus of birth. It is thus the original exteriorization of birth that (according to Derrida) is repeated in Nancy's work. Birth is what appears through the compulsive repetition of the movement of exteriorization. It shapes the entire consistency of Nancy's thought, through the lexicon and the logic of the ex-.

What Derrida doesn't see is that Nancy's compulsion to build everything on ex-, to use almost exclusively concepts with ex-, and thus to construe an entire ontology of the ex- (an *exontology*, so to speak), belongs to our historical moment *and is due to the technological transformation of sense*. It is this shift that *exteriorizes* in the most radical way, and that by doing so turns exteriorization itself into *the* question of our epoch. In the case of Nancy, we are perhaps not so much dealing with a thinker of expulsion (as Derrida would have it), but with a thinker of exposition. Unless, of course, one understands technical exteriorization as a compulsive, organological thing, as a matter of the drive.

Nancy's thought of the ex- repeats over and over again this moment in the history of sense. This is because in the becoming-technological of our life-form and in the ubiquitous expansion of technological objects, the outside and the opening become prominent, and problematic. Ex-isting is ex-posed as never before. The original exposition of being-outside-oneself and being-outside can no longer be denied. Our entire becoming enters into the light of this major exposition. Indeed, it is itself exposed by this original exposition and by the exposition of technology.

Nancy himself has done more than merely mention technics as a central player in the transformation of the history of sense. For a moment, he even appears to have considered the contemporary situation in light of the technological condition—and to understand and describe the contemporary condition as such.[22] In a text from 1991 that a few years later is added as a supplement to his book *Being Singular Plural*, Nancy finds in "eco-technics" (*écotechnie*) what may be the "last figure without figure"[23] of the history of sense as such. The general "becoming-technology of the world"[24] that points towards ecotechnics as its *impossible* and (within the limits of classical concepts) *unthinkable* historical horizon—towards a pure *technè* that would be liberated from all "economy" and "sovereignty"—lets "the question of technics" appear for the first time in all its rigor. This question only begins, Nancy suggests,

at that moment when technics is taken into account as the finish of Being [*finition de l'être*], and not as a means to some other end (science, mastery, happiness, and so on). It only begins when technology is taken into account as an end in itself, *sui generis*. Technology is the "purposiveness without purpose" (= without an extrinsic end) of a genre that perhaps remains to be discovered. It is to such a discovery that we expose our history, as a becoming-technological of Being or its finish.[25]

Ecotechnics is Nancy's name for the event [*Ereignis*] of the technological transformation of sense—for the shift in the history of sense that is liberated by technics (and liberates technics), and that ends an entire regime of thinking about sense that didn't simply displace technics but founded itself on its denial. This event marks the technological liberation of sense, and its importance remains in itself to be determined: "One day, we will appreciate the newness … that's been introduced into our history. Nothing less than the entrance of the event of ecotechnics, whose sense we must invent—a sense that corresponds to neither the concept nor to the unmediated".[26] Some ten years later, Nancy will say: "Our world is the world of the 'technical', a world whose cosmos, nature, gods, entire system is, in its inner joints, exposed as 'technical': the world of the *ecotechnical*".[27] It's in between these two quotes that ecotechnical sense in Nancy's work has been invented.

II

There is something like an insistence of technics in Nancy's text. And it insists strongly. The historico-systematic site where the problem of technics is situated and where questions like the effects of technological becoming arise and can be understood, remains insufficiently explained. The closer determination of this insistence is not only philologically interesting for our understanding of Nancy's work—it also has a much broader, diagnostic importance.

That is how the insistence of technics first appears in *Finite Thinking*, where Nancy attempts to explain the new situation in the history of sense in the context of a thinking of finitude. The first step in the project is to understand existing as a being-without: without essence, without sense, without ground, without aim, without limit, without model, without rule, et cetera. It's precisely this "without"—an emblem of radical finitude that's disturbingly close to ontologies and anthropologies of lack, which I discuss in the next section—that is supposed to be the opening as sense. Fully in line with the historical situation, which is determined by the rise of the technological condition, this originary opening of the "without" marks first of all the ontological site of technics. Technics is thought as the supplement and supplementation of nothing. Thus, it becomes a crucial operation of existence and the only possible correlate to a sense that's in principle finite:

> Technics "as such" is nothing other than the "technique" of compensating for the nonimmanence of existence in the given. Its operation is the existing of that which *is* not pure immanence. It begins with the first tool, for it would not be as easy as one imagines to demarcate it clearly and distinctly from all animal, if not indeed vegetable, "techniques". The "nexus" of technics is existing itself. Insofar as its being *is* not, but is the opening of its finitude, existing is technical through and through. Existence is not itself the technics of anything else, nor is technics "as such" the technics of existence: it is the "essential" technicity of existence insofar as *technics* has no essence and stands in for being.[28]

Faced with the technological condition and the shift in the history of sense it implies, Nancy goes on to take position against a certain anti-technical affect of philosophical discourse, in particular against the largely technophobic phenomenology of sense, and also against Heidegger. To "dwell" in technics means "to dwell in the finitude of sense".[29] The dominance of technics, or whatever one wants to call Being in technological relations, "disassembles and disorients without fail the never-ending feedback of a single sense".[30] What remains to be understood, if the sense of Being is to be technical from now on, is what is meant, exactly, by technical sense. Indeed, what does technical sense consist of, what is its technicity?

Nancy's peculiar existentialism is one of technical existence throughout. It appears in this context as both a thought *and* a symptom of technicization. The question of technics, which from here on cuts across Nancy's text, becomes the key problem of an ontology and an aesthetic that understands existence as exposition, and first and foremost as technical exposition. In *The Muses*, for example, Nancy evaluates the new aesthetic sense that presents itself in a world that is resolutely technical. If technics appears there mostly as "being-outside-itself" and as "the exposition to a lack of ground and foundation", as "obsolescence of the origin and the end" and as "withdrawal of the ground", it is also technics that historically paves the way for the appearance of "art-technique".[31] In the end, technics demands a new treatment of the relations between art and technics that would mark the essential technicity of art, and mark art as technics. When, as we can then conclude, "the arts are first of all *technical*", this is because in the arts the "ex-position of existence" takes place in the most radical way.[32] "It might be that art, the arts", Nancy writes, "is nothing other than the second-degree exposition of technique itself, or perhaps the technique *of the ground* itself".[33] Art thus becomes the medium of "exteriority and exposition of a being-in-the-world, exteriority and exposition that are formally grasped, isolated, and presented as such".[34] Art "does not deal with the 'world' understood as simple exteriority, milieu, or nature. It deals with being-in-the-world in its very springing-forth".[35] Art "exposes" that the world is not a given, and also that the world does not simply appear. Art is nothing other than "the *tekhnè* of existence".[36]

In the context of such an onto-aesthetics of exposition, drawing and design take up a crucial, historico-systematic place. In a short text on cave painting, Nancy thematizes the "opening, the spacing by which man is brought into the world, and by which the world itself is a world" through drawing.[37] Before the separation of art and technics, from the architechnical gesture of the groundless design and the original exteriorisation in the form of drawing, "the impossible outside of the world [looms up] … in its very impossibility".[38] Drawing is presented as the archidesign, the archiprojection of world, as its original appearance; it even reveals the originary technicity of appearing. Drawing is the architrace and the archipath of world-building as such. The drawing on the wall, Nancy writes, interrupts "the continuity of being",[39] draws traces in being, cuts it up and encodes it. It is the first spatialization of sense, one that always already differentiates every immediacy, the archiexcription. This interruption of the continuum of being that Nancy situates at the beginning of history and as the arrival in history and the world of sense introduces the understanding of technicity of sense that can be found in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and also in the writings of Bernard Stiegler: a technicity that is considered in the context of the technico-medial situation of the present, where the signature of machinism and the technical—now becoming technological in the strong sense of the word—is understood as the encoding of flows of being and as the grammatization of the flow.[40] Nancy encounters at the very beginning of world-building this generalized machinism and technicity that characterize particularly well contemporary world-building under technological conditions.

The epochal move that becomes visible in Nancy's onto-aesthetic of exposition and that informs its entire politics is clearly described in *Sense of the World* as a technological shift in the history of sense. When in this case the question and the problem of inoperativity (*désoeuvrement*) is put forward as the key figure of the technological age, one can see appear in between the lines of the text a double sense of technics—one restricted, and the other general—that regulates the historicity of sense in general. Whereas the restricted sense of technics associated with a world of meaning that's been left behind—the technics of production and of work, and the related dogmatic image of technics as instrument—, the general sense of technics is the one that's referred to by the word "ecotechnics". It opens up the "closures of signification" to "the coming of (necessarily unprecedented) sense".[41] Technics destroys the age-old regime of restricted sense and the concomitant dogmatic image of technics and draws out the sense of technics as such from this order of sense called "meaning". In other words: it's technics and the sense of technics that are unworked first in this technical unworking of sense. The double sense of technics schematizes the question of sense. Its recent appearance—the opening and reopening of sense, its new description—takes place exactly in the passage from the first to the second technics (to recall Benjamin), in other words in the passage from technics to technology. The exteriority and exteriorization of "the necessary exteriority of a being-toward",[42] as our situation of sense can be described, appears to be first of all the exteriority and exteriorization of technics as such: of a pure, liberated *technè*, whose operations

quite simply no longer support the *ancien régime* of meaning, production, and work. If we are indeed living through the completion and ending of a specific formation of sense as well as the opening of another order of sense—more specifically, the rise of sense before all sense, the appearance of the world as such—, then this central senso-cultural and finally ontological transformation fundamentally and directly concerns the power of technological inoperativity. After Nancy, world would from now on always and resolutely be *technical world*. Before and without technics, there wouldn't even be world-building. The appearance of world would always already be technical appearance. World wouldn't simply appear, but essentially have been brought into appearance, with appearance itself being resolutely technical (from Husserl to Jan Patočka, appearance has been understood as an anti-technical phenomenon).

Consider the following passage, which clarifies that the sense of the world under what I call the technological condition—rather than technological conditions—is one of technical inoperativity, in other words a question of inoperative technicity:

> The world of technics, that is, the "technicized" world, is not nature delivered up to rape and pillage … It is the world becoming *world*, that is, neither "nature" nor "universe" nor "earth". "Nature", "universe", and "earth" (and "sky") are names of given sets of totalities, names of significations that have been surveyed, tamed, and appropriated. *World* is the name of a gathering [TN: *assemblage*] or being-together that arises from an *art*—a *teknè*—and the sense of which is identical with the very exercise of this *art* … It is thus that a world is always a "creation": a *teknè* with neither principle nor end nor material other than itself. And in this way, a world is always sense outside of knowledge, outside of the work, outside the habitation of presence, *but* the *désoeuvrement* of sense, sense in *excess* of all sense—one would like to say the *artificial intelligence of sense*, sense seized and sense by *art* and as *art*, that is, *teknè*, that which spaces out and defers *phusis* all the way to the confines of the world.[43]

The new image of world as "assemblage", "being-together" and "creation" in the strong sense of the word—*that's* the new conception of sense, under the technological condition of open machines and open objects. That's what Nancy describes. As will be clear, the transformation of sense poses an extremely difficult task to thinking, to the age-old philosophical politics and languages, indeed for the theoretical attitude as such. Once technics has become technology, it has to be thought "in an entirely different way", "as in-finitization of 'production' and the 'work' or", Nancy goes on to say, "as inoperation [désoeuvrement]".[44] The inoperativity as such—which is an at first sight poetological figure that represents one of the central watchwords of our new position in the history of sense and one that so decisively shaped post-Heideggerian thought in Blanchot, Nancy, and Derrida—appears as an effect of technology. Because in the same way that technics "disconcerts and displaces, endlessly, the completion of a 'work', in such a way that technicization could, in all rigor, be called 'un-worked', or without work [*dés-oeuvrée*]".[45] The thought of inoperativity is a central figure of sense in the technological era.[46]

It is, finally, in *The Creation of the World* that technics takes up the strongest position in the history of sense. In this book, Nancy now repeats what he has presented throughout his work as the crisis and end of meaning due to a shift in the formation of sense as the beginning of the history of sense. Openness and opening, marked by Simondon as signs of a technical mentality, appear as signatures of a coming-to-world that is from now on technical as such. This is because technics opens up the world of sense as such, and represents the original and originary transformation of sense in the history of humanity: the transformation that first enabled us to enter into sense, that in this way is always already a *techno-logical* transformation of sense, and that marks as well (and before everything else) the condition of philosophy. The "unprecedented opening of sense" that took place with the rejection, the withdrawal, and the subtraction of the gods and with the birth of philosophy goes back, Nancy argues, to the unprecedented power of subtraction, which is one of technics' qualities:

> This force [of subtraction, EH], in all respects, is that of *technology*. Behind what will become, in a very precise sense that we will need to analyze, *techno-logy*, there is a whole range of techniques, like that of iron followed by that of commerce (including both accounting and shipping), writing, and urban planning. With this moment in the history of technologies, there is something like a threshold that is crossed. There is a movement that is contemporary to human beings—technology as human, quite simply *Homo faber*, producer and conceiver of *Homo sapiens*, technician of itself—a movement that from the outset proceeds by subtraction or by emptying out.[47]

The "inaugural *flight* [échappée] of the West" with its four conditions—as Badiou calls them: politics, science, love, and art—, in other words the entrance into Western "ab-sense"[48], the original "flight of sense" that the metaphysics of meaning has always only impeded, hindered, and hidden, are clearly related here to the "human denaturation" by technics (its essential condition).[49] This originary technicity of sense is the point of Nancy's narrative of the history of sense: it was covered up by the metaphysical work on sense as meaning, which introduced the contradiction between sense and technics as the guiding difference of all sense culture. Technics appears in Nancy as the denaturizing event that liberates sense as such. Without technics there wouldn't even be an entrance in the order of sense, let alone a sense of being. Nancy therefore refers to technics as "architechnics"[50] (*architechnique*), as the "opening of an empty space where the infinite 'creation' of the world is (re)played".[51] "The event of technics", he concludes, "would thus have meaning in a sense that would be neither directional nor significant".[52] Technics opens up what makes possible existence as pure exposition: without principle, without determination, without ends, it tears up the space in which "existence exposes itself, lacking sense, making this lack its very truth".[53]

III

Hans Blumenberg already emphasized that Christianity and technics are intimately connected through the question of creation. They represent the two heavy-weights of the Western history of sense. Against the Platonic rejection of an absolute thought of creation (i.e. a creation without a pre-existing example)—a rejection that can be connected with a remarkable anti-technical attitude and a denial of the technical condition—, Christianity has (according to Blumenberg) begun to radically reconceive the idea of creation. Thereby, it changed the creative human being's "understanding of being", something that is unavoidable for the ontological understanding of the "coming technical world".[54] In this context, Nancy's deconstruction of Christianity merely represents the most extreme consequence of his work on the technological shift of sense. It operates precisely in this fold of Western sense, namely the problem of creation. The reformulation of the question of creation from the spirit of exteriorization—as Nancy's project could be characterized—appears as a major stage of the new thinking of sense. It is located at the level of the technological situation, and indispensable for its understanding. In light of a new understanding of the question of creation, one can see the outlines of a new ontology, an *ontotechnology*, emerge that—after the long dominance of onto-theology—corresponds to the contemporary processes of world- and sense-formation.

Ontotechnological thinking is concentrated on the figure and the problem of inoperativity. From this perspective, creation no longer presents a work, but loses all "operativity". There is no longer a production that takes place. What happens, instead, is nothing other than an "exposition", a "bringing outside itself" (*la mise-hors-de-soi*): pure, that is purely technical, exteriorization and exposition. The question of creation thus explicitly becomes the "crossroads" of a "deconstruction of monotheism"—even its "most active resource".[55] The stake and horizon of the question of creation—and for an ontotechological program like the one that can be found in the more recent texts by Nancy, this is of course crucial—is the "*creatio ex nihilo*", precisely "inasmuch as it is clearly distinguished from any form of production or fabrication".[56] *Ex nihilo* means "undoing any premise, including that of nothing. That means: to empty *nothing* (cf. *rem*, the thing) of any quality. That is creation".[57] In the transition to another understanding of creation (from a productive, instrumental and work-related creation to an inoperative, kenologic—or, one could also say, kenogrammatic—conception of creation as pure opening and emptying out that Nancy finds in Christianity), one can see once more but more clearly than ever before

how the technical transformation of sense also operates under the title of a deconstruction of Christianity. In the transformation from technics to technology, one loses the restricted, instrumental, tool-like and work-related sense of technics—a sense of technics that has also characterized and formed, one could say, the dogmatic conception of creation. The exodus from the age-old sense of creation as fixated on work and production that is also drawn out and highlighted in the new thinking of creation as Nancy sketches it out is initially implemented by complex human-machine couplings that are unthinkable within the registers of instrumental reason. Through close couplings of humans, machines, and technological objects that shape a new sense of activity, a traditional sense of creation is deconstructed, giving way to a creation without work or creator, in other words: a creative becoming, in which the concept of creation as such is lost. The technological transformation of sense enables us to enter into a world of compositions and assemblages and agencies on the far side of work, production and fabrication. It allows for inoperativity to become the fundamental event of our being, born from the technical operation that can never again be closed or completed. From there, a new ontological situation begins to sketch itself out that Nancy ultimately characterizes as a differed sense of creation: "From creation as the result of an accomplished divine action, one shifts to creation as, in sum, an unceasing activity and actuality of this world in its singularity (singularity of singularities). One sense of the word (creation as a state of affairs of the given world) yields to another (creation as bringing forth [*mise au monde*] a world—an active sense that is nothing else than the first sense of *creatio*).[58]

The ontological "model of causal production according to given ends"[59] that is found in the traditional conception of creation is left behind. Under the technological condition and following the rise of the "technical mentality" that Simondon discussed, it disappears. The technological becoming of technics itself replaces this in the end mechanical sense of creation, which ultimately masks a restricted sense of the technical. Nancy emphasizes that instead, the "non-model or model-less-ness of being without given", "its immeasurable real", appears.[60] This subtraction of everything given, this groundlessness, this aimlessness and transition into the creative world of transitive being is the central characteristic of the major caesura of sense that is conditioned by technological displacements, and that Nancy describes.

The insight that a wholly new ontological description has become necessary due to technicization—one that exposes the question of creation as one of the great, returning questions of contemporary world- and sense-building—is unquestionably a fundamental concern in Nancy's work. In this context, it is precisely the question of the *creatio ex nihilo* that brings Nancy's thought to a highly precarious point of transgression: namely the point where the new thought of a creative becoming breaks with the fascination with lack.

Lack is without a doubt one of the major terms of negativity that has virulently animated the traditional culture of sense—of meaning and representation. It has regulated object relations, in particular relations to technical objects; but it has also presented subjects with a constant lack of sense and being, with a principled understanding of being and one's relation to the world under the sign of lack, and as governed by the regime of production and work. Lack is probably the most important term of a minoritizing formation of technical objects and technicity as such. For a long time, the West determined the place and stake of the technico-medial question along these lines. However, the transition from technics to technology and the related transformation in the culture of sense that gave way to a world of technical becoming, demands the bracketing of such an ontology of lack—of the kind of ontology that has dominated philosophy since Plato's *Protagoras*, and that was particularly prominent at the end of the nineteenth century, and going into the twentieth—from Ernst Kapp and Henri Bergson via Sigmund Freud, Arnold Gehlen, Günther Anders, Teilhard de Chardin all the way to Marshall McLuhan, André Leroi-Gourhan, and Gotthard Günther. In all of their works, one finds a negative anthropological and ontological *technodicea* that is again and again presented as the deciphering and explanation of technical being. It casts the human being as a being of lack, and characterizes all artefactuality as prosthetic compensation, a question of a supplementary organology.[61] Today, we are—due to technology and technological objects that inaugurate new object relations—in a world of radicalized technological becoming. It may even be that we have arrived at the outer limit of a history of lack: at the point where lack no longer lacks anything—no lack of essence, aim, determination, ground. Where lack is becoming the lack of nothing, and

where the great senso-cultural figure and supreme sign of negativity (namely lack) finally comes home to its disappearance and provokes only failed readings. It may be that we have arrived at a point where being and lack are no longer combined, where this evidence that was constitutive for the West loses its force of persuasion, where the fascination with lack begins to lose its logic of abandonment and we can begin to think on the far side of lack? Isn't this the decisive exigency of our new situation in the history of sense, the exigency that represents the consequence of a creationist technology that surpasses lack, in other words: that leaves behind the entire senso-cultural regime of lack including its central notions of essence, aim, determination, ground, that have been lacking for as long as we can remember? Isn't this what is at stake today in our self-descriptions?[62] And shouldn't we also liberate from this regime our descriptions of media and technology, as appears to happen as well in Nancy's supplementary and prosthetic conception of technics?

Nancy's thought unfolds at the extreme limit of the Western fascination with lack. Key sentences of his thought of exposition such as "To exist means: to lack sense" or "To lack sense is, properly speaking, to lack *nothing*",[63] appear to strangely waver in this double, decisive question of lack: in the history of sense, and in ontology. Nancy does not appear to be willing, in any case, to go all the way: this is most clear in his relation to Deleuze, whose attempt to destroy the ontology of lack, and step outside of the history of lack, in other words to think completely outside of lack and be everything but a priest of castration, irritates Nancy. Instead of the "simple plenitude of chaos"[64] that he associates with Deleuze, Nancy privileges the facilitations [*Bahnungen*] that "lack-of-being-in-itself" carves out.[65] And a little further on he writes: "I for my part cannot understand how one can escape this hollowing out (death, time, genesis and end)".[66] Does Nancy's thought of finitude, one can ask, still belong to the ontology of lack, even if it is without a doubt also an attempt to overcome it? Is it perhaps the question of lack that in the final instance ties his thought to Christianity. Through concepts like failing, guilt, and sin, Christianity circulates central notions of lack; could it be that by association, Nancy's reading is in the grip of a fascination with lack? Could it be in the end—and one barely dares to consider it—that the figures of original and necessary supplementarity and prostheticity—these figures of the outside, of the opening of openness, as we find them not only in Nancy but also in Derrida and especially in Bernard Stiegler's thought of the default (*défaut*) and that undoubtedly connect these three deconstructions of the techno-medial to another—are perhaps still the figures and inscriptions of an ontology of lack, even if they operate at its outermost limit? Is the thinking of the outside, of the withdrawal and of the open, the theorem of exteriorization that deconstruction radicalized, in a certain sense a final expression or echo of this powerful ontology, one that needs to be destroyed?

This brings us to the breaking point of our philosophico-political history of sense. The quasi-transcendentalism and the thought of immanence that are perhaps nowhere as distinct as in our attitude towards lack, embody two senso-political strategies that today, under the conditions of the technological transformation of sense, compete with one another as explanations of the situation and the determination of a new sense of sense. The question is whether the quasi-transcendental thought of opening, of the opening up and dis-enclosing—this entire fascination with opening that has been unfolding for half a century and is still unfolding today as a thought of exteriority and supplementarity—is not a figure—even if it's a complicated one—of the ontology of lack.

And so we should ask ourselves: doesn't the thought as well as the time of technology demand that we bid this figure goodbye?

POSTSCRIPT 2012

Since the original publication of this article, Nancy has developed new descriptions of the historical condition of sense. There is no doubt that Nancy's thought has focused on human agents and agency. This focus has been characteristic of his thought of being-with and has revealed the limits of his thought of technics and his related reflections on the history of sense: Nancy's privileging of human agency quite simply goes against the explosion of environmental agency of multiple actors and forces that is characteristic of the technological condition. In his text "On Struction", Nancy has let go of this fixation in favor of a cosmopolitical—and cosmotechnological,

even—thought. Finally caught up with the technological condition, or in any case in response to it and after it, Nancy has begun to conceive of the pure technicity of being-with and of the new historical condition of sense as a radically distributed, condition. "What is given to us", he writes, "only consists in the juxtaposition and simultaneity of a copresence in which the *co-* does not bear any other particular value than that of contiguity or juxtaposition within the limits according to which the universe itself is given."[67] It is precisely in this exposition of struction, in the sense of *struo*—"to amass" [*amasser*], "to heap" [*entasser*]—that, according to Nancy, technics has to be considered.[68] The point is that in the technological age, "a displacement is revealed, a curve in the phenomenological apparatus", in whose traits one can now more and more recognize mere "coappearance" [*com-parution*] as "sense of the world".[69] It is no longer, as before, about an existential and anthropocentric "co" but about a merely categorical one. It is precisely this exposure that marks, according Nancy, the senso-historical situation of struction, in which technics—having becoming technological in the strong sense of the word—(re)situates us and because of which "it is incumbent on us to reinvent everything beginning with 'sense'".[70]

Nancy has developed this very reading of technics further and he has emphasized "the catastrophe of sense"[71] with which we are confronted. As part of this project, he has in an exhaustive diagnostic intervention understood the becoming-catastrophic of sense—sense's turning, its being-taken-up-in-an-overcoming, its collapsing-onto-itself—as the core of the great senso-historical transformation of the present through technology. Basing himself on general "interconnectedness" [*interconnexion*], he ultimately considers the main characteristic of the contemporary condition to be a general ecology of sense.[72] As Nancy sees it, there is "a kind of generalized environmentality, a generalized environmentalism, according to which everything surrounds, enfolds, and unfolds within the measure of the interconnectedness of what has been characterized as a *technological unconscious*—with 'unconscious' meaning first and foremost the interconnected weaving together of everything that is".[73]

If Nancy had already (and repeatedly) brought the notion of "ecotechnics" into play in order to describe the general becoming-technical of the world and remain in close proximity to the new ecological paradigm, general ecology now appears in his writing as a key destination of our highly technicized culture of sense. With this, Nancy is tapping into a politico-conceptual vein of our epochal movement. Since many years, it is around the concept of ecology that a new semantic for the description of our cyberneticized form of life, and our being in intelligent environments and multiscalar networks, has begun to crystallize. Of course, the notion of ecology itself has been taken up in a shift, a reformulation, and transvaluation even. There is talk of libidinal ecologies, of ecologies of attention, sensation, perception, cognition, subjectivity, belonging, of media ecologies et cetera. We are currently going through a fundamental ecologization of the image of thought and the image of being. The concept of a general ecology, as I am developing it, has a double meaning: on the one hand, it refers to a fundamental change in experience, and a fundamentally new position, that characterizes being and thinking under the conditions of a cyberneticized "state of nature"; on the other, it refers to the new description that this transformation demands, and the new philosophico-conceptual politics that it entails.[74]

ERICH HÖRL is Professor of Media and Philosophy at Ruhr-Universität Bochum.

NOTES

1. TN: This text originally appeared as "Die künstliche Intelligenz des Sinns: Sinngeschichte und Technologie im Anschluss and Jean-Luc Nancy". *Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturforschung* 2 (2010), 129-147. The text is published here in English translation with an adjusted title and a new postscript from 2012. Hörl's argument revolves around Nancy's use of the word "sense" (Hörl uses the German "Sinn"), meaning both "meaning" (signification) and "sense". Whenever "Sinn" or "sense" are clearly used in the sense of "meaning" (signification), I have translated them as such, i.e. as either "meaning" or "signification". Whenever "Sinn" or "sense" are used in another sense (and often in explicit distinction to "meaning"), I have translated them as "sense". Hörl's other focus is on Nancy's use of the word "technique" ("Technik", in the German), which I have translated as "technics" to distinguish it from Nancy's use of "technologie" ("Technologie", in the German; translated as technology). In many cases, these choices have necessitated significant modifications of already published translations of Nancy's works—so significant, in fact, that I have my doubts about whether Hörl's argument could be understood on the basis of a reading of the English translations of Nancy's work alone—, but I have made every effort to locate all of the already translated passages in the endnotes so the reader can look them up for her/himself and see what other choices Nancy's translators have made. I would like to thank Erich Hörl for his invaluable assistance with this translation.

2. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*. Trans. Jeffrey S. Librett. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, 40, translation modified.

3. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*. Trans. François Raffoul and Gregory Recco. Atlantic Highlands: Humanity Books, 1997, 22, translation modified.

4. Nancy, *Gravity*, 44, translation modified.

5. Nancy, *Gravity*, 44, translation modified.

6. Nancy, *Gravity*, 24, translation modified.

7. This last aspect is characteristic of the radical antihermeneutic project of Friedrich Kittler and the first phase of so called "German Media Theory" it inaugurated. See: Berhard Siegert. "Cultural Techniques: The End of Intellectual Postwar Era in German Media Theory" *Theory, Culture & Society* 21 (2013): 1-18, in particular 1-6.

8. Jean-Luc Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*. Ed. Simon Sparks. Trans. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003. 39.

9. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*. Trans. Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant, Michael Smith. Fordham: Fordham University Press, 2008, 145.

10. Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 30.

11. In his study of the open, Giorgio Agamben does not consider this historical dimension of this question, which is nevertheless of crucial importance for the functioning of what he calls the "anthropological machine". Ultimately, there is a clear reconfiguration of the relations between the human and the non-human through machine- and object-historical ruptures, as well as through cybernetics. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*. Trans. Kevin Attell. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004.

12. Gilbert Simondon, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*. Paris: Aubier, 1989, 11. [My translation, ADB]

13. Gilbert Simondon, "Technical Mentality" Trans. Arne De Boever. *Parrhesia* 7: 24, translation modified.

14. Simondon, "Technical", 23.

15. Simondon, "Technical", 23-24.

16. Simondon, "Technical", 24, translation modified.

17. TN: The translation of "Technical Mentality" has "opening", but I put openness here to be consistent with the terminology used above. At the end of this article, Hörl mentions both "openness" and "opening" as features that Simondon identifies with technical reality, so the difference may not be significant.

18. Simondon, "Technical", 24.

19. Simondon, "Technical", 24.

20. I have developed the concept of a "technological transformation of sense" after Husserl in: Erich Hörl. "Du déplacement technologique du sens" *Rue Descartes* 64 (2009): 50-65.

21. Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*. Trans. Christine Irizarry. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005.

26-27.

22. I have developed the concept of "the technological condition" in Erich Hörl, ed. *Die technologische Bedingung. Beiträge zur Beschreibung der technischen Welt*. Berlin, Suhrkamp: 2011. 7-53. An English translation is in preparation.

23. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*. Trans. Robert Richardson and Anne O'Byrne. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, 134.

24. Nancy, *Being*, 117.

25. Nancy, *Being*, 119, translation modified.

26. Jean-Luc Nancy, "Der Preis des Friedens: Krieg, Recht, Souveränität—technè" *Lettre International* 34 (1991), 44. [TN: this quote is not in the English translation of this text, which was published in Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*. It can only be found in the second postscript to the German edition of this text.]

27. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*. Trans. Richard Rand. New York: Fordham, 2008, 89.

28. Nancy, *Finite*, 24, translation modified.

29. Nancy, *Finite*, 25, translation modified.

30. Nancy, *Finite*, 26, translation modified.

31. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996. 26. Donald A. Landes also comments on Nancy's new treatment of the relation between art and technics in: "*Le Toucher* and *Corpus* of Tact: Exploring Touch and Technicity with Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy." *L'Esprit Créateur* 47 (2007): 80-92.

32. Nancy, *Muses*, 24.

33. Nancy, *Muses*, 26.

34. Nancy, *Muses*, 18.

35. Nancy, *Muses*, 18.

36. Nancy, *Muses*, 38.

37. Nancy, *Muses*, 70.

38. Nancy, *Muses*, 77. See also Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le plaisir au dessin*. Paris: Galilée, 2009.

39. Nancy, *Muses*, 74.

40. For the relation between grammatization and exteriorization, see Bernard Stiegler, *Pour une nouvelle critique de l'économie politique*. Paris: Galilée, 2009, 43-63.

41. Nancy, *Sense*, 102.

42. Nancy, *Sense*, 11.

43. Nancy, *Sense*, 41, translation modified.

44. Nancy, *Sense*, 98.

45. Nancy, *Sense*, 26.

46. I have written extensively about this elsewhere: Erich Hörl. "Das Arbeitslose der Technik. Zur Destruktion der Ergontologie und Ausarbeitung einer neuen technologischen Sinnkultur bei Heidegger und Simondon". In: Claus Leggewie, Ursula Renner-Henke, Peter Risthaus, eds. *Prometheische Kultur. Wo kommen unsere Energien her?* Fink, München, 2013, 111-136.

47. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World or Globalization*. Trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007, 85.

48. Nancy, *Creation*, 85, translation modified.

49. Nancy, *Creation*, 87.

50. Nancy, *Creation*, 89, translation modified.

51. Nancy, *Creation*, 90.

52. Nancy, *Creation*, 90.

53. Nancy, *Creation*, 90.

54. See also Hans Blumenberg, "'Nachahmung der Natur': Zur Vorgeschichte der Idee des schöpferischen Menschen" in Blumenberg, *Wirklichkeiten, in denen wir leben*. Reclam: Stuttgart, 1996, 55-103; 60.

55. Nancy, *Creation*, 70.

56. Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 24.

57. Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 24-25.

58. Nancy, *Creation*, 65.

59. Nancy, *Creation*, 68.

60. Nancy, *Creation*, 68.

61. On Plato's ur-narrative of the theory of lack, see Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*. Trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

62. See Jean-Luc Nancy, "Manque de rien" in *Lacan avec les philosophes*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1991, 201-206. Nancy suggests here that our time needs to be understood first and foremost as a transformation of lack—as a turn in our lack of something, from a lack of essence to a lack of nothing. Nancy suggests that there is a history and historicity of lack that traverses the West. And it is our task to write the history of this fascination with lack, around which Nancy's entire prosthetic understanding of technics revolves.

63. Nancy, *Finite*, 12.

64. Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Deleuzian Fold of Thought". Trans. Tom Gibson and Anthony Uhlmann. In: Paul Patton, ed. *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996, 112.

65. Nancy, "Deleuzian", 108.

66. Nancy, "Deleuzian", 112.

67. Jean-Luc Nancy, "On Struction", trans. Travis Holloway and Flor Méchain. *Parrhesia* 17 (2013), 5.

68. Nancy, "Struction", 4.

69. Nancy, "Struction", 7.

70. Nancy, "Struction", 9.

71. Jean-Luc Nancy. *L'Équivalence des catastrophes (Après Fukushima)*. Paris: Galilée, 2012, 20. [My translation, ADB]

72. Nancy, *L'Équivalence*, 59. [My translation, ADB]

73. Nancy, *L'Équivalence*, 59. [My translation, ADB]

74. For more on general ecology, see: Erich Hörl. "A Thousand Ecologies: The Process of Cyberneticization and General Ecology". Trans. James Burton, Jeffrey Kirkwood and Maria Vlotides. In: Diedrich Diederichsen, Anselm Franke, eds. *The Whole Earth*. *California and the Disappearance of the Outside*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013, 121-130; Erich Hörl, "Le nouveau paradigme écologique: Pour une écologie générale des medias et des techniques" Trans. Guillaume Plas. *Multitudes* 51 (2012): 68-79.