

SHAW, Jeffrey M. *Illusions of Freedom: Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul on Technology and the Human Condition* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014), pp. xiv + 193. ISBN 978-1-62564-058-1 (paper) \$23.00.

Some years ago, on a plane trip from New York to San Francisco, author Henry Miller began musing about life below, on the ground, which he was tempted to feel he was escaping, but he realized at the end of his reflections that would become the essay “Stand Still like a Hummingbird” (an essay Thomas Merton greatly admired), that he was in a machine and would remain in a machine when he landed: “No escaping them, even up there in the blue. The machine was theirs and would come home to roost. It would engender more machines, more intricate machines, more amazing machines, more machine-like machines, until the world and all its man-made parts became one vast interlocking machine of a machine.”¹ Miller thought he was free and then he thought again. This is how you find freedom.

We think we are free until we try to move freely and discover we are bound. Why did we think we were free in the first place if we were not? How does one become deluded? Are there *illusions of freedom* that we accept without thinking? And if given the choice to think, will people choose to actually *think through* illusions? Does anyone, seriously, want to be disillusioned? Asking such questions creates a little space for gaining some perspective, room to start loosening the knot that binds your freedom. You begin to make some comparisons, you begin to think, and this is exactly what Jeffrey Shaw’s book is hoping to encourage you to keep doing.

Shaw’s task is simple and straightforward: he offers a comparison of the critical perspectives of Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul regarding the function of technology in our times. Shaw’s book is a study in comparative viewpoints, a work that grew out of the author’s recent dissertation in humanities at Salve Regina University. His writing is crisp, clear and direct, and the book offers a reliable introduction to Merton’s and Ellul’s thought on the subject as well as a basic introduction to a generally Christian approach to criticism of technology’s influence in modern society. He does not argue about which thinker may be more insightful or whether either is even correct in their critical estimations. Shaw presents their opinions through selected quotations and references without leading the reader to any conclusions beyond affirming the importance of thinking about technology in relation to our human condition. If you seek a diatribe, you will be disappointed.

1. Henry Miller, *Stand Still like a Hummingbird* (New York: New Directions, 1962) 194.

I marveled at the end of the book as to how the author could refrain from making some kind of speculative or editorial statement about the issues, given the stakes and the passionate response of Ellul and Merton, but Shaw concludes matter-of-factly that both thinkers addressed the challenges of technology “consciously and conscientiously to the best of their abilities” (175) and thus, together, provide a foundation of thought from which others can begin to hone their own critical perspectives if desired.

The first two chapters logically cover the focus, outline and patterning of the book in which Shaw provides an account for how both Ellul and Merton understood and employed the terms “technology” and “freedom” similarly in their writings. The first chapter (1-19) introduces the themes while the second chapter (20-48) provides the warrants for comparing the perspectives of these two men. Both men were born in France – Ellul in 1912, Merton in 1915 – and both wrote as Christians, one Protestant, the other Catholic, with similar conversion experiences. Both were prolific authors trying to gain perspective in the midst of rapid social and political changes of the twentieth century.

Central to this whole discussion is Ellul’s concept of technique that was introduced in *The Technological Society* (1964), which Merton read, devoured and absorbed. Ellul’s argument concerning *technique* provides the touchstone for Shaw in comparing Merton’s and Ellul’s viewpoints. Technique, says Ellul, has only one principle: effective ordering. Technique is both a *rationality* and an *artificiality*; that is to say, technique is a way of thinking about living and a way of living by such thinking. For Ellul, technique is a powerful form of rationality initially acquired from machines, but soon transcended mechanics such that machines have become merely devices of technique (Ellul would disagree with Henry Miller: we are not ruled by machines, we are ruled by technique) – and thus we find ourselves as human beings living too often “in conditions that are less than human.”² When the reach of technique’s ordering of life outstretches human decision-making, the human condition may begin to whirl in illusions of freedom.

It is with this central concern about technique versus freedom, therefore, that Shaw moves into the heart of the book, which is composed of three middle chapters that compare Merton’s and Ellul’s perspectives on technique and specific technologies in terms of their theological, social and political aspects, respectively. The chapters are not exhaustive by any means but utilize selected topics for making level comparisons.

2. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964) 4.

Chapter three (49-84) centers on the theological similarities in Merton's and Ellul's perspectives of technological issues in relation to freedom. Shaw describes their overall viewpoint as Christocentric and then delves into the influence of Karl Barth on their thought, the nature of the visible and invisible church (technical structures vs. spiritual life), and closes with a brief discussion of "Thoughts on Prayer and Contemplation" (81-84). What troubled Ellul and Merton, Shaw argues, is the role that technology was thought to play in diminishing the capacity of the institutional church "to lead the faithful on the path to freedom" (84).

Chapter four (85-116) considers the "Sociological Perspective" shared by Merton and Ellul. Here, Shaw begins with a comparison of their views on transcending the self, then moves to consider further commonalities of outlook on questions of propaganda in society, the concept of mass man and the crowd, as well as the city as technique. Shaw reasons that both thinkers worked from a transcendent perspective of life that countered technique as the basis for social order. The next question, then, becomes one of how to act or what to do about the concrete social order, which necessitates a political basis for social action.

Chapter five (117-44) examines the political perspectives of Merton and Ellul. Shaw begins with a discussion of the primary influence of Karl Marx on the two thinkers, then moves to consider freedom in terms of capitalism versus communism (both men were critical of both systems). The author then identifies the Catholic Worker movement as another source of comparison and concludes the chapter with reflection on how both Ellul and Merton sought to identify some kind of "third way" of thinking and working through the false dilemma of choosing between dominating ideological extremes.

Before Shaw concludes the book, he offers a curious sixth chapter (145-68) on literature as a point for comparison between Merton and Ellul. Essentially, Shaw shows that the two thinkers were gravely concerned about the denigration of language. He follows this concern into a study of Merton's commentary on Albert Camus and Eugene Ionesco as a way to further illuminate Ellul's critique of technique. The formal conclusion of the book, chapter seven (169-75), is simply a brief, helpful summary of the book's chapters.

Shaw also provides an Appendix (177-83) and Bibliography (185-93) that are quite helpful to readers who, if they have just begun reflecting on the impact of technology in their lives, would appreciate these other resources after having become engaged with the basic concerns of Ellul and Merton. While I do not think seasoned Merton readers will find much

new in this book, I do think that those who may be unfamiliar with either Merton or Ellul, or who have not reflected in much depth on issues of technology in modern society, will find Shaw's work reliable and helpful.

Where the book is weak, however, is in extension and application of the views of Merton and Ellul. The book leaves their thought in the 1960s. The focus is solely on comparative viewpoints of two writers with similar concerns but leaves the matter on paper and does not address the actual issues readers continue to struggle with today. To be fair, Shaw is quite clear he is only highlighting similarities of thought that others might find useful starting points. Indeed, they might be useful, but how do we use them in confronting the realities of drone warfare, global warming, data mining, artificial and superintelligence, posthumanism, transhumanism, genetically modified food, the hyper-surveillance of personal life and the privatized dismantling of public life? The crises of desperate but inefficient humanitarian aid in our times have led to the creation of the first World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 – the same year in which the theme of the 2016 World Economic Forum is this highly premature boast: “Mastering the Fourth Industrial Revolution.”³ Clearly, we are still careening from one illusion of freedom to another. Contemplation and action need to be brought together in the balance of being. Shaw's book encourages readers to start thinking if they have not; but those who have been thinking will want to go much deeper to integrate theory with practice.

I will end this review with Merton's words at the end of one of his letters to Miller in 1962:

The time is short, and all the idols are moving. They are so full of people that they are becoming at last apparently animated and when they get fully into action the result will be awful. It will be like the clashing of all the planets. Strange that the individual is the only power that is left. And though his power is zero, zero has great power when one understands it and knows where to place it.⁴

We must understand this: for Merton, zero power is an illusion of despair, but not an illusion of freedom. We need to help each other realize the zero freedom we have and then help each other see where and how to use that power to live a living life – not a more efficient, technically speaking, existence.

Gray Matthews

3. www.weforum.org.

4. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 277-78 [8/7/1962].