The Modern Era

Perception

Argotique

NASCENT STATE
Magazine
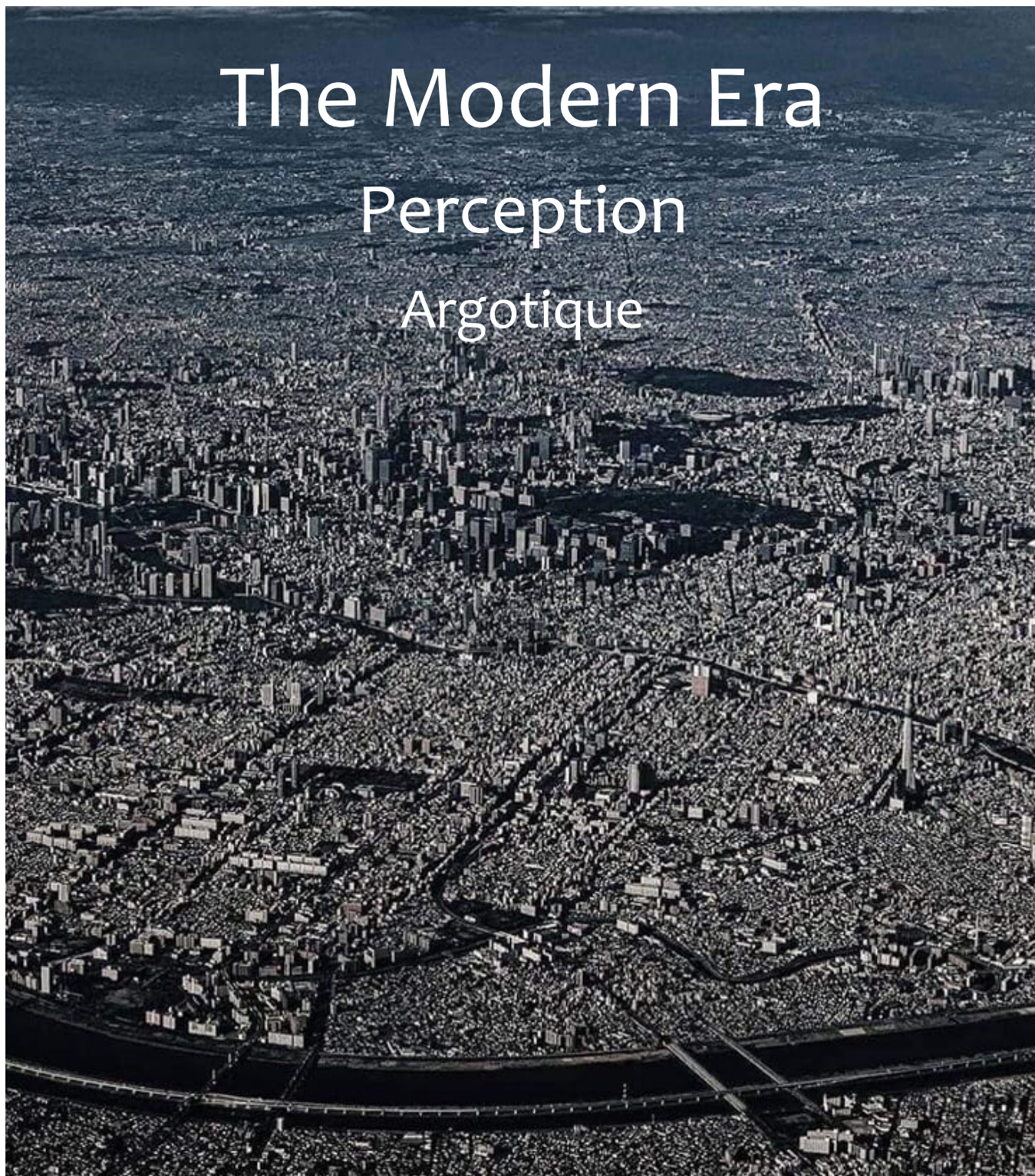
The Modern Era

The rate of change in the Modern Era is unlike any other. We live with technology that didn't exist when we were born, and practices we once took for granted – holding down the same job for life - no longer exist. The advent of artificial intelligence will increase that rate of change still further.

In Statu Nascendi:
'In a state of being born'

Present day Tokyo, popuation 37 million

We assume tomorrow will be like today, but with some innovations. We assume people will believe what we believe today and want what we want today. We may be mistaken.

Logic does not cope well with change. With logic, something is either 'right' or 'wrong' and it must always be so, otherwise logic would not function. Present day society is governed by logic, and that means there will be those who associate change with progress, and therefore as good and right, and others who will come to regard it as a threat to humanity and therefore bad. This is likely to lead to an inevitable conflict between the two groups.

For those who can see the dangers of being governed by logic, intuition provides an alternative. Whereas logic is fixed, intuition is fluid. Logic deals with what we know by applying definitions and labels, whereas intuition deals with what we do not know through insight. In a changing world, we will find ourselves dealing more and more with new technologies, new movements, and new outlooks, all of which will seem either perplexing or a threat to those who think logically. If we want to cope with change, we need intuition.

The current edition of *Nascent State Magazine* has articles on *The Modern Era* and its nature, on the subject of *Perception*, or how we see things, and on *Argotique*, or the language of subcultures.

Contents

The Modern Era

and the rate of change

Fritz Lang's Metropolis (1927)

And the ragged rock in the restless waters,
Waves wash over it, fogs conceal it;
On a halcyon day it is merely a monument,
In navigable weather it is always a seamark
To lay a course by: but in the sombre season
Or the sudden fury, is what it always was.

T. S. Eliot, The Dry Salvages

When Alvin Toffler published *Future Shock* (1970), he put into words what should have been obvious; the world is changing - it always has - but now at a rate unprecedented in history. While the more common term 'culture shock' had been used to describe how an encounter with another culture can result in misreading its nature, his own term 'future shock' was intended to draw parallels, not with an alien culture, but with the rate of change making our existing culture seem alien to us:

'Future shock will not be found in *Index Medicus* or in any listing of psychological abnormalities. Yet, unless intelligent steps are taken to combat it, millions of human beings will find themselves increasingly disoriented, progressively incompetent to deal rationally with their environments. The malaise, mass neurosis, irrationality, and free-floating violence already apparent in contemporary life are merely a foretaste of what may lie ahead unless we come to understand and treat this disease.'

Toffler wasn't the first to envisage a dystopian future. George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* were both examples of a vision of the future which is not wholly human. Outside of fiction, Norbert Wiener, regarded as the father of cybernetics, or self-governing machines, also voiced concerns about the impact of implementing technological change without any consideration of its impact. In *The Human Use of Human Beings* (1950), he wrote:

'Let us remember that the automatic machine, whatever we think of any feelings it may have or may not have, is the precise economic equivalent of slave labour. Any labour which competes with slave labour must accept the economic conditions of slave labour. It is perfectly clear that this will produce an unemployment situation, in comparison with which the present recession and even the depression of the thirties will seem a pleasant joke.'

Wiener could see the self-governing machine was a step-change from what had gone on previously. It is because of Wiener that we now speak of the second and third industrial revolutions. Just as previous advancements in technology had a major impact on agriculture and manufacturing, the present digital revolution will lead to the same upheaval in what is called 'white collar work'. This will affect a strata of society, not used to such change. This is a problem, and - in spite of many other pressing problems - with the advent of Artificial Intelligence, it is about to become much worse.

An AI, or 'neural network' machine is unlike the existing computer. Charles Babbage (1791 - 1871), who is credited with inventing the digital computer, would understand the present day personal computer. Neural network computers are a considerable step-up from this.
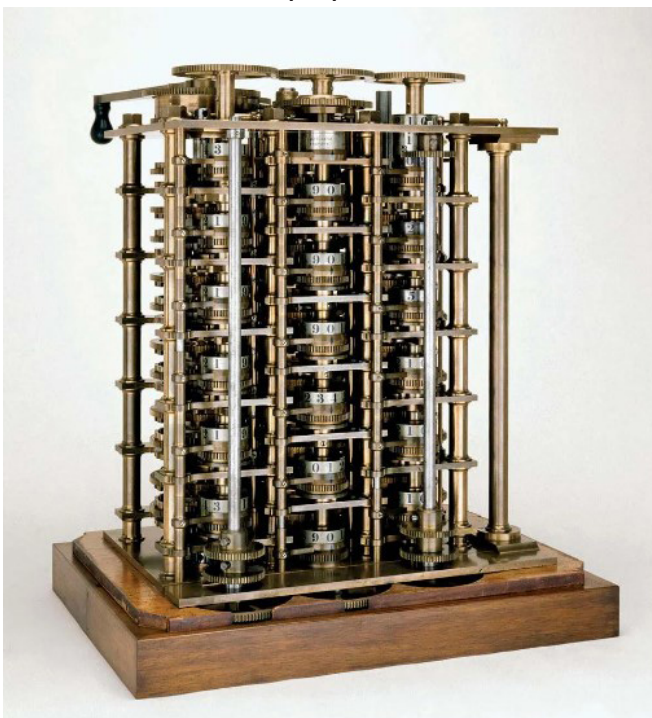
Charles Babbage, Difference Engine, c. 1820

A neural network computer mimics the nerve networks in the brain. We do not just see a flower or a bird, but we see it in the context of its environment. In order for us to make sense of what we see and hear, the mind adds what is inherent - but not always obvious - in our observations, and a neural network computer does the same. It can take a simple instruction and convert it into a coherent statement, and do so at a pace a human being would struggle to compete with. Some of its more obvious applications - being used by students to answer exam questions - have already been stated. Its less obvious applications are sufficiently disturbing to warrant quite serious warnings about its impact by Geoffrey Hinton, Ilya Sutskever and Sam Altman, all of whom have been instrumental in bringing neural networks to fruition.

Geoffrey Hinton

What is less obvious - at least at present - will be its effect on society. All those who are presently employed as administrators, call-handlers, record-keepers and accountants, legal, court and tribunal clerks, local and national government office workers will be facing unemployment in the near future. If the impact of AI was limited to administration, that would be enough to cause concern, but neural network systems can also make decisions more accurately and more rapidly than any human being. This will affect banking and investment decisions, medical advice, the development of new medicines and diagnoses, architectural design, engineering and graphic art, as well as government decisions on spending, planning and taxation - and the list is not comprehensive.

Apart from the more immediate prospect of mass unemployment, the longer term prospect is that advanced neural network systems may

regard human resistance as a threat, and then take active steps to prevent this. If this seems somewhat of an overstatement, Geoffrey Hinton (b. 1947), regarded as the father of neural networks, has been quite outspoken about the existential threat to humanity posed by AI. Regarding the impact, he had the following to say:

'Predicting the future is a bit like looking into fog. You know how when you look into fog, you can see about a hundred yards very clearly, and then two hundred yards, you can't see anything. There's a kind of wall, and I think that wall is about five years.'

British miliary robot dog

Attempts to limit the use - or perhaps misuse - of artificial intelligence are hindered by the free markets of the West, which make competition the driving factor in any emergent technology. More troubling is its employment by the military. Hinton stated that its employment by the military is the reason why it is not possible to decree that AI systems must not harm human beings. He also pointed to what he called 'bad actors', or those with malicious intent.

In terms of the impact on thinking, the efficacy of neural networks will mean we will see an increasing materialism creeping into our understanding of the individual and society. If what is deemed 'true' is determined by what works - and neural network systems do indeed work - then it follows that anything which does not translate into efficacy will be regarded as ghost-like and ephemeral. This will affect all that is presently deemed 'spiritual', and come to include our concepts of hope, progress and meaning, all of which will become more - if not completely - utilitarian in nature.

An early example of the materialist outlook can be found in the eighteenth century French thinker Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709 – 1751). *His Man a Machine* (1747) was written as a statement of the emergent view that there is little or no difference between human beings and machines, with the former being only more elaborate.

'Let us then conclude boldly that man is a machine, and that in the whole universe there is but a single substance differently modified.'

Artificial Intelligence will nullify this difference. What is more, the advancement of digital computers and their associated technology means they will pervade everyday life. A generation born in the last ten years cannot imagine a time when the smartphone did not exist. It is interesting to note that Nicola Tesla, who invented the alternating current motor and system, was regarded as somewhat visionary when he wrote in 1926:

'When wireless is perfectly applied the whole earth will be converted into a huge brain, which in fact it is, all things being particles of a real and rhythmic whole. We shall be able to communicate with one another instantly, irrespective of distance. Not only this, but through television and telephony we shall see and hear one another as perfectly as though we were face to face, despite intervening distances of thousands of miles; and the instruments through which we shall be able to do this will be amazingly simple compared with our present telephone. A man will be able to carry one in his vest pocket.'
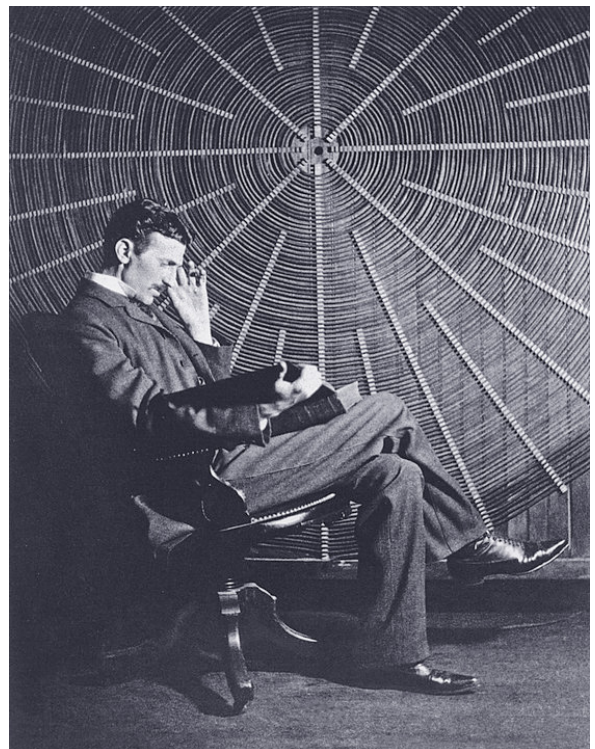
Nikola Tesla and Spiral Coil, 1896

We are now living in such a world. The problem is not whether this will come to pass - it already has - but whether such a world will serve human nature or not. To answer this, we have to ask 'What is it that makes us most essentially human?'. Geoffrey Hinton, when asked whether neural networks are sentient (i.e self-aware), answered:

'I think if you bring sentience into it, it just clouds the issue. Lots of people are very confident they aren't sentient, but if you ask them what they mean by 'sentient', they don't know...I am very confident that they think.'

We think both logically and intuitively. We use logic to process what we already know, and we use intuition to deal with what we do not presently know. This is why, when we are presented with an unknown, whether it is a stranger, a new situation or an unfamiliar phenomenon, our first response is intuitive. Many people associate intuition with gut-feeling, but gut-feeling is only one part of intuition; a second element is dispassionate observation. René Descartes (1596 – 1650), in his *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, wrote:

'As regards any subject we propose to investigate, we must inquire not what other people have thought, or what we ourselves conjecture, but what we can clearly and manifestly perceive by intuition or deduce with certainty. For there is no other way of acquiring knowledge.'

Rene Descartes by Frans Hals

A third element is insight. Insight is a much less understood property of the mind than observation or deduction. Insight can be defined as the spontaneous restructuring of our thoughts. Through insight, we suddenly see what we saw before, but from a completely new point of view. Insight has been responsible for many important discoveries in science and technology, and yet it is little commented on. One exception is the physicist, Fritjof Capra, who was inspired to write *The Tao of Physics* (1975) after his own experience of insight. He had the following to say about the experience:

'I remember the first such experience. Coming, as it did, after years of detailed analytical thinking, it was so overwhelming that I burst into tears...'

Without a fuller understanding of human nature, the technology we create is likely to dehumanise society. Essential to this is the study of thinking, and not just logic and mathematics, but also intuition. It is through intuition that we see more than is immediately present in the environment. Without this, technological prowess may become the basis of a new ideology, and one limited to what can be expressed in purely mechanistic terms. The increasing rate of change means this may become a problem much sooner than we think. For any thoughtful human being, the coming years may be as much about coping as progress.

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Perception

or how we see things
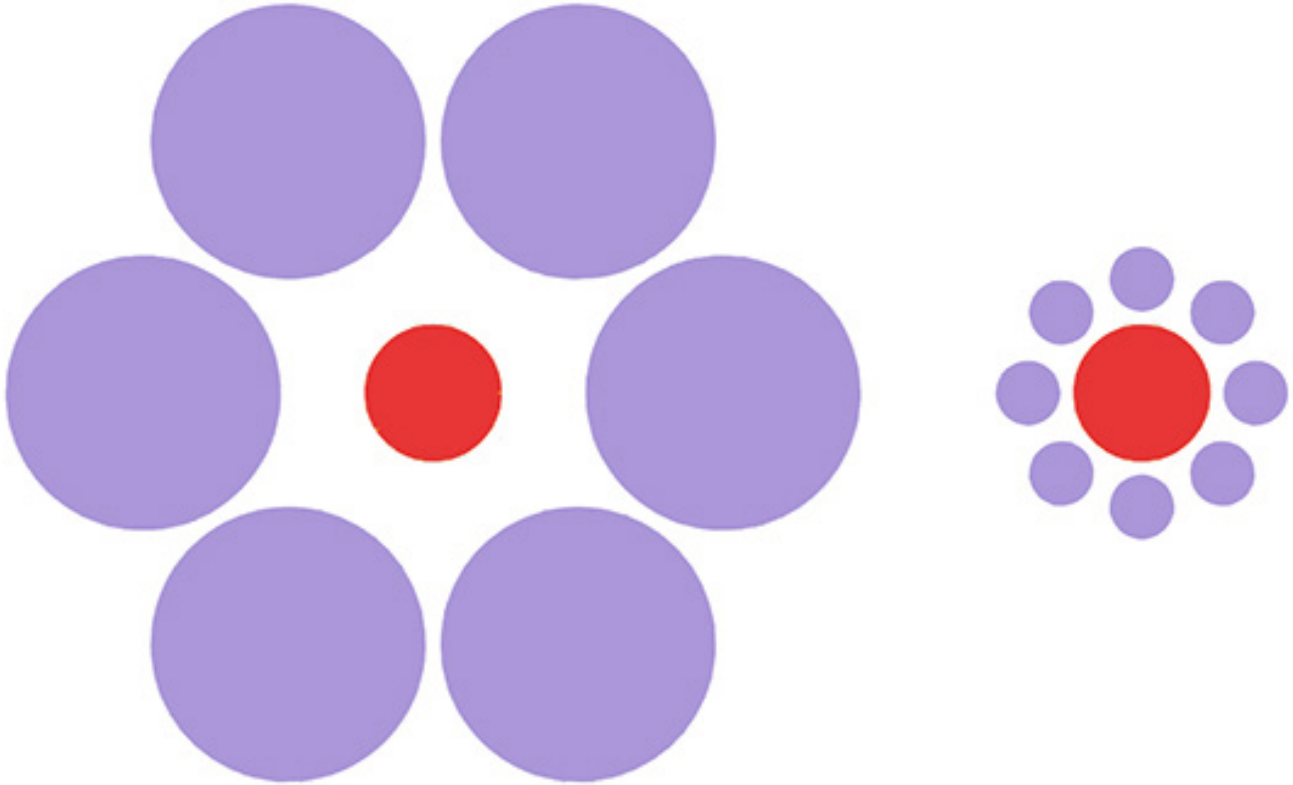
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Pablo Picasso, who had an international reputation as an artist, went to a local carpenter to ask if he could make a cabinet for his studio. 'What do you have in mind?' asked the carpenter. Picaso pulled out a piece of paper and drew on it. 'I need deep drawers for the brushes,' he said, 'and fuller drawers for the paints and long draws for the paper.' He showed him the drawing. 'Can you make that?' he asked. 'Of course,' said the carpenter. 'How much?' asked Picaso.

'Nothing,' said the carpenter; 'just sign the drawing.'

There is a difference between what we see and the way we see it. The phenomenon known as 'perception' means we do not simply observe the world, but interpret what we see. We do this for the most part unconsciously, and it is only when our attention is drawn to the phenomenon that we see it for what it is.

We only become aware of the mind acting on what we see under unusual circumstances. Many jokes are based on providing one way of seeing a situation and then suddenly switching to another way; we see the absurdity, and we laugh. The same phenomenon can also be seen in Gestalt images, which can be interpreted in more than

one way.

We might assume the phenomenon of perception is confined to jokes, anecdotes and optical illusions, but there is much more to it than that; perception affects how we see people, events, and the wider world - and even ourselves. There is what we see, and how we see it, and if we are not aware of it, we might assume the way we see the world is complete, whole and correct. And that can be a problem.

The phenomenon of perception arises from the way the mind organises information. We do not simply observe for its own sake, but for a reason. So we see a stray dog up ahead along a dusty track, and want to know if it is dangerous. We hear a knock on the door and wonder who it might be. To make sense of what we see and hear, we have to connect it to a wider context. This can be drawn from past experience, the immediate environment, gut-feeling, gleaned knowledge, and our own thinking. What we observe may be simple, but the context through

which we see it may be complex.

Our everyday experiences carry an inherent context, and often without us realising it. We look at a group of apples in a basket and choose the best one; in a different basket, the same apple might be overlooked or even rejected as inferior. We move to a noisy neighbourhood and regard it as unbearable, and then after six months barely notice it. If we have been without food all day, a simple meal will seem like a feast, whereas the same meal will seem boring to someone who has all the food they need.

Such perception is for the most part unconscious. We assume that we see the world as it is rather than through the framework of our perception. It is because we are not for the most part aware that we do this that it can be a problem. If we assume we see the world as it is, our naivety can be used against us by people who understand the nature of perception.

Howard Thurston (1869 – 1936)

Those who know how perception works, and use it deliberately, include stage magicians, confidence tricksters, advertising executives, newspaper editors, propagandists and public relations advisors. The least sinister - and therefore the most open about the practice - are stage magicians. The author and magician, Henning Nelms, who wrote *Magic and Showmanship: A Handbook for Conjurers* (1969), employed the term 'mental misdirection', to describe what happens when a stage magician primes the expectations of the audience so that they misinterpret what they see wrongly; if a

stage magician wants to produce a rabbit from an empty hat, they first have to convince the audience the hat is empty. Nelms defined mental misdirection in the following manner:

'Logic requires a 'frame of reference' or 'context'. A successful conjuring theme baffles logic by providing a false frame of reference.'

The same method is employed by the 'con man' or confidence trickster. The writer, David W. Maurer, who catalogued examples of confidence tricks in his book *The Big Con* (1940), gave an example of how, in pre-revolutionary Cuba, a conman would arrange for a pickpocket to steal the wallet of a wealthy American tourist. The conman would then wait in the local police station for the American to turn up to report it. Casually overhearing this, he would express sympathy for the victim and - using their own money - offer to buy them a return ticket home. On the way to the airport, the conman would let it slip that he was due to build a casino, once the local government official had been suitably bribed, adding that he had nearly all the money he needed.

Beyond entertainment and petty crime, the same method is employed in public relations. Edward Bernays (1891 - 1995), nephew of Sigmund Freud, coined the term 'public relations' to replace the more sinister sounding 'propaganda'. He pioneered modern advertising methods by drawing on his uncle's interest in the unconscious mind. He said that, in order to sell a product, it is not enough to say how good the product is, but better to evoke an image around its ownership.

The image sells the product

To sell a piano, for example, he said that instead of explaining how good the craftsmanship was, it is better to provide a photograph of a sophisticated couple in an elegant drawing room

- with the piano in the background. In his seminal book *Propaganda* (1928), he wrote:

'If we understand the mechanism and motives of the group mind, is it not possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without their knowing it?'

What he was referring to is the context through which the specific is perceived. By affecting the social environment - and doing so by stealth - he could evoke the necessary response in an individual. His methods worked sufficiently well for him to be employed by Procter & Gamble, General Electric and the American Tobacco Company, Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover, and the CIA.

Knowledge of how to govern people by affecting their perception is not new. Niccolo Machiavelli (1469 - 1527), the renaissance thinker noted for his indifference to matters of morality, offered the same advice to Lorenzo de Medici in his book *The Prince*.

'Men judge generally more by the eye than by the hand, because everybody can see you, but few come in touch with you. Everyone sees what you appear to be, but few really know what you are, and those few dare not oppose the opinion of the many, who have the power of the state to defend them.'

Borgia and Machiavelli, Federico Faruffini, 1864

Perception plays a part in life because it is part of human nature. If we are unaware of what motivates us, we will be subject either to our own unconscious motives or to the governance of others who will employ our ignorance to their advantage. Once we become aware of this, we can become angry, or we can use the opportunity to develop self-knowledge. And to that end it is not necessary to have access to a laboratory

to study perception; life provides us with all the material we need, provided we understand its nature.

Logic is not enough for the study of perception, not least because logic works within a fixed framework - if A does not equal B, the relationship between A and B must be fixed, otherwise A might equal B on occasion, and therefore logic would not apply. Perception is contextual, and contexts can change, which is why we can regard a negative as a positive if we so choose.

We first become aware of perception intuitively. When we suspect we are not seeing the whole picture, or when we have second thoughts, or when we doubt the official version of events, or when we pick up on an anomaly or an enigma, it is the intuitive mind calling to us to pay attention to what we presently cannot see directly. The intuitive mind is unlike the logical mind because logic deals with what we know; intuition deals with what we do not presently know.

In order to make sense of life we have to put what we see, hear and know into context. In a society where there is an increasing rate of change, much that we presently take for granted can become outdated, outmoded or irrelevant, even in our own lifetime. Those who are unable or unwilling to adapt to change are likely to become angry or disillusioned, or to be drawn into whatever issues dominate the social agenda of the day.

The alternative is to understand the nature of perception and, in that way, to regulate our responses to a changing environment. Many will equate this with relativism, and from the point of view of a fixed outlook, it must appear so. With sufficient understanding however, the rate of change in society can become a prompt to attend to what we otherwise might have overlooked. Whether we regard the present era as a problem or an opportunity depends on perception.

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Argotique

the language of subcultures

'The cathedral is a work of art goth (gothic art) or of argot, i.e, cant or slang. Moreover, dictionaries define argot as 'a language peculiar to all individuals who wish to communicate their thoughts without being understood by outsiders'.'
Fulcanelli, The Mystery of the Cathedrals

Alexander the Great (356 - 323 BC) created an empire that went beyond his birthplace in Greece to cover Persia, Asia Minor and India. It is said that, having gone as far as the known world, he wept; 'for there were no more worlds to conquer'. Quite apart from the veracity of the statement, the empire he created also unified culture, which meant the logic of his tutor, Aristotle, also became universal. It is owing to Alexander that logic pervades Western culture.

Logic demands uniformity; if a dog cannot talk in Greece, then a dog cannot talk in Crete. Such uniformity was necessary in the ancient world because, without it, superstition prevailed. And so, with the uniform culture of Greece, we got the uniform thinking of logic. What is more, we have never really escaped uniform culture.

The Greek empire of Alexander gave way to the Roman empire of Julius Caesar (100 BC – 44 BC), which covered North Africa, Western Asia,

and Europe as far as Gaul, including southern Britain. Again, the necessity of governance by a single authority led to a uniformity of culture. Then, once Christianity was adopted by Rome, under the emperor Constantine (c. 272 – 337), a uniform culture led to a uniformity of religious belief. Finally, through Justinian (482 – 565), this translated into an intolerance of all other belief systems.

It is from this that we assume there is only one correct view of truth, which is dictated by a governing authority. Even the secular thinking of the French enlightenment (1715 - 1789) did not alter this, and simply replaced religious dogma - 'a principle or set of principles laid down by an authority as incontrovertibly true' - with a secular dogma of its own. Plus ça change.

And yet within the overriding culture of a governing authority, there has always existed a variety of subcultures; lesser known, little

understood, and often suffering persecution by the governing authority for daring not to conform. The study of such subcultures reveals a method employed by them to communicate with others of like mind and - more importantly - to avoid detection and hence persecution. Such a method involves the use of 'argot', or secret language. And its study is highly instructive.

Roman catacomb c. 2nd - 4th Century

The meetings of the early Christians were held in underground chambers or catacombs. The evidence for this can be found in the artwork in the catacombs, including their religious iconography and arcane symbolic imagery. The use of symbolic imagery, with its meaning being inferred rather than explicitly stated, prevented the governing authorities from being able to say too exactly what was being communicated.

Once Christianity became the authorised religion of Rome, those who became subject to persecution included the Gnostics and the Manicheans. Of Manichaeism, few fragments remain, but the most reliable account of Gnosticism can be found in the (c. 3rd Century) *Pistis Sophia*, the meaning of which is conveyed in highly symbolic language.

Catharism became the next target for persecution. The Cathars held many views in common with the Gnostics, and indeed the main accusation against them was that they were essentially Gnostics. The Church responded by sending in military forces to attack the Cathar stronghold of Bezier in France in the early thirteenth century. Paul Johnson, in his *A History of Christianity* (1976), tell us:

'In 1209, Arnold Aimery exulted to the Pope that the capture of Beziers had been 'miraculous'; and that the crusaders had killed 15,000, 'showing mercy neither to order, nor age nor sex'. Prisoners were mutilated, blinded, dragged at the hooves of horses and used for target practice.'

What this underlines is that for any subculture to survive in Europe, it had to employ an indirect form of expression to avoid detection by the authorities. It was for this reason that symbolic imagery was employed, not least because it needs to be understood to be interpreted rightly.

It was about the same time, in what is called the 'High Middle Ages' of Europe, the Troubadours emerged. The Troubadours were wandering minstrels, often highly educated, and forced to survive by earning a living through street entertainment. In Helen Waddell's account of them in *The Wandering Scholars* (1927), she said the Church was more afraid of the Troubadours than the Cathars; being highly mobile, they could disseminate their knowledge throughout Europe. She also said that, in addition to vernacular street culture, their songs also included metaphysical subject matter.

Also about the same time, beginning with the Abbey of Saint-Denis in the 12th Century, Gothic architecture emerged, and noted for the symbolic imagery in the design and proportion of the building. It is presumed to have come from the nomadic Goths of early German history, and yet the Goths were not noted for their developed culture. The architect Claude Bragdon pointed to an altogether different origin in his book *The Beautiful Necessity* (1910):

'In France, during the Middle Ages, a Gothic cathedral became, at the hands of the secret masonic guilds, a glorified symbol of the body of Christ.'

A further subculture that emerged at about the same time was the Kabbalah. Its first publication was the *Bahir*, which appeared in the 12th century. The second book, the *Zohar*, appeared about a century later. Their origins are speculative but unknown, but both were expressed through highly obscure symbolic language, to the degree that their content had to be explained verbally to be understood.

Then in the 14th century, the Tarot emerged, and again from obscure origins. The Tarot is perhaps the most complete example of a subculture expressed through symbolic imagery. Because it emerged as common playing cards, its subversive meaning was not noticed by the Church. The major arcana includes the Tower card, for example, depicting a tower being destroyed by divine lightning. The original name for the card is *La Maison Dieu*, or *The House of God*.

In the following century, the Renaissance emerged. While the modern era regards the Renaissance as the birth of secular thinking, the evidence is quite to the contrary. What the early Renaissance thinkers - Giordano Bruno, Marsilio Ficino, Pico Della Mirandola and Nicolaus Copernicus - had in common was not an early form of secularism, but a rekindled interest in the proscribed thinking of the ancients, including Pythagoreanism and Hermeticism, both expressed in arcane symbolism.

Albrecht Durer, Melancholia 1, 1514

And in the following century, Rosicrucianism emerged, with the publication of the *Fama Fraternitatis* in 1614. The *Fama*, as it is known, is expressed almost wholly through symbolic imagery, with the exception of the introduction, which includes the following statement:

'And as we do now securely call the Pope Antichrist, which was formerly a capital offence in every place, so we know certainly that what we here keep secret we shall in the future thunder forth with uplifted voice, the which, reader, with us desire with all your heart that it may happen most speedily.'

And finally in the eighteenth century, the secular era arose, beginning with the French Jacobins. Initially meeting in secret, their intention was to replace the monarchy with a republic, and again their chosen form of expression was through the symbolic imagery of the Tricolor cockade, the Tree of Liberty and the All-seeing Eye.

Antoine Jean Gros, French Republic, 1794

It is interesting to note that Victor Hugo (1802 - 1885) did not understand the importance of argot, and assumed it was merely the language of the criminal classes:

'Then came the Kingdom of Argot; that is to say, all the thieves of France, arranged according to the order of their dignity; the minor people walking first.'

The emergence of secularism in society meant that politics, economics, science and the mainstream media now represent the governing authority in society rather than the monarchy or religion. If what constituted the use of argot prior to the modern era was expressed in religious imagery, it was because the primary language in society was largely religious. The employment of code for espionage, for example, is a modern example of argot. It is interesting to note that the Pigpen cypher has its origins in Freemasonry.

The emergence of a secular society is widely regarded as an advance on the superstition and religion of the past, and yet the Twentieth century gave us two overarching ideologies in the form of Nazism and Soviet communism. The resistance movement known as The White Rose emerged in Nazi Germany in 1942, and its symbol was chosen because it represented purity. In the Soviet Union, the need to disseminate ideas contrary to the governing authority gave rise to Samizdat, or hand-printed reproductions of banned literature. In the West, the use of 'cop' for policeman, or the 'mark' of the conman, or the dual use of 'gay' or 'pot' in counterculture are all examples of modern argot.

What an overarching authority represents is the closure of learning and discovery through its ability to impose a singular ideology. This means all ideas contrary to the authority are deemed a threat, even if that is not their intention. The use of argot to express ideas contrary to the narrow dogma of the day results in the adoption of conventional expressions, but with a slightly different meaning attached to them. This can include the use of language, mathematics, geometry, rituals, artwork and symbolism.

It is likely that, should a culture become authoritarian, new forms of argot will be adopted to allow individuals to communicate with each other without drawing the attention of the authorities. The past treatment of heretics, dissenters and resistance movements provides an indication of the severity of punishment for daring to express unconventional ideas in such an environment.

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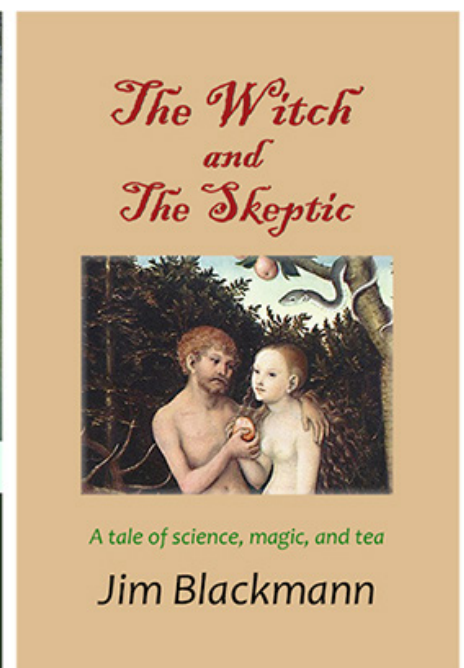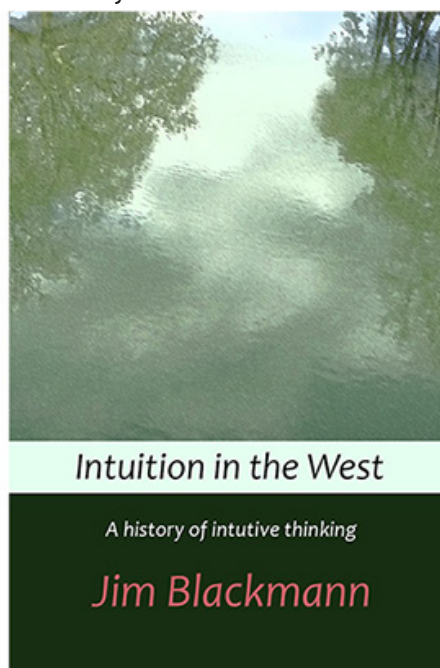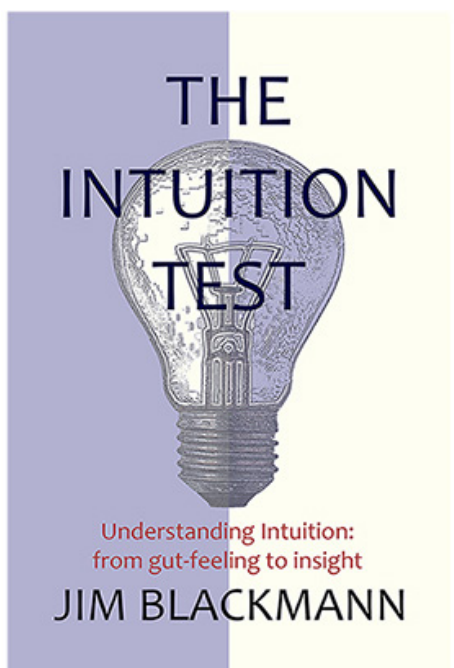
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