

# The Mimeograph, Technology, and Labor

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“Equo ne credite, Teucri”  
—Virgil, *Aeneid*

Not long ago, the chairman of the media-service provider Netflix stated that sleep was the biggest competitor of the corporation he leads. The development of a revolutionary technology able to remove the vital function of sleep would probably make not only Netflix’s CEO Reed Hastings content but also those of us in search for more time. After all, the idleness of sleep nibbles away almost half of our lifetime. It is not a coincidence that in Ancient Greece the deity of Sleep (Hypnos) was no other than the twin-brother of Death (Thanatos), both sons of the goddess Night (Nyx). Can sleep be equated with dead time?

The pages of this book were mostly printed during nighttime on a mechanical machine, now obsolete, known as mimeograph. The following text presents some reflections on our printing practice, which poses questions about the meanings of technology, labor, and art.

It is also nighttime now, and we are in Ålvik. We have chosen to do a residency in this town as here some of the primal structuring between technology, labor, and nature remain still relatively unconcealed. Located in the west of Norway, Ålvik has some four hundred inhabitants today. The town was built on a small plateau between the steepness of the mountains and the steepness of the fjord. Its *raison d’être* is the Bjølvfossen waterfall. In 1905, Bjølvfossen was funneled into a power plant so that it could produce electricity for the factory and its settlement of workers: the town of Ålvik. Elkem Bjølvfossen still functions today as a foundry, producing ferroalloys for the iron and steel industry as it has done since the 1920s. The plant is at work day and night.

A few decades before the Bjølvfossen waterfall was funneled into a power plant and mimeograph technology was envisioned, Karl Marx put forth a critique of capitalism of unparalleled influence. Labor, technology, and time are key concepts of his critique. In one of his earlier works, Marx remarked: “time is everything, man is nothing; he is, at the most, time’s carcass.”<sup>1</sup> The notion of time is always present in the process of printing with an obsolete object. The time of the machine, the time that links us with that chain of human beings who conceived, produced, and used the machine. The time of mimeograph printing reveals itself as a radically different time than that of both industrialized and manual printing.

Marx gives an account of the historization of the means of production as a transition from hand to machine. The hand is the means of prehistory, the tool that of the era of manufacturing, and the machine that of the modern industry. As described by Marx, the machine has three components. First, the motor mechanism that puts the whole in motion. This motor can be located either outside the machine—as it is the case with natural resources such as wind or water—or inside the machine—as it is the case after the invention of the steam engine. The transmitting mechanism is the second component, in charge of regulating, dividing, and distributing the motion from the motor to the working machine by the use of wheels, ropes, gears, and so forth.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 6 (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 127.

The third component is the working machine itself, which performs the operations formerly done by manual work and mostly uses altered versions of the tools originally made for handcrafts.<sup>2</sup>

The mimeograph lies somewhere between a tool and a machine. The motor mechanism can be either the manually operated crank or the electric motor, with which some of the machines were built. The transmitting mechanism distributes motion to the spinning drum or drums, and, depending on the model, motion can also be distributed to the feeding and receiving mechanisms. The original handcraft tools that the machine incorporates are the silkscreen, now mounted on drums, and the impression roller. The machine basically replaces the paper feeding and the inking and rolling over the master to make the actual impression. The other tasks need to be done by hand.

In his 1951 book *Minima Moralia*, Theodor Adorno put forth the idea of “barbaric asceticism” (*barbarische Askese*) as a means of resistance against both mass culture and progress in technical means in order to restore an unbarbaric condition.<sup>3</sup> In a way reminiscent of artist William Morris, Adorno anticipates that “no work of art, no thought, has a chance of survival, unless it bear within it repudiation of false riches and high-class production, of color films and television, millionaire’s magazines and Toscanini.” The older media (älteren Medien) appear as a rejuvenated means to incarnate Adorno’s notion of barbaric asceticism: “They alone could outflank the united front of trusts and technology.” The concluding lines of the passage extend the ineluctable fusion of mass culture with both progress and barbarism to the realm of the publishing industry: “Books have long lost all likeness to books, the real book can no longer be one.” Adorno finally discloses that it is the mimeograph, the only suitable means to repeal the barbarism of progress: “If the invention of the printing press inaugurated the bourgeois era, the time is at hand for its repeal by the mimeograph, the only fitting, the unobtrusive [*unauffällige*] means of dissemination.”<sup>4</sup> The section of *Minima Moralia* discussed here is significantly entitled “Pro Domo Nostra”—for our own sake or for our own cause.<sup>5</sup>

The stickiness between mass culture and the conflation of barbarism and progress that Adorno describes with aversion could find a proper illustration in Netflix. Over a century and a half ago, Marx spoke of time being everything and man being nothing, and seventy years ago, Adorno wrote about the barbarism of mass culture brought about by technology. Contemporary with Marx, artist William Morris, a writer, printer, and book maker, was also concerned with technology and labor. As well as Adorno, and sometimes Marx, Morris chastised uses of technology:

Those almost miraculous machines, which if orderly forethought had dealt with them might even now be speedily extinguishing all irksome and unintelligent labour, leaving us free to raise the standard of skill of hand and energy of mind in our workmen, and to produce afresh that loveliness and order which only the hand of man guided by his soul can produce—what have they done for us now? Those machines of which the civilized

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital Volume One*, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 35 (New York: International Publishers, 1996), 376.

<sup>3</sup> “Fortschritt und Barbarei sind heute als Massenkultur so verfilzt, daß einzig barbarische Askese gegen diese und den Fortschritt der Mittel das Unbarbarische wieder herzustellen vermöchte. Kein Kunstwerk, kein Gedanke hat eine Chance zu überleben, dem nicht die Absage an den falschen Reichtum und die erstklassige Produktion, an Farbenfilm und Fernsehen, an Millionärsmagazine und Toscanini innewohnt. Die älteren, nicht auf Massenproduktion berechneten Medien gewinnen neue Aktualität: die des Unerfaßten und der Improvisation. Sie allein konnten der Einheitsfront von Trust und Technik ausweichen. In einer Welt, in der längst die Bücher nicht mehr aussehen wie Bücher, sind es nur noch solche, die keine mehr sind. Stand am Anfang der bürgerlichen Ära die Erfindung der Druckerpresse, so wäre bald deren Widerruf durch Mimeographie fällig, das allein angemessene, das unauffällige Mittel der Verbreitung.” Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1951), 81-2.

<sup>4</sup> *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) first circulated as a mimeograph version with the title *Philosophical Fragments* (1944).

<sup>5</sup> See Joel Burges, “Adorno’s Mimeograph: The Uses of Obsolescence in *Minima Moralia*,” *New German Critique* 40, no.1 (2013): 65-92. Reprinted in Alt Går Bra’s book *The Mimeograph, A Tool for Radical Art and Political Contestation* (Bergen: Alt Går Bra, 2016).

world is so proud, has it any right to be proud of the use they have been put to by Commercial war and waste?<sup>6</sup>

Some of the ideas conceptualized by Morris also resonate in Martin Heidegger. These three thinkers point at different degrees of incompatibility between technology/commerce/capitalism and art/thought, a sort of inverse proportional relation, or even a relationship of exclusion.

Prompted by Netflix CEO Reed Hastings's statement that sleep was his corporation's biggest competitor, we began this text discussing sleep. We pointed out that Hypnos (Sleep) was the twin-brother of Thanatos (Death) in Greek mythology. In spite of this genealogy, an important difference set both twins apart. While the god of death, Thanatos, was childless, the god of sleep, Hypnos, was a prolific father. Hypnos gave birth to one thousand children, and these children were no other than the Dreams (Oneiroi) themselves. Residing in the Underworld, the Oneiroi flew every night from their abode to deliver dreams to us, mortals. During their flight, they were confronted with a decisive moment, the moment of traversing what the Greeks called the Gates of Sleep.<sup>7</sup> There were two gates: the gate of ivory and the gate of horn. Flying through one or the other gate would produce dreams of the opposite quality. The Oneiroi flying through the gate of ivory delivered deceptive dreams; those traversing the gate of horn, would, on the contrary, deliver true dreams. A beautiful passage from Homer's *Odyssey* has Penelope explaining this to Odysseus, whom she believes to be a stranger rather than her very husband:

Stranger, dreams verily are baffling and unclear of meaning, and in no wise do they find fulfillment in all things for men. For two are the gates of shadowy dreams, and one is fashioned of horn and one of ivory. Those dreams that pass through the gate of sawn ivory deceive men, bringing words that find no fulfillment. But those that come forth through the gate of polished horn bring true issues to pass, when any mortal sees them.<sup>8</sup>

Dreams cannot exist without sleep and technology cannot exist without dreams. It is through the labor of artists that collective dreams are fathomed, artists, the masters of the *technē*. Curiously, the word that we use today to refer to this conglomerate that we call technology originates in art. Saying technology (*technē+logos*) would be something like saying *artology*. In Ancient Greek, *technē* meant art, craft, and also skill.

In his influential essay "The Question Concerning Technology," written almost at the same time as Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, Heidegger begins by stating that the worst possible way to approach technology is to perceive it as neutral, as this makes us particularly blind to it. The non-neutral character of technology is somehow clear here in Ålvik. "Technology helps keep our workers far from smelting furnaces," several workers told us during our stay in the small town. New technologies enable workers to remotely run reduction furnaces operating at 1,600 °C.<sup>9</sup>

Having drunk from the river Lethe, we have forgetfully forgotten not only that the origin of technology is in art and dreams, but also that truth itself is *alētheia*.

The Greek word for truth will never be the same after Heidegger. As it is well known, *alētheia* is a concept central to Heidegger's philosophy. Heidegger elaborated an original philological interpretation of *alētheia* namely to oppose it to the idea that truth resides in the correspondence or representation of a knowing subject and a known object.<sup>10</sup> Heidegger maintains that the original meaning of *alētheia* is, as in the pre-Socratic philosophers, disclosure

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<sup>6</sup> William Morris, *Stories in Prose. Stories in Verse. Shorter Poems. Lectures and Essays*, ed. G. D. H. Cole (London: The Nonesuch Press, 1976), 637-8.

<sup>7</sup> Homer, cited below, is the first source speaking of these gates. His description influenced ancient authors, including Plato, who referred to the gates in *Charmides* (173a). Virgil's account of Aeneas (*Aen.* 6.893-896) traversing the gate of ivory—as opposed to that of horn—became the source of an important academic controversy.

<sup>8</sup> Hom. *Od.* 19.562-567.

<sup>9</sup> Scandinavian metallurgy workers working in the proximities of smelting furnaces in Marx's lifetime are illustrated by *The Iron Foundry, Burmeister and Wain*, an 1885 painting by Danish artist Peder Severin Krøyer.

<sup>10</sup> See Heidegger's *The Essence of Truth: On Plato's Cave Allegory and Theaetetus* and St. Thomas Aquinas's definition of truth as adequation of things and the intellect—"veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus" (*Summa Theologica* 16.1.3).

or unconcealment. This digression about Heidegger's *alētheia* will make more sense, soon, as we continue our discussion about sleep, dreams, technology, art, and, from now on, also truth.

We just made a somehow obscure remark about the river Lethe, technology, forgetfulness, art, dreams, and *alētheia*. Let us start with what we can see. The words *alētheia* (ἀλήθεια) and *lēthē* (λήθη) have much in common. Basically, *alētheia* is the same word as *lēthē* with an *a* or alpha added at the beginning. In Greek mythology, the river Lethe had a magic effect on people who drank from it. It made them forget. It had the effect of oblivion. The name of the river comes from the noun *lēthē*, which means forgetfulness as well as concealment. *Alētheia* is, then, nothing else than *a* + *lēthē*—the initial *a* in *alētheia* is a negative prefix, known as alpha privative. So, literally translated, the word to express truth in Greek would give something like un-forgetfulness—or as Heidegger understood it, un-concealment or disclosure. We could say, then, that *alētheia* is that which has not been forgotten, which would be the equivalent of saying that it is that which is remembered.

As we remember, from earlier paragraphs, Hypnos, the god of Sleep, was the twin-brother of Thanatos, the god of Death. Thanatos was childless, while Hypnos had a thousand children, the Oneiroi. Dreams, deceptive or true, are delivered by the Oneiroi, who carry them from their abode through either one of two gates. The Oneiroi are said to reside in the twilight of their father's cave, deep in the hollow of a mountain side. It is at this site that Greek mythology brings together dreams and forgetfulness, where the river Lethe flew by the dwelling of Hypnos.

Memory is the antonym of forgetfulness, and Mnemosyne (Memory) the divinity antithetical to Lethe. Unlike Heidegger, who emphasized the idea of un-concealment/disclosure in *alētheia*, we focus on the idea of un-forgetfulness/memory. Our proposal is in agreement with later philological debates on the subject, claiming, contra Heidegger, that objectivity was a late development in the concept of *alētheia*. The original idea of *alētheia* applied only to subjects and not to objects. Put differently, the pre-Socratics used the word *alētheia* to indicate the truthfulness of a person. This analysis directly challenges Heidegger's interpretation and supports our hypothesis of *alētheia* as remembering/memory as activities proper to subjects (humans) and not objects.<sup>11</sup>

Working with an obsolete machine as the mimeograph in the 21st century, brings back Adorno's idea of "barbaric asceticism" and Morris's veneration of the skill of the hand. Printing on a mimeograph today entails searching for those who used this technology in the past, for those who made and maintained the machines, for those who developed the skills to hand-etch temperamental and fragile wax stencils. The approach to equipment and supplies is imprinted by a different mindset, always pressing for exceptional care, for handling material as precious, and above all for thriftiness. We can see something similar here in Ålvik, where the Bjølvfossen waterfall is still part of the landscape, the buildings from the original settlement are kept both intact and functional, and the Labor Day parades, that, perhaps only in this town, gather larger crowds than the 17 of May National Day. Memory is ineluctable here as it is in working with a mimeograph.

Significantly, Mnemosyne was not only what we would like to call truth for the Greeks. Mnemosyne was also the mother of the Muses. The Muses originally told poets what they were to say, aiding them to render words in a beautiful form. Later, the Muses were believed to be the source of inspiration not only for poets but also for the arts in general and the sciences. Just like the Oneiroi, the Muses are divinities whispering into the ears of mortals. Whereas the Muses brought mostly truth or memory, the Oneiroi could bring either truth or deceit.

We hope that these words will somehow inspire this conference about the art of the mimeograph that we have just began. The Muses will whisper into our ears during these two days, speaking to us the words of memory. Perhaps, we even want to reconsider the long-abandoned epistemological theory of Plato, who believed in reminiscence. We are born with

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<sup>11</sup> See Thomas Cole, "Archaic Truth," *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica*, New Series, Vol. 13, No. 1 (1983): 7-28; Jean-Pierre Levet, *Le vrai et le faux dans la pensée grecque archaïque. Étude de vocabulaire* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1976); Bruno Snell, *Altheia*, *Festschrift für Ernst Siegmann (= Würzburger Jahrbücher für die Altertumswissenschaft 1, 1975): 1-18*; and Paul Friedländer, *Plato. An Introduction*, trans. H. Meyerhoff (New York: Harper, 1964).

all the knowledge. We just need to remember it. Human knowledge, the knowledge of humanity—in both senses of objective and subjective genitive—that we have collectively built throughout centuries.



Peder Severin Krøyer, *The Iron Foundry*, *Burmeister and Wain*, 1885, oil on canvas, 144 x 194 cm. Copenhagen, National Art Museum.