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Some Brief Thoughts on Art and Scientific Language in the Administered World

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CASPAR DAVID FRIEDRICH'S DAS EISMEER (1824)

Technology (shipbuilding) confronts nature



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This piece was written by [Robert Quillen Camp](#), a theater artist and scholar who researches perception in theater and performance.

Joel established this blog series to investigate some of the ways in which secularism and scientism hold sway as unexamined ideologies in contemporary American culture. The premise is that while many of us tend to think that we have transcended the irrational dogmas of religious credulity, we have often only replaced them with equally faith-based beliefs. When we don't necessarily recognize that this is problematic, we often communicate in ways that are not nearly as objective or rational as we assume.

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This is not to argue against the value of scientific inquiry, or the validation of human curiosity that it represents. Especially in a moment of deep skepticism about the possibility of shared truths (see: the many different ways it is currently possible to be [awake](#) and/or [woke](#)), the protocols and demonstrated accomplishments of the scientific method can offer a bridge between people of different creeds and cultures (see: [the volcanologists heading to North Korea](#)). But the overwhelming dominance of science and technology in our contemporary worldview can have unintended consequences in other areas of human activity, perhaps most importantly those which have the capacity to interrogate the ways in which we make meaning out of our lives.

In the arts, for example, for the past century we have often used scientific terms as if they are magical totems, conferring sacred authority on our projects when we use “research” to create “experimental” work. From the beginning this has occasioned embarrassment for both artists and scientists. The Frankfurt School critical theorist Theodor Adorno (now [back in vogue](#)) wrote in his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* about the “many misunderstandings” of “artists who had become enraptured by the nomenclature,” noting that “the scientific terminology they used to name their technical procedures was... misattributed.”

Adorno is responding to the zeal with which artists in all media have attempted to legitimate their work by associating it with what was perhaps the primary cultural force of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Perhaps this association hasn't always been conscious: the “violence of the new” (Adorno's phrase) that became characteristic of artistic practice from the late nineteenth century onward sometimes seems, in retrospect, like an example of Freud's [repetition-compulsion](#) – the trauma of industrialization and technological innovation replayed as a game. One specific example of this, articulated by critics like Chon Noriega, is *kaijū*, the genre of Japanese monster movies inaugurated by *Godzilla* (1954), seen in part as an expression of the repressed traumas of Hiroshima and Nagasaki – though here I'm suggesting that perhaps the entire value of “newness” that we associate with modernism is itself a response to trauma.

One of the ways in which this language borrowing can impact the making of art and its reception is the way in which it seems

to promise that art will contribute to society in some way that is empirically measurable. And indeed, there are many pressures brought to bear on the artist who attempts in one way or another to slot their work into what Adorno called the “administered world,” not the least of which is to occasionally demonstrate the use value of that which appears, on first glance, to be utterly useless. That value could be located in its commercial viability, its asserted social utility or its technological innovations. But all of these means of validation refer the question of value elsewhere, and when meaning is derived from the market, economic materialism, or in a possibly utopian techno-future, then art is subjected to the utility-based logic of the administered world. And in spite of best efforts, a clear measure of art’s usefulness tends to remain elusive, and disappointment often follows.

But perhaps the extent to which something is *art* is the extent to which it can’t be comprehended by an external set of definitions and practices. We can truthfully say that all art is political, of course, and we might also say all that art is (or could be) a product in the marketplace. But perhaps the *artness* of an artwork rests in its exemption from other forms of understanding. In other words, the thing that makes it art is the not-completely-nameable feeling, good or bad, that it causes to well up in the viewer. In this way, art remains – perhaps because of its seeming uselessness – a site of mystery.

Even as critics offer explanations for its continued practice (borrowing from psychology, anthropology, sociology and political science) the explanations never fully satisfy – perhaps that is why we continue to have so very many of them. Indeed, art’s resistance to explanation, as well as its resistance to the logic of the administered world, can help remind us that there is an *outside* to scientific thinking, an *outside* to thinking in general, just as every conceptual framework has an outside.

What is surprising, perhaps, is that in Adorno’s administered world, a world increasingly governed by the needs of quantification and awash in the language generated by those needs, art not only continues to be made, but seems ever more indispensable. As the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard wrote, partially in response to Adorno, “even in the immense, complex, and supple regulation to which the modern world is subject, art and beauty do and will take place, simply because their place is

not a place in the world.”

Robert Quillen Camp is a theater artist and scholar who researches perception in theater and performance. He wrote the text for Pig Iron Theatre’s Obie Award-winning Chekhov Lizardbrain, and his writing has appeared in Yale’s Theater, Comparative Drama, Conjunctions, and Play A Journal of Plays. He is currently at work on a book about performance and the uncanny.
