TECHNOPHANY
A Journal for Philosophy and Technology

Technophany Vol.4 No.1

Shadows And Everything Between: What Is Lost When Technology Takes Over

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Abstract

Drawing on media ecology and philosophy of technology frameworks, this essay first aims to illustrate the impacts of technology and second to discuss a possible way forward amid technological change. I will examine the influence of electric light on Japanese aesthetics, particularly through the perspective of Jun'ichirō Tanizaki and his essay, *In Praise of Shadows*. Subsequently, I will extend the concept of electric light to digital technologies in general, with the aim of linking the loss of beauty in Tanizaki's view to the loss of betweenness and nuance in the digital environment. Just as electric light redefined notions of beauty in Tanizaki's Japan, digital technologies have likewise transformed our understanding of human interaction and information. Finally, in a call for awareness and human solidarity, I suggest that resisting technological change is not futile; indeed, it is essential if we wish to free ourselves from the matrix we have created and perpetuated.

Keywords:
Digital Environment, Technological Resistance, Jun'ichirō Tanizaki

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ISSN 2773-0875

Were it not for shadows, there would be no beauty.
—Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*

1. Introduction

Technology has a long history of influencing humanity. While this statement seems monolithic and perhaps deterministic, this essay first aims to illustrate the impacts of technology and, second, to discuss a possible way forward amid technological change. This essay draws on media ecology and the philosophy of technology to call attention to certain human elements that are lost in technological change, particularly with the advent of digital environments. The nuance of human existence cannot be reduced to binary code, to 1 and 0, to pure black and white. Nuance, instead, implies a shadow, a between state. It is this liminal space that will serve as the main analogy for the essay. I wish to offer a brief overview and critique, while also maintaining a mild optimism that we are never beyond the scope of recovering ourselves from the throes of technological change.

The purpose of this essay is to follow through and observe some of the implications of "technological progress.[1] I will use the impact of electric light on Japanese aesthetics, particularly from the perspective of Jun'ichirō Tanizaki and his essay *In Praise of Shadows*. Electric light, as a medium, will help us see a pattern of technological change, particularly one whose positive impacts are often foregrounded while its negative effects are left in the dark. Then, I will extend the conception of electric light as a pattern to digital technologies more broadly, with the goal of connecting the loss of beauty in Tanizaki's view to the broader harm to humanity in the digital environment. This section will evaluate digital technology philosophically and metaphorically, using electric light as an analogy. Lastly, in a call for awareness and human solidarity, I suggest that resistance to technological change is not futile. Indeed, it is imperative if we intend to free ourselves from the matrix we have fashioned and enabled.

2. Japanese Industrialisation in the Meiji Era

Japanese culture shifted drastically in the late 1800s. The Japanese Meiji era of the 1870s exhibited more curiosity about Western ideas and technologies than previous regimes.[2] However, to some, adopting foreign ideas and technologies gave the Japanese a bad light (pun intended). Japan ultimately "relied on the West as the source of technological

1 Marshall McLuhan and Eric McLuhan, *Laws of Media: The New Science* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 93.
2 Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

knowledge… a dependency that gave rise to the unflattering view that the Japanese could only borrow and imitate, not invent."[3] If the Japanese had been left to their own devices, literally, they might have come into a "world of technology entirely its own."[4] Of course, the sentiment that Japan merely aped the West would later change when many new technologies and innovations began to flow from the island nation to Western shores.

Don Ihde suggests a categorisation of how technologies are carried from more industrialised countries to those less adapted to technical means of existence, and the responses of indigenous cultures to "technologization."[5] He considers the first group as having no coping mechanism to stave off or slow the invasion. They are over-taken and overwhelmed, consumed by the novelty and newfound abilities technology provides. Ihde sees the second group as compromising by adopting certain technofacts (technological artefacts) and adapting them to the indigenous way of life. A third group resists the majority of the incoming group's technologies. This is, however, a rare occasion. The last group in Ihde's taxonomy goes beyond merely adopting certain technofacts, as seen in group two, but takes on the incoming group's cultural shape and thinking process. Once sufficiently adopted and adapted, the mindset becomes pervasive, and the indigenous group begins to go beyond the incoming group's previous innovations. Ihde notes that Japan, "in different historical periods, has exemplified both (3) resistance and (4) the willing adaptation of high-technology culture and, on the surface, even many of its Western accoutrements."[6] Although initially completely resistant to foreigners and foreign ideas, the Japanese would eventually adopt Western ideals and technologies in new territory, in an ironic fashion.

Despite their deep connection to the traditional way of life in Japanese culture, with its love of ritual and symbolism, "for most young Japanese the modernization of their country along Western lines and personal advancement were stronger motivations."[7] The pervasive sentiment was summed up by the slogans, "*bunmei kaika*, civilization and enlightenment, and *risshin shusse*, be a success!" with both slogans expressing "the reform enthusiasm and optimism of early Meiji."[8] However, the early to mid-20th century displayed a tempering of this thought.

In 1942, a group of prominent Japanese "critics, thinkers, scholars, and writers met in the old imperial capital city of Kyoto during what was described as two very hot summer days to discuss the question of how to 'overcome the modern' (*kindai no chōkoku*) and

3 James L McClain, *Japan: A Modern History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 229.
4 Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows* (translated by Thomas J. Harper and Edward G. Seiden-sticker) (Sedgwick: Leete's Island Books, 1977), 7.
5 Don Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 151
6 Ihde, *Technology*, 151.
7 Marius B. Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2000), 460.
8 Jansen, *The Making*, 460.

the meaning of the war for the nation."[9] By this time, the concern was not only on the consumption of goods but also a change in customs. Assimilation had occurred to such an extent that many in Japan at the time rarely recognised that the goods they consumed were imported, or that using technological innovations such as telephones, cars, and radio was still relatively new to Japanese life.[10]

The concerned group, labelled the Kyoto School even though there was no formal membership, sought to overcome modernity not by dismissing or overturning it, but by living through it. They sought resistance to the imported capitalistic and material nature they saw as connected with modernity. Fearing that Japanese culture "would disappear into that large, boundless realm of sameness called modernity," the symposium suggested, as a means of overcoming, "a rediscovery of the classics, the return of the gods and… a new kind of subjectivity that owed as much to modern philosophy as it did to Buddhist metaphysics."[11] Within this resistance was an appeal to tradition that privileged "art and culture produced before and outside of capitalism" as a critique and a call to action.[12] Yet the impact of one particular innovation was difficult to overcome: electricity, specifically electric lighting.

In 1886, a Japanese manufacturer named Shibusawa "installed electric lighting throughout his mills, becoming the first textile manufacturer in the world to do so, and he then added a second shift of workers so that he could operate his expensive imported machinery twenty-two hours a day."[13] The use of electricity had already disrupted labour in many Western nations. Electricity made the industrialised world more efficient, with smaller units able to supply the same outputs as the former coal and steam systems.[14] Electricity became a driver of technological innovation, but it also became an end, with automation as the ultimate goal. Lewis Mumford notes that in the mid-1900s, "Power production and automatic machines have steadily been diminishing the worker's importance in factory production."[15] This diminishing of the worker's importance to factory work foretold many structural changes in society, for Western communities and Japanese alike. The fascination with power and electricity also began to infiltrate the home life of many Japanese, displaying a cultural shift at the local level that many Westerners had long since incorporated.

By the end of the 1800s, Japan had embraced electric lighting so thoroughly that it led the

9 Harry Harootunian, *Overcome by Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 34.
10 Harootunian, *Overcome by Modernity*, 50.
11 Harootunian, *Overcome by Modernity*, 91.
12 Harootunian, *Overcome by Modernity*, 218.
13 McClain, *Japan*, 229.
14 Lewis Mumford, *Technics & Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
15 Mumford, *Technics*, 228.

world in the use of fluorescent lights, which had become a standard fixture in Japanese homes, replacing paper lanterns as the main source of light.[16] This effect also began to change domestic and foreign views of Japanese culture and other areas of their existence. Electric light, as opposed to natural light sources such as sunlight and firelight, exemplifies how one culture adopting the technological inventions and ideas of another can create a Faustian bargain, in Neil Postman's terms.[17] For the Japanese, the changes that followed were significant, and for some, destructive of traditional aesthetics and ideals.

3. The Problems of Electric Light

As a technological medium, electric light offers vast benefits, such as illuminating darkness at the flip of a switch. No longer does a person have to harness fire or wait for sunlight to navigate the night. Light is the purest medium because most other activities could not exist without it.[18] The purity of light stems from its function as a "medium without a message," as a medium that provides a context for other media.[19] However, what happens when electric light overpowers or negatively impacts other parameters? Marshall McLuhan notes that "the message of the electric light is total change. It is pure information without any content to restrict its transforming and informing power."[20] I will address the implications of light as information later in the essay, but for now, suffice it to say that electric light as a medium brings about changes in our perceptions of the world, and subsequently in our understanding of it. McLuhan discusses how various media impact our existence by stating, "All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, or unaltered. The medium is the message. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments."[21] This assertion shows just how powerful and environmentally damaging technological change can be. We must then ask, what kind of environment does electric light create, and what are the implications?

In answering the above questions, we might start by observing what is lost by adopting electric light. While Jun'ichirō Tanizaki was not a member of the Kyoto School, his critiques of modernity's impact on culture bear resemblance to the group and offer a

16 Miya Elise Mizuta, "Luminous Environment: Light, Architecture and Decoration in Modern Japan," *Japan Forum* 18, no. 3 (2006): 339-360.

17 Neil Postman, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 192.

18 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 9.

19 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 8.

20 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 52.

21 Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore *The Medium is the Massage* (New York: Random House, 1967), 26.

valuable perspective.[22] Initially known for his fiction writing, Tanizaki wrote an essay about his views of shadows as a quintessential part of the Japanese aesthetic that had been largely lost due to the Japanese embracing electric light. He titled the essay, *In Praise of Shadows*, a "lament," an "elegy for a Japanese architecture destroyed by illumination, by an electric force, which disperses the shadows that linger in and constitute the essence of the Japanese house."[23] During World War II, writers such as Tanizaki were silenced due to their commentaries on modernization.[24] Tanizaki and his writings were later rediscovered by both Japanese and Western readers. The following section will describe Tanizaki's phenomenological insights into shadows and why they were important to Japanese culture during his youth and prior.

4. Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows*

Early in his essay, Tanizaki notes how far transitioned the Japanese had become by electricity, stating, "For so accustomed are we to electric lights that the sight of a naked bulb beneath an ordinary milk glass shade seems simpler and more natural than any gratuitous attempt to hide it."[25] Tanizaki understood, similarly to McLuhan, that the medium shapes perception. He submits that something as insignificant as a pen can have "a vast, almost boundless, influence on our culture."[26] This is in reference to the fountain pen as opposed to the Oriental use of the brush. This invasion, he writes, has forced the Japanese to stray from the path they have followed for thousands of years. What has been deemed progress in Western eyes has imposed a direction upon the Japanese that removed the opportunity for them to arrive at a notion of progress that suited their culture. While Japanese progress might have been slow if they had been left unadulterated, Tanizaki writes that there would "have been no borrowed gadgets, they would have been the tools of our own culture, suited to us."[27] However, the nature of technological change is such that it occurs irrespective of whose culture it affects, instead imposing its own culture on the human lifeworld.[28]

Tanizaki criticises how Western technologies, such as the phonograph and radio, affected Japanese music and the value placed on silence. Western machines and innovations, he

22 Michael Gardiner, "Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, the Kyoto School, and the Twenty-first Century Transparency Society," *Philosophy East and West* 73, no. 4 (2023): 854–876.
23 Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 21.
24 Jansen, *The Making*, 710.
25 Tanizaki, *In Praise*, 1.
26 Tanizaki, *In Praise*, 8.
27 Tanizaki, *In Praise*, 9.
28 Ihde, *Technology*; Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

adds, are suited to Western arts but disadvantage Japanese arts, such as Western paper, which turned light away. In contrast, Japanese paper gently takes it in.[29] Much of Japanese artwork was reserved and minimalist in order to embrace contrasting shadow and light, as seen in Miyamoto Musashi's *Shrike on a Withered Branch* and Hokusai's *Great Wave.* Shiny things, such as polished silver and nickel tableware, were not aesthetically pleasing to Tanizaki. For him and the Japanese culture he looks back toward, enjoying shiny things began when the lustre had worn off, and a bit of grime or soot had demurred the sheen.[30]

Shadows were needed to texture other elements in Japanese life, such as food and living spaces. Tanizaki proposes, "with Japanese food, a brightly lighted room and shining tableware cut the appetite in half… Our cooking depends upon shadows and is inseparable from darkness."[31] The contrast of light shadows and dark shadows permeated the rooms and houses in the former Japanese culture, impacting the beauty one perceives within the space.[32] An example Tanizaki describes is the alcove. For him, the alcove is beautiful not because it is a cleverly built design feature, but because of the emptiness created within it by its construction. There in the alcove, silence reigns, and "tranquility holds sway."[33]

Moving beyond the aesthetics of things, Tanizaki shifts to human beauty, where, were it not for shadows, beauty would not exist.[34] Women in the older Japanese society were accented, similarly to ornamental lacquerware, by shadows. Only their faces stood out, a pale complexion contrasting with the darkness of shadows, with the rest of their bodies concealed in their kimonos. Expounding on Tanizaki's point, Akira Mizuta Lippit suggests that electric light exposes the secret body, making it indecent.[35] The shaded, obscured, dark body, according to Tanizaki, contrasts with the clean, overexposed body.

Tanizaki notes that Westerners, like the Japanese, have not always had modern trappings such as gas and electricity, but unlike the Japanese, they have also never had a disposition to shadows. He opines, "What produces such differences in taste? In my opinion, it is this: we Orientals tend to seek our satisfactions in whatever surroundings we happen to find ourselves, to content ourselves with things as they are."[36] This contrasts with the Westerner's desire to change his condition, particularly dealing with darkness: "From candle to oil lamp, oil lamp to gaslight, gaslight to electric light—his quest for a brighter light never ceases, he spares no pain to eradicate even the minutest shadow."[37] Instead of

29 Tanizaki, *In Praise*, 9-10.
30 Tanizaki, *In Praise*.
31 Tanizaki, *In Praise*, 16–17.
32 Tanizaki, *In Praise*, 18.
33 Tanizaki, *In Praise*, 20.
34 Tanizaki, *In Praise*, 30.
35 Lippit, *Atomic Light*.
36 Tanizaki, *In Praise*, 31.
37 Tanizaki, *In Praise*, 31.

being used to highlight something artistically, or for some constructive activity such as reading, writing, or sewing, light is used to dispel shadows from every nook and cranny. For Tanizaki, this runs counter to the Japanese embrace of shadows as part of their aesthetic and culture.

Still, Tanizaki submits himself to the fact that Japan has "chosen to follow the West, and there is nothing for her to do but move bravely ahead and leave us old ones behind. But we must be resigned to the fact that as long as our skin is the colour it is the loss we have suffered cannot be remedied."[38] This concession is not necessarily defeat, but a realisation that the present condition is now Japanese as much as it is Western, that the "version of progress based on the unification of space by all-penetrating light can't simply be reversed."[39] Just as the disposition toward electricity started in the West and moved East, the tendency toward technological innovation and expansion has now become a global phenomenon. This blurring is no mere grey area, because, in Tanizaki's terms, just as light consumes and washes out a space, the shadows are swallowed up, leaving an aesthetic void and, simultaneously, a false sense of reality. There is more to shadows than what Tanizaki could state, however.

5. Light, Darkness, and the Something in Between

Light is fundamental to our lifeworld, as plants need it for photosynthesis. When we find ourselves suddenly in the dark, we become disoriented and often scared.[40] Light also shapes our worldview by conditioning how we perceive, "guiding what we are able to see, inflecting visible colours and informing our sense of the shape of space."[41] Despite light's intrinsic value to biological existence, our sensory orientation, and our perceptual abilities, we can be blinded by light as well.[42] There is a reason we wear sunglasses or hats outside in the daytime, and can flip a switch or dim the lights while inside. Beyond just biological and phenomenological areas, "the *absence* of light can condition atmospheric settings."[43] This conditioning, as Tanizaki alludes to, occurs via light's relationship with darkness, to which it is often seen as an opposing force. In this created dichotomy of light and darkness, the space between, the shadow, often gets forgotten or ignored, or merely lumped in as a form of darkness and therefore often demonised.[44]

38 Tanizaki, *In Praise*, 42.
39 Gardiner, "Tanizaki Jun'ichirō," 856.
40 David J. Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water as Environmental Ideas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010).
41 Tim Edensor, "Light Design and Atmosphere," *Visual Communication*, 14, no. 3 (2015): 331.
42 Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy*, 247.
43 Edensor, "Light Design," 332.
44 Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy*, 248.

In Plato's conception, and by extension much of later philosophy's, shadows have long been seen as a falsity or figment of the real, cast on a cave wall by firelight. At the same time, truth was found in the sunlight outside the cave.[45] Plato's cave, where darkness inside contrasts with the blinding sun outside, illustrates a form of being and closedness. Byung-Chul Han notes that this contrast is anathema to the Far Eastern sense of space, wherein the relationship between inside and outside, light and shadow, "creates an in-difference, an in-between."[46] The give and take, ever-shifting nature of light in Tanizaki's and Han's writings demonstrate change and tension without the necessity of fusion. For the Far East, "neither the permanence of *being* nor the stability of *essences* is part of the beautiful. Things that persist, subsist or insist are neither beautiful nor noble."[47] Beauty is found in the "fleetingness of a *transition*" rather than the "duration of a *condition.*"[48] The hazy horizon bears more beauty than the clearly defined edge. In this regard, the "heroic light that seeks to reduce the darkness"[49] is antithetical to the Far Eastern view, largely because both are needed, ever in dialectical tension, to maintain the beauty created by the shadow.

Han follows Tanizaki, who notes the interplay between light and darkness, in which absolutes and stark dualisms are disdained. For Tanizaki, this interplay is the essence of the shadow. The excess of electric light in present-day Japan had destroyed the elegance of Japanese aesthetics. The desirable space in Tanizaki's mind was one "not *perforated by communication*," an un-datafied space similar to a Buddhist temple wherein the shadows add a sense of completeness rather than the conquest of electric light.[50] As opposed to simpler forms of lighting such as candlelight or oil lamps, electric light invades space and "erases distinction between discrete spaces, making difference invisible."[51] What gets erased is the between, the liminal space that carves out and protects space for differences on either side.

Miya Elise Mizuta suggests shadows as a third term between the dialectic of light and darkness. Rather than seeing shadows as merely a lessened form of darkness, "the shadow is that which grows out of darkness to encompass light… an indeterminate body suspended between the voids of light and darkness."[52] There is an ironic view here in the

45 Plato, "The Republic" in *The Best Known Works of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett (New York: The Book League, 1942), book VI and VII.
46 Byung-Chul Han, *Absence: On the Culture and Philosophy of the Far East*, trans. Daniel Steuer (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023), 28.
47 Han, *Absence*, 33.
48 Han, *Absence*, 34.
49 Han, *Absence*, 35.
50 Michael Gardiner, "Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's In Praise of Shadows and critical transparency," *Textual Practice*, (2023): 5, emphasis in original.
51 Mizuta, "Luminous Environment," 343.
52 Mizuta, "Luminous Environment," 345.

term void, given that shadows are often seen as the void rather than light or darkness. Shadows, suspended between the polarities of light and dark, indicate absence rather than presence.[53] In this way, light and dark become the void since they close off indefinitely the possibility of something other than itself. In phenomenological terms, shadows have a different form of being from other phenomena since their being is not comprised of substance but of absence. This absence, as opposed to a void, embraces an Eastern view of existence.

Han points out that the "fundamental topos of Far Eastern thinking is not being but the way (*dao*)… The difference between *being* and *path*, between *dwelling* and *wandering*, between essence and absencing, is critical."[54] Following this assertion, the *way*, as opposed to being, "does not permit any substantive closure."[55] This lack of closure allows for things to flow into each other, to coalesce and converge, without necessarily fusing together. In its infatuation with essences, the West has a view foreign to the East. Han notes, "Essence is difference. Thus, essences block transitions. Absencing is in-difference."[56] Essence, as being or substance, evacuates the middle, the between. It places a distinction between the subject and object, the figure and ground. In contrast, through absencing, space is made for the relationship between the subject and object. Space is made for transition, for collaboration, for meaning to be created. Absencing, as Han illustrates it, "makes space more permeable" without the need for finality and closure.[57] In contrast, essences create closure, removing possibilities and horizons. This effect becomes problematic, at least metaphorically and aesthetically, in Tanizaki's terms.

With the advent of electric light, shadows become increasingly diluted.[58] Just as Tanizaki lamented the beauty that was lost when electric lights entered the room, we must ask, if shadows are analogous to a liminal space, what is the cost of eradicating shadows, of invading our lives with electric light? Mizuta demonstrates how the "'problem of lighting' is equated with Westernization or Western enlightenment," whereas the "'Japanese style'… the true beauty of Japanese art that Tanizaki argues is 'inseparable from darkness,' is fading under the glare of this blinding light."[59] On the global scale, if, as McLuhan suggested, electric light is "pure information without any content to restrict its transforming and informing power,"[60] what are we to do with this blinding light? Here, electric light can be seen as a metaphor for information and the glut of it in the digital age.

53 Carlos A Morujão, "Shadows: A Phenomenological Analysis," *Phainomenon* 30, (2020): 21.
54 Han, *Absence*, 5.
55 Han, *Absence*, 6.
56 Han, *Absence*, 22.
57 Han, *Absence*, 23.
58 Mizuta, "Luminous Environment," 345.
59 Mizuta, "Luminous Environment," 343.
60 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 52.

6. Between-ness Lost and Blinding Light

In his essays *Saving Beauty* and *The Transparency Society*, Byung-Chul Han suggests that what we often find beautiful in the modernised world are smooth things, reflecting a social imperative of positivity. Smooth things do not injure or resist, and instead remove negativity, creating what Han calls a society of positivity and of transparency.[61] In such a transparent society, all forms of distance must be eliminated from information, which must be free from otherness, instead valuing conformity and uniformity.[62] In Han's interpretation, modern communication is smooth, "a frictionless exchange of information… free from any negativity of the other or alien."[63] Digital beauty contrasts natural beauty, which is often coarse on the edges, sometimes blurry, or what we might say, shadowed, in Tanizaki's terms. Digital beauty, distinct from the blending of between spaces, "forms a *smooth space of the same*, which does not permit anything alien, any *alterity*, to enter."[64] To save beauty, we must also preserve a sense of the *other*, of difference.[65] Just as Tanizaki viewed the beauty of Japanese aesthetics through the use of shadows, inseparable from darkness, our rich and beautiful landscape of culture is being smoothed out by digital representation and "fading under the glare of this blinding light."[66]

Information in the digital age, like its predecessor, electric light, makes everything instantly present, forced to stand outside historical time.[67] Information is now taken for granted, a transparent aspect of our current environment in the same manner as electric light. Following this realisation, information is not to be mistaken for knowledge, which is often private and the result of deliberate thought or reflection.[68] Instead, information may be seen as a "form of garbage" because it "appears indiscriminately, directed at no one in particular, in enormous volume and at high speeds, and disconnected from theory, meaning, and purpose."[69] Indeed, we are "awash in information"[70] just as Japan had become awash in electric light in Tanizaki's era. In both cases, electric light and information, the relationships between humans and their technologies become disoriented, often shifting the user to the used and vice versa.

Douglas Rushkoff, an ardent critic of modern technology and media, states, "Our

61 Byung-Chul Han, *Saving Beauty* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 1. Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 13.
62 Han, *The Transparency Society*, viii.
63 Han, *Saving Beauty*, 10.
64 Han, *Saving Beauty*, 25.
65 Han, *Saving Beauty*, 68.
66 Mizuta, "Luminous Environment," 343.
67 Mizuta, "Luminous Environment," 346.
68 Han, *Saving Beauty*, 31.
69 Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 70.
70 Postman, *Technopoly*, 69.

technologies change from being the tools humans use into the environments in which humans function… as technology goes from tool to replacement, the humans using it devolve from users to the used."[71] Tanizaki recognized that electric light destroyed the aesthetic of Japanese beauty, completely remaking Japanese beauty into something bereft of its originality and vibrance. In the above realization, Rushkoff recognizes that digital technologies (or just technology in general) completely remake human environments into something devoid of their humanistic orientations. Instead, the technologies morph into grand-scale puppets with a handful of puppet masters controlling the play.

They also eradicate between-ness. Rushkoff affirms, "There are no in-betweens… The internet reinforces its core element: the binary. It makes us take sides."[72] As a design feature of modern digital media and technologies, choice and agency are replaced by algorithms. Human reasoning and the adventure of uncertainty are replaced with computer logic and the perceived safety of someone or something else making a decision for us. Computers and similar technologies rely on certainty, binary logic, and linear progression because that is their primary function. They are inputs and outputs, 1s and 0s. There are no in-between states, or as Rushkoff notes, ambiguity is prohibited.[73] However, it is the ambiguity, the middle, the between, that makes us human, just as the middle ground of the shadow creates beauty for Tanizaki.

The digital environment not only forces us into the paradox of choice by giving us so much information to choose from yet simultaneously nudging us toward single options, but it also creates a vortex of distraction from the present reality. Rushkoff states that we "tend to exist in a distracted present, where forces on the periphery are magnified and those immediately before us are ignored."[74] This disorientation, what Rushkoff calls a present-shock nightmare, is alarming because we physically cannot be in two places at once, no matter how much our digital technologies attempt to create that illusion. No matter how much we adopt a technology (short of the singularity in Ray Kurzweil's sense), our bodies are still analog and therefore remain bounded by certain physical characteristics.[75]

In the race to adopt newer and newer technologies, we often fail to count the costs. No matter how much we think online presence "feels" real or believe that it allows us to stay connected with others, there is a certain loss of humanity in the move to digital spaces. Rushkoff insists that humans "rely on the organic world to maintain our prosocial attitudes and behaviours. Online relationships are to real ones like internet pornography is to making love. The artificial experience not only pales in comparison to the organic

71 Douglas Rushkoff, *Team Human* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 52.
72 Rushkoff, *Team Human*, 85-86.
73 Rushkoff, *Team Human*, 135.
74 Douglas Rushkoff, *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 4.
75 Rushkoff, *Present Shock*, 71.

one, but degrades our understanding of human connection."[76] Similarly, Tanizaki suggests that this effect also occurs with natural light. In his critique, he noted that his homeland had become accustomed to the institutional feeling of fluorescent light, thereby degrading the beauty and intrigue of the shadowed visage.

A key feature of our (human) existence is our diversity, recognizing that we are not all the same. Following this assumption, we do not all know the same information, and if we did, we would not need the medium of communication.[77] The existential state of humanity implies plurality rather than singularity, which is characteristic of digitality given the binary logic underlying the digital environment. As Timo Kylmälä highlights, "the machinate 'mind' (e.g. a functional totality of networked computers) is an environment unto itself, where medium loses its function as an in-between."[78]

Kylmälä's fear is akin to Tanizaki's lament for the loss of shadows, Han's critique that friction is smoothed out, and Rushkoff's notion that ambiguity is irradicated. For Kylmälä, the plurality of human existence is compressed into a singularity: "Our digital machines are by their very organization a *singularity*; they are designed to merge together flawlessly and comprise one, massive, uninterrupted superstructure."[79] Echoing McLuhan's terms, the danger here is that the "in-betweens" of human existence are at risk of obsolescence or amputation. Kylmälä argues that as the human experience shrinks due to living in digital environments, we become more informational, less and less of a medium or a between.

A last facet where the advent of digital technologies overlaps with electric light is the dislocation of figure from ground and the collapsing of contexts. McLuhan believes that electric light is pure information, a medium without a message.[80] In this formation, light becomes the ground, but one that completely engulfs and eliminates the figure. In a normal situation, the figure-ground dialectic is always in flux. McLuhan and his son Eric propose that figures "rise out of, and recede back into, ground, which is con-figurational and comprises all other available figures at once… Each new figure in turn displaces the others into ground."[81] In this configuration, ground is subliminal and structural even while it is ever-shifting. However, if electric light and digital media eliminate the figure and stifle the dialectical tension, then the threat of making the original subject (us) into an object of utility is a likely result. Rushkoff states, "When we lose track of figure and ground, we forget who is doing what for whom, and why. We risk treating other people as objects.

76 Rushkoff, *Present Shock*, 72.
77 Timo P. Kylmälä, "Medium, the Human Condition and Beyond." *Empedocles: European Journal for the Philosophy of Communication* 4, no. 2 (2012): 133–151.
78 Kylmälä, "Medium," 140.
79 Kylmälä, "Medium," 144.
80 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 8.
81 McLuhan and McLuhan, *Laws*, 5.

Worse, we embed these values in our organisations or encode them into our technologies," thereby disguising the problem for future users.[82] While we, the humans, were once the tool-users, in the digital environment, we have become the used. We have gone from being the figure in the digital world to being the ground.[83] In contrast, technologies were once extensions of our nervous systems, according to McLuhan, then simultaneously became our environments, according to Postman, and have now consumed us, as Rushkoff points out. Technologies began as a way of helping us exist but have become our existence. The entire context has collapsed.

In *Context Blindness*, Eva Berger describes context collapse as "how people, information, and norms from one context leak into another."[84] Context collapse means simultaneity, everything converging all at once. Berger notes that we have been deprived of context in the age of the Internet, social media, and digital technology. Once a context collapses, the figure and ground, or the inside and outside, no longer exist. A parallel effect of context collapse for Berger is context blindness, a useful metaphor for understanding "the human condition in this technological age."[85] However, as Berger illustrates, context blindness, an effect normally associated with autistic behaviour, is becoming a trait among neurotypical individuals who are no longer in control of their digital environments. Berger uses both the metaphor and the condition of autism to demonstrate that "'autistics' difficulty in imagining minds other than their own and their struggle with social skills may be a preview of our imminent context-blind human circumstances."[86]

Given the smoothening out of difference in Han's work on beauty, the loss of in-betweenness in Rushkoff's and Kylmälä's summation of digital environments, the dislocation of figure and ground in McLuhan's perception, and the context blindness Berger suggests, what can, or should we do? How might we resist the changing dynamics of our environments? Tanizaki's essay on the loss of shadows in Japanese aesthetics ultimately ends in his acceptance of the changes and a resignation that the Japan he so fondly remembers is a thing of the past. Is it too late to steer this ship in a different direction? Perhaps for some, particularly the techno-optimists, we have never gone off course. The opportunities of new technologies are exciting and often open doors that were previously closed. Still, for those who worry about the changes, there must be a way to break from the "machine," or at minimum, resist it.

82 Rushkoff, *Team Human*, 44.
83 Rushkoff, *Team Human*, 63.
84 Eva Berger, *Context Blindness: Digital Technology and the Next Stage of Human Evolution* (New York: Peter Lang, 2022), 58.
85 Berger, *Context Blindness*, 31.
86 Berger, *Context Blindness*, 32.

7. Conclusion: Resisting Without Revolting

Technology resistance can take many forms,[87] including violent extremism (i.e., Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber or the Luddites), healthy pacifism (i.e., the Amish), and those who question the effects technology has on culture and society (i.e., Neil Postman, Jacques Ellul, and Lewis Mumford). The Kyoto School resisted by seeking to overcome the issues of capitalism and modernization through rediscovering their previous art and culture. In the works of Tanizaki and modern-day techno-critics such as Wendell Berry, we find "a profound sense of loss and an awareness that technology has a way of coming between the individual and feelings that cannot be measured or charted or counted but are nevertheless treasured."[88] Postman calls for a loving resistance to technology wherein we recognize the historical ramifications of various innovations and advancements, and also embrace a healthy hesitation and scepticism of new technologies.[89] McLuhan affirms, "there is absolutely no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening."[90] Building on McLuhan's work, Rushkoff recommends that if we learn "to recognize reversals of figure and ground, we can liberate ourselves from the systems to which we have become enslaved."[91] In Postman, McLuhan, and Rushkoff, we find imperatives to step outside our environments from time to time and "see the light," as the saying goes.

In many ways, both electric light and digital media were created to help humans see the world differently and interact with each other more cohesively. However, these "painstakingly evolved mechanisms for social connection—for playing as a team—fail in the digital environment."[92] Ironically, as explained above, our technologies harm as much as they help. In so many ways, the natural world and human existence are both collaborative acts.[93] It is a collaboration between light and dark, figure and ground, and myriad other things that need the between. Electric light and digital technologies both often wash out our differences, the very things we have that make us human. Indeed, it is in the between that we exist.

Lance Strate sums up the human condition as "a middle ground, an environment that constitutes the medium of our being and becoming. We emerge, individually and collectively, out of those same gaps and cracks… the interstices and intervals, the stuff

87 Nicole Fox, *Against the Machine: The Hidden Luddite Tradition in Literature, Art, and Individual Lives* (Washington: Island Press, 2013).
88 Fox, *Against the Machine*, 15.
89 Postman, *Technopoly*.
90 McLuhan and Fiore, *The Medium*, 25.
91 Rushkoff, *Team Human*, 44.
92 Rushkoff, *Team Human*, 72.
93 Rushkoff, *Team Human*, 11.

that lies in-between."[94] This statement roots resistance in an attention to our humanness and emphasises the need to protect ourselves from the things we have created,[95] the things that "are replacing and devaluing our humanity."[96] Tanizaki lamented the loss of beauty in his era, seeing the devaluation of shadows and the replacement of natural light with electricity. Just as he worried over the cost of aesthetics, we, too, might ask what elements of the natural world or the tangible creations of humans are losing their existence to the digital space. As electric light redefined beauty for Tanizaki's Japan, so, too, have digital technologies redefined what we consider human interaction and information. Western influence on Japanese culture was boundless in Tanizaki's estimation. He questions whether Japan could have "pushed forward into new regions quite on their own" if they had been left alone.[97] Perhaps we might follow suit and ask what humanity might be capable of if we were more hesitant to adopt new technologies and more resistant to allowing them to invade our existence and between spaces.

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94 Lance Strate, *Media Ecology: An Approach to Understanding the Human Condition* (New York: Peter Lang, 2017), xi.

95 Rushkoff, *Team Human*, 39.

96 Rushkoff, *Team Human*, 5.

97 Tanizaki, *In Praise*, 8.

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