

ABSTRACT

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Source One

Bridle, James. *New Dark Age, Technology And The End Of The Future*. Verso, 2018.

Source Two

Tönsing, D.L., 2017, 'Homo faber or homo credente? What defines humans, and what could Homo naledi contribute to this debate?', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73(3), 4495. <https://hts.org.za/index.php/hts/article/view/4495/10390>

Aesthetic example

McLellan, Todd. *Things Come Apart*. (photo series) 2013. (Todd McLellan motion/stills inc)

Rodrigo, Caula. „Things Come Apart: A Teardown Manual For Modern Living By Todd McLellan“. *Designboom | Architecture & Design Magazine*, 2013, <https://www.designboom.com/art/things-come-apart-a-teardown-manual-for-modern-living-by-todd-mcclellan/>. Accessed 3 Oct 2021.



This Essay explores the concept of homo faber (humans as creators of their own tools and lives) within the context of modern technological consumption and passivity. Drawing on James Bridle's *New Dark Age* (2018), the research examines how contemporary humans are increasingly passive consumers of complex technologies, often losing the ability to „shape and direct“ the very tools they rely on (Bridle, 2018, p. 2). In contrast, Detlev L. Tönsing's exploration of homo faber (2017) highlights the human as an active agent who creates and controls their environment through tools and technology.

A gap emerges between these two perspectives: while the concept of homo faber positions humans as active makers, Bridle suggests we are becoming disconnected from this role, especially in relation to modern systems and technologies. This paper seeks to reconcile these views by exploring what lessons homo faber offers in addressing technological passivity.

Todd McLellan's photo series *Things Come Apart* (2013) serves as a visual metaphor for this tension. By deconstructing everyday objects, McLellan's work emphasizes the complexity of modern tools, reflecting the themes in Bridle's work about the need for a more engaged relationship with technology.

Research question

What can we learn from the concept of the homo faber when trying to be less passive towards complex tools, as seen in Todd McLellan's photo series, and towards complex systems and technologies as described in James Bridle's book?

EMERGENCE: FROM TOOLS TO AGENCY

The idea from James Bridle of being critical "in order to meaningfully participate in (...) shaping and directing" and truly "knowing how things came to be" triggered my interest (Bridle, 2018, p.2, 3). The point the author makes refers to new technologies. However, what intrigued me in particular, is how society lost the sense of "how things came to be" not only towards advanced technology but also towards essential processes like food and energy production or generation or in general to the tools they use (Bridle, 2018, p.3). Electricity comes from the socket and food from the supermarket. How many people actually visit an atomic reactor, a coal-fired power station or simply a farm to gain a real-life impression and experience of "how things came to be" that goes beyond "functional understanding" (Bridle, 2018, p.3).

This reflects the state of the society of the spectacle in the 21st century as it describes the role of the consumer as passive, and blind towards a layer behind appearances. Or in other terms, what cannot be seen because it happened earlier. This lost consciousness is what makes the consumer less critical, and to put it in James Bridle's words; unable "to meaningfully participate in (...) shaping and directing" (Bridle, 2018, p.2).

Splitting up tasks and having different fields of expertise is surely one reason why humans were able to develop the way they did. One human cannot be informed about every field. However, in a world where so many products have a big impact due to their quantity of production the consumer should be held accountable for their actions and to their responsibility of knowing what they are consuming. This means that without the effort of being critical, questioning and curious the consumers remain passive and therefore unable to form the world around them.

In the photo series "Things come a part" the Canadian photographer Todd McLellan takes apart everyday tools and lays them out in an organised way (Herr, 2013). The products reach from electronic devices to mechanical tools or even a chainsaw. In an interview McLellan talks about his intention behind his photographs: "I wanted to show some of the objects that I had collected in a new light or different way of seeing them." (Herr, 2013).

This aesthetic reference relates to James Bridle's book as it reveals the parts of products that do not appear on the outside and therefore may trigger questions and curiosity when being revealed to their consumers. Some devices surely reveal parts that the majority of people don't know the purpose of or that they haven't seen before. However, what seems interesting is what these photographs cannot portray even when showing every part the tool is made of. This especially referring to advanced technological devices. For example the photograph of the mobile phone cannot portray the connections to other systems like transmission masts or cables. It can also not show who built it or where the resources came from. These kinds of invisible and less obvious connections seem to contribute to losing the understanding of how our tools and products impact and interact with our surroundings. This leads to the question of how important it is as a modern human to understand the tools we use and their impact, influence and connections.

The article by Detlev L. Tönsing, among other subjects, deals with the concept of homo faber. Which defines the modern human as "(...) the makers of instruments and the makers of their own life." (Tönsing, 2017, p.2). Or in other terms as an operating adjuster of their surroundings using tools.

Not only do both theoretical sources refer to tools and how their purpose don't define their use, they also discuss the state of the modern human in a modern world. On one hand we have the human who needs to learn to be critical and understand "how things come to be" in order to participate in the directing and shaping of the world (Bridle, 2018, p.3). While on the other hand the concept of the homo faber states that the modern human is already defined by the ability to be an active maker of its own life and surroundings, who seeks a deeper purpose than dominating their environment (Tönsing, 2017 p.2).

Both, Bridle and Tönsing believe that in order to deal with the speeding development of advanced technologies and tools we need to amplify our thinking. While Bridle suggests to re-enchanted tools using metaphors, Tönsing believes that we need to put our "calculating, instrumental thinking" beneath something that's greater than us (Bridle, 2018, p.13) (Tönsing 2017, p.3). To me it sounds like both theoretical sources suggest to reflect on the ancient roots of being human in order to face the rapid technological developments. Combining human rootedness with the hunger for technological progress. Thus, combining the old with the new.

So what can we learn from the older concept of homo faber when dealing with new technologies? In his book Bridle points out the importance of "our ability to act effectively in the world and shape it to our desires" (Bridle, 2018, p.13). This directly reflects the concept of the homo faber who is a modifier of their surroundings. Even though this characteristic of being an operating adjuster of our surroundings doesn't define us as humans, still it seems to be essential for our existence. In my opinion there is not much homo faber left in the modern human, as the average person seems to have lost the "functional understanding" of their tools and how they "came to be" (Bridle, 2018, p.3). Or in other terms, how can one be an active shaper of the world when they don't know how their tools shape the world?

It seems like the majority of humanity is resting on the complete domination of the planet and therefore seems to have lost the qualities of the concept of homo faber. This could be because the urgency to know how your phone works and "came to be" isn't essential for your initial surviving. On the other hand understanding how to make fire or how to build a bow was a question of life and death at times where humans didn't dominate the planet. I think this necessity to understand how things function but also how they came to be didn't become less important but turned into a long run task of humankind. Not being aware of the effects of the tools you use and understanding how they "came to be" can also become a question of life and death. For example when being careless about the use of resources due to the lack of understanding or consciousness can sooner or later also lead to death. Through the connectedness of our world this doesn't have to be the direct personal death but maybe one of someone who depended on that resource. Or even if it just contributes to the ongoing over-use of resources, it sooner or later leads to death or even extinction. This means that the responsibility of knowing how tools and products "came to be" has become way more indirect and therefore easy to not live up to.

One step to take responsibility could be to use tools more like homo faber who uses them to shape the world consciously to their needs to survive and less like passive consumers who use them for short-term satisfaction, comfort, compensation, appearances etc. Not knowing how they impact and shape the world they live in.

However, the original concept of the homo faber has its limitations for the modern human. As mentioned before, Tönsing states that the homo faber isn't enough to define us as humans. He says that "humans must be more than just homo faber – because instrumental domination cannot, in the long run, be a purpose – it must serve something more" (Tönsing 2017, p.2).

What purpose that is, one must choose for themselves. When approaching this decision keeping the spirit of the homo faber can be beneficial. This seems like a crossing point in the development towards an active shaper or passive consumer and one question seems to play an important role. Do you let commercials and social norms define your purpose, or do you face this decision with the spirit of a homo faber willing to actively define and shape what you should seek more in life? One thing is certain. Global players, profit orientated establishments and cooperations are thankful for everyone who becomes a passive consumer and seeks what they show in their advertisements.

This leads to the question of why these establishments and co-operations have such a far-reaching impact on us, that we actively need to decide against the temptation of using their products as a way of identification, self-improvement and purpose?

One aspect seems to be that we leave the way we make, create and develop tools and technologies mostly to these establishments and cooperations. Their main concern is to remain profitable and to defend the interest of the shareholders. Therefore, chasing growth in numbers and selling as much as possible by getting into more and more aspects of their clients' life. How could our "making" change or be supplemented when it's not mostly based on financial interests?

One possibility can be found in McLellan's photo series (McLellan, 2013). With making we often think of taking different components and organising, structuring and transforming them in a certain way, and out comes something new. Something with a new purpose. Something practical. In his work, McLellan shows a different way of making which distinguishes him from the traditional concept of the home faber. He doesn't create tools, he takes them apart. He creates something new through deconstruction. This seems like a crucial step in order to observe, rethink and reflect on the created tools and technologies.

This is remarkable as with new technologies and tools the initial intention is usually to look "forward" and chase the next faster, easier and more outstanding technology or innovation. One reason for this chase seems to be a characteristic of technology. It brings up problems that can only be solved by more technology, that again brings up new problems that can only be solved through more technology and so on. Making new technology always seems connected to more new technology. The tools we create, demand the creation of more tools. Sooner or later this endless demand seems to be a problem in a limited world. Therefore, taking steps back to reflect and observe our tools becomes important and also gives more control to shape the direction innovations develop.

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