https://doi.org/10.48417/technolang.2025.02.11
Research article

On the Symbolic Dimension of Technology: A Phenomenological Approach

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Abstract

Phenomenological-hermeneutic approaches to the philosophy of technology explore the world-disclosing role of technical artifacts. These approaches often lack a deeper engagement with their symbolic dimension. This paper addresses that gap by asking how the symbolic dimension of technical artifacts can shape the ways in which we relate to and disclose the world. To this end, the paper distinguishes four distinct modes in which the symbolic dimension of technical artifacts can manifest itself in experience. As demonstrated through a range of examples, the symbolic dimension may present itself in ways that either a) conceal it, b) remain in the background, c) impose themselves upon us, or d) challenge us to engage in active interpretation. As the paper argues, each mode gives rise to a different stance toward the artifact, thereby shaping the way we understand both the artifact and the world more broadly. The approach is phenomenologically motivated, which means that the vocabulary developed here must always be understood from the perspective of a subject experiencing the artifact. To clarify what is distinctive about this perspective, the paper also contrasts it with alternative approaches, such as cultural hermeneutics, which likewise addresses the symbolic dimension of technology but does so by adopting a general interpretive-theoretical stance rather than beginning from the situated experience of the subject, as the phenomenological perspective does.

Keywords: Technology hermeneutics; Phenomenology; Symbolic dimension of technology; Everyday experience; World discloser

Citation: Nguyen Duc, V. A. (2025). On the Symbolic Dimension of Technology: A Phenomenological Approach. *Technology and Language, 6*(2), 127-141. https://doi.org/10.48417/technolang.2025.02.11

УДК 1:62
https://doi.org/10.48417/technolang.2025.02.11
Научная статья

О символическом измерении технологий: Феноменологический подход

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Аннотация
В феноменологически-герменевтических подходах к философии техники, которые исследуют роль технических артефактов в раскрытии мира, часто не хватает более глубокого взаимодействия с их символическим измерением. В данной статье рассматривается вопрос о том, как символическое измерение технических артефактов может влиять на то, как мы относимся к миру и раскрываем его. С этой целью в статье выделяются четыре различных способа, с помощью которых символическое измерение технических артефактов может проявляться в опыте. Как показано на ряде примеров, символическое измерение может представлять себя способами, которые либо а) скрывают его, б) остаются на заднем плане, в) навязываются нам или г) бросают нам вызов, побуждая к активной интерпретации. Как утверждается в статье, каждый способ порождает различную позицию по отношению к артефакту, тем самым формируя наше понимание как артефакта, так и мира в целом. Подход имеет феноменологическую подоплеку, что означает, что разработанная здесь лексика всегда должна пониматься с точки зрения субъекта, переживающего опыт. Чтобы прояснить отличительные черты этой перспективы, в статье она также противопоставляется альтернативным подходам, таким как культурная герменевтика, которые также рассматривают символическое измерение технологии, но делает это, придерживаясь общей интерпретативно-теоретической позиции, а не отталкиваясь от конкретного опыта субъекта, как это делает феноменологическая перспектива.

Ключевые слова: Герменевтика технологии; Феноменология; Символическое измерение технологии; Повседневный опыт; Раскрытие мира

Для цитирования: Nguyen Duc, V. A. On the Symbolic Dimension of Technology: A Phenomenological Approach // Technology and Language. 2025. № 6(2). P. 127-141. https://doi.org/10.48417/technolang.2025.02.11

INTRODUCTION

In phenomenologically-hermeneutically oriented technology research, as pioneered by such as Martin Heidegger and Don Ihde (2010), the core focus is on questions regarding the world's disclosure and meaning-making through technology.[1] How does technology transform our relation to ourselves and to the world? How does the technologically textured lifeworld shape the manner in which we integrate ourselves into it on a daily basis? And how can technological experience be more precisely understood in its embodied dimension? Questions such as these have been addressed in recent decades within a variety of frameworks – postphenomenology, material hermeneutics, hermeneutics of technology, and others. The present work is intended as a contribution to this multifaceted debate, as it deals with an aspect that has often been marginally addressed in this debate, namely the symbolic dimension of technology. There is hardly any in-depth engagement with this, which might be due to the fact that when we think of technology, we tend to think of its use, not its symbolic dimension.[2] However, a phenomenologically oriented hermeneutics of technology should also address the symbolic dimension of technology because the way we disclose the world is not only dependent on the use of technological artifacts but also on their symbolic dimension.

This article explores the question of how the symbolic dimension of technical artifacts can influence the way in which we disclose the world. To this end, I develop a differentiated vocabulary that enables a more precise articulation of the symbolic dimension of technology. Since the term "symbolic" is itself highly complex and risks being employed in a vague or diffuse manner, I begin by specifying what I mean by the symbolic dimension of technology. I then proceed – drawing on a variety of examples, ranging from AI-generated music to luxury sports cars and complex architectural structures – to examine the different ways in which the symbolic dimension of technology or technical constructs can shape our modes of world-disclosure. My research is phenomenologically motivated: all conceptual determinations I make here must therefore be understood from the perspective of a subject in lived experience, to whom the symbolic content of an artifact is disclosed.

[1] For a good reconstruction of this debate see Jure Zovko's 2023 paper „Expanding hermeneutics to the world of technology."

[2] An exemplary case in point is Arun Kumar Tripathi's paper **„***Hermeneutics of Technological Culture"* (2017) which offers a valuable overview of the postphenomenological debate on technology but omits any discussion of the symbolic dimension of technology – despite its explicit focus on the cultural dimension of technological experience**.** One exception, however, is a conference volume edited by Epp et al. in the field of the sociology of technology, which explicitly refers to the "symbolic dimension of technologies" (Epp et al., 2002, p. 3, my translation). Nevertheless, here too the symbolic dimension is strongly interpreted in terms of the use of technology. Moreover, as the editors admit, there is a lack of conceptual systematics in the exploration of the symbolic dimension of technology (Epp et al., 2002, p. 8). Thus, it remains methodologically unclear in this volume what it actually means to deal with the symbolic dimension of technology.

WHAT IS MEANT BY THE SYMBOLIC DIMENSION OF TECHNOLOGY?

To begin, it is necessary to clarify what exactly is meant by the expression *symbolic dimension of technology*. Two interpretations seem possible. First, the term may refer to the fact that technical artifacts make use of symbols or icons in order to communicate information about particular states of affairs. Second, it may refer to the idea that technical artifacts can possess a surplus of meaning – an additional semantic layer that exceeds their functional or instrumental use. The former interpretation has been analyzed by Ihde under the concept of *hermeneutic relations*, which refers to the use of technological artifacts that mediate aspects of reality not directly perceptible to us (Ihde, 1990, p. 80-97). For example, when I use a measuring device to assess different frequencies in an electric circuit, I see on the display a symbolic representation of those frequencies, from which I must indirectly infer the phenomenon. This symbolic representation must be interpretable – hence Ihde's designation of such world-relations as hermeneutic. This symbolic representation serves a functional purpose and is therefore tied to a specific practical utility.

What follows, however, is concerned with the second meaning of the symbolic. My interest lies in a symbolic dimension constituted by a surplus of meaning – one that cannot be reduced to mere functionality. This surplus, which any technical artifact can in principle acquire, endows the artifact with expressive character and influences how I relate to it, insofar as I am affected by its symbolic content. Even here, one can speak of a hermeneutic relation, insofar as the symbolic dimension must be disclosed interpretively. For instance, I may enter an electric SUV and initially view it simply as a means of transportation from point A to point B. In that case, its symbolic dimension does not affect the way I experience the ride. The situation changes, however, once I interpret the SUV as an environmentally damaging artifact that, despite being electrically powered, falsely suggests ecological sustainability while it is in fact highly resource-intensive. And so, if I am environmentally conscious, Ienter the vehicle not without a sense of unease and perhaps even indignation at the current state of the automotive industry. What becomes salient here is not the specific environmental footprint of this particular vehicle, but a broader socio-political imbalance that the SUV seems to embody. The mode of world-relation that is constituted during the ride is thus fundamentally different from perceiving the SUV merely as a neutral means of transportation. In one case, the symbolic dimension plays no role; in the other, it becomes significant, as it may be interpreted as an emblem of the failure of the ecological transition – depending on what might one call hermeneutic standpoint.

Whether or not I disclose the symbolic dimension of an artifact depends on my hermeneutic standpoint, which determines whether I am able to perceive this dimension at all. But is this a purely subjective matter? By no means. The constitution of the object also plays a role. In the case of the electric SUV, it is quite natural – under current conditions – to associate it with political compromises in dealing with the ecological crisis. With an e-bike, which also serves as a means of transportation, such associations are less likely or may take on an entirely different direction.

Let us therefore summarize: the hermeneutic standpoint of the interpreting subject plays a decisive role in disclosing the symbolic dimension of technical artifacts, but so too does the constitution of the artifact itself. Accordingly, when reflecting on the symbolic dimension of technology, we find ourselves in a discursive situation similar to that of affordance theory – except that the focus here is not on the material cues of a technical artifact that suggest particular courses of action (Gibson 2015), but rather on interpretive possibilities, or more precisely, on a fundamental, context-sensitive mode of understanding in human–technology interaction. The way in which the symbolic dimension can affect our relation to the world goes beyond mere instrumental use.

CULTURAL-HERMENEUTIC VS. PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

It is now necessary to further refine the concept of the symbolic dimension of technical artifacts for the purposes of this analysis. Simply stating that the term addresses a surplus of meaning irreducible to instrumental function remains too vague. One can approach the symbolic dimension of technology in at least two distinct ways, which I aim to delineate more clearly in what follows. Depending on the chosen approach, one will inevitably engage with different domains of objects. One approach, drawing on Ihde, I shall refer to as the cultural-hermeneutic approach (Ihde, 1990, pp. 124-161). This approach is concerned with uncovering the cultural – or more precisely, symbolic – layers of meaning that attach to a technical artifact from a theoretically interpretive standpoint. The second approach I intend to pursue here is phenomenological in nature, in that it reflects on our technologically mediated relations to the world as they emerge from our situatedness and our everyday dealings with technical artifacts.

Within the *cultural-hermeneutic approach*, a historian or cultural anthropologist might, for example, study the invention of the clock and interpret it as a symbol of modernity. Or one might turn to the invention of the lightning rod and examine the symbolic significance it held during the French Revolution. In general, adopting a cultural-hermeneutic perspective entails attributing symbolic meaning to all technical artifacts, insofar as they are simultaneously cultural artifacts and can potentially be understood as expressions of the Zeitgeist. This interpretive process may, depending on the creativity of the interpreter, become quite speculative. One might recall Slavoj Žižek's popular and humorous interpretation of various toilet types across Europe as expressions of distinct ideological orientations (Open Culture, 2016). For instance, the French toilet – which swiftly flushes away excrement before it becomes visible – is taken by Žižek as indicative of a revolutionary mindset: a readiness to embrace the new without regard for the old, or for what might be lost in the process.

In contrast, a *phenomenological approach* to the symbolic dimension of technology focuses on how technological artifacts shape our everyday experiences. The point here is not merely to establish, in principle, that technical artifacts can be examined with regard to their symbolic dimension. Rather, the focus lies on the fact that there are specific situations in which the symbolic dimension of technical artifacts shapes our everyday experience of technology in a distinctive way – and it is precisely this phenomenon that

requires closer examination. From a phenomenological perspective, the aim is to articulate aspects of everyday experience that usually remain implicit – experiences that are taken for granted yet lack adequate conceptual articulation. Don Ihde, in particular, has impressively advanced such phenomenological elucidation by introducing concepts such as embodiment relation, hermeneutic relation, alterity relation, and background relation, all of which serve to articulate the ways in which our relation to the world is mediated by technology. I have already addressed his notion of the *hermeneutic relation* and pointed out that this concept relies on a predominantly functional understanding of symbols. When it comes to the question of how the symbolic dimension of technology may influence our technologically mediated relations to the world, Ihde's vocabulary proves to be quite limited – and it is precisely at this juncture that my own reflections begin.

DIFFERENT MODES OF BEING AFFECTED BY THE SYMBOLIC DIMENSION OF TECHNOLOGY

With the examples of the electric SUV and e-bike it has only been suggested so far that the symbolic dimension of technical constructs can affect us in such a way that our mode of world-disclosure may shift or even change entirely. From a phenomenological perspective, however, this can be articulated in more detail. As I will now show, there are various ways in which the symbolic dimension of technical artifacts can affect us. I propose that we distinguish, on a fundamental level, four different ways in which the symbolic dimension of technology can impact our relation to the world, depending on how it *appears to us*. The symbolic dimension of technology can be encountered in the form of (a) concealment, requiring special effort or specific knowledge in order to be perceived at all; (b) backgrounded presence; (c) imposition; or (d) a form that challenges us to engage interpretively with it. In each of these modes of appearance, the symbolic dimension operates in a distinctive manner, which I aim to elaborate in this section.

It is important to note that I am not concerned here with explaining how one's attention comes to be directed toward the symbolic dimension of a technical artifact, or under what conditions this is more or less likely to occur. Such questions would lead us into psychological analysis, which is not my objective. Rather, I seek a phenomenological analysis that begins at the moment the symbolic dimension of an artifact is disclosed. The following descriptions proceed from the assumption that the symbolic dimension of a technical artifact is given, and they address the question of how it presents itself when it is given.

The Symbolic Dimension Conceals Itself

To begin with, let me reiterate that the disclosure of the symbolic dimension of technology always involves a hermeneutic relation, insofar as this dimension must be interpretively accessed. There is no objective standpoint from which to perceive it, since the interpretive horizon from which I disclose the world is always subjective. The knowledge I possess about a thing plays a crucial role in how I interpret it. For example, if I listen on my laptop to the so-called 10th Symphony of Beethoven – "Beethoven X" –

my listening experience will be fundamentally different from listening to the 9th Symphony, simply because I know that the third and fourth movements of the 10th were generated by artificial intelligence. In addition to the fact that artistic performances often generate or are shaped by a symbolic dimension, the so-called 10th Symphony contains an additional symbolic layer, insofar as it spectacularly showcases the progress of a technological development.[3] This symbolic dimension of the technical construct frames my interpretive access and shifts the way in which I make sense of the musical piece.

My experience of listening to the so-called 10th Beethoven Symphony would, however, be quite different if I were approaching the piece from an entirely different knowledge base and, accordingly, from a different hermeneutic standpoint. If, for instance, I generally have difficulty distinguishing between Beethoven's various symphonies and am not well-versed in this repertoire, I am likely to accept the 10th Symphony as an authentic composition if it is presented to me as such. Only someone familiar with Beethoven's oeuvre might, upon listening, suspect that this is not an original symphony but rather a composition that imitates Beethoven's stylistic signature[4] – knowing, of course, that Beethoven never completed a tenth symphony. Yet regardless of how much I know about Beethoven's work or how refined my listening abilities may be, in all cases it is fair to say that the AI-generated piece is explicitly designed to imitate the sound of a Beethoven symphony so convincingly that it might easily be taken for the real thing. The symbolic dimension of this AI-generated work does not impose itself immediately; rather, it conceals itself – or more precisely, it *reveals itself in such a way that it remains hidden*. In this sense, the symbolic dimension of the AI-generated symphony can only affect our listening experience through an act of disclosure, in which we come to realize it is, in fact, generated by AI. When this symbolic dimension presents itself to me, it does so precisely in the mode of concealment.

This mode of perception can also be illustrated by the example of cosmetic surgery. Consider a particularly successful case of facial lifting in which the intervention is not readily noticeable. If I have long been impressed by how youthful a friend's face appears and then, upon closer inspection or by being informed, I learn that the face has undergone aesthetic procedures for years, I may be surprised not to have noticed earlier. If this realization does not concern me further, I may simply move on without giving it another thought. But let us suppose instead that my initial surprise leads me to examine my friend's face more closely, becoming preoccupied with the subtle aesthetic alterations I had not previously suspected. In that moment, a symbolic dimension may begin to emerge – one that momentarily lends the face an additional layer of meaning, as I now see in it the expression of a desire to halt or even transcend the aging process. My friend's face deceives me insofar as it conceals its true age. What is at stake here, then, is a symbolic dimension that shapes the way I see the face – yet it does not disclose itself immediately, as in the cases where it imposes itself (see below), but rather in a manner that is concealed.

[3] While lead programmer Ahmed El-Gamal concedes that an arranger was needed to compile the AI-generated material (BR-KLASSIK, 2021), the result remains impressive and indicative of the technology's possibilities.

[4] Dirk Kaftan, who conducted the premiere of Beethoven X, emphatically asserts that the composition cannot genuinely be considered *Beethoven* (BR-KLASSIK, 2021).

The Symbolic Dimension Remains in the Background

There is a difference between the symbolic dimension of a technical artifact presenting itself in such a way that it conceals itself, and presenting itself in such a way that it remains in the background. At first glance, the expressions "concealing itself" and "remaining in the background" may appear similar, since in both cases something does not present itself directly. However, they involve important differences, which are crucial to my argument here. That which conceals itself is not meant to be seen, whereas that which remains in the background becomes visible as soon as one attends to it. These two formulations are intended to mark distinct categories of experience, describing different ways in which the symbolic meaning of a technical artifact can manifest itself to us. For this reason, I want to draw a strict terminological distinction between them. The first pertains to forms of experience typically associated with technologies that operate through imitation or deception, as illustrated in the earlier examples of the AI-generated Beethoven symphony or subtle cosmetic surgery. The second refers to technical artifacts whose symbolic charge has diminished over time, such that we no longer immediately associate the object with any symbolic meaning. In such cases, it is largely up to us to recognize and articulate this dimension.

Let us take a mundane situation as an example: a person watches an airplane flying overhead. This may be a fleeting form of perception, such that the observer registers nothing more than the airplane itself, along with the clouds it passes through and the blue sky serving as the visual background. The airplane, after all, is a familiar object – one whose symbolic dimension no longer imposes itself as it might have done in the early twentieth century. Of course, I may nonetheless, upon seeing the airplane, also reflect on its symbolic dimension. I may even find myself momentarily struck by the thought that this technological marvel represents the realization of a longstanding human dream. In such a moment, I no longer perceive the airplane merely as a flying object, but as the symbolic realization of a technical utopia.

Naturally, one need not be filled with awe at the sight of a plane in flight, as air travel today is hardly remarkable. For most inhabitants of the Western world, boarding a plane at least once a year is almost a matter of routine. The experience I wish to describe here takes the form of the symbolic dimension of an artifact disclosing itself to me precisely because *I am the one attending to it.* It arises as something that stands out to me – something that exceeds the immediately visible. The symbolic dimension of the airplane is there, but it does not force itself upon me; rather, I become aware of it in such a way that it emerges from the background of my understanding and is brought into the foreground of my attention. This, then, is not a matter of revealing something hidden, asin the case of concealment, but of noticing a dimension of meaning that is already present, yet requires my attentiveness in order to be perceived.

Let us take, as an alternative example, the European Central Bank tower (ECB Tower) in Frankfurt, located adjacent to a park. A passerby may initially perceive it simply as a tall, transparent building made of glass. It is, of course, easy to adopt a cultural-hermeneutic perspective here and interpret the building's transparency as a symbol for the idea of transparency itself – perhaps as an expression of conscientious work practices that are open to public scrutiny. Of interest here, however, is the phenomenological

perspective, which focuses on the lived experience of this symbolic dimension. Consider the case of a passerby who pauses to look at the ECB Tower. For such a person, the symbolic dimension of the building may not impose itself, especially given that there are now many buildings with a similarly transparent appearance – so many, in fact, that one may not be inclined to reflect on the symbolic character of this particular building at all. That is to say: the passerby could, if sufficiently attentive, perceive the symbolism evoked by the ECB Tower's transparency; but they could just as easily overlook it, simply because it does not strike them. In this case, the symbolic dimension of the ECB Tower remains in the background for the observer – it does not conceal itself, however, in the sense that it can become accessible simply by attending to it. And if the observer does attend to this symbolic dimension, then the resulting experience takes the form of an act of attentiveness: the observer becomes the one who grants attention to the object, allowing its symbolic dimension to step out of the background and into the foreground of awareness.

A necessary condition for this kind of experience is that the subject, given their hermeneutic presuppositions, is capable of discerning the symbolic dimension inherent in the artifact. In this sense, the subject must possess the background knowledge that allows transparent architectural forms to be understood as symbolic expressions of transparency itself. If this interpretive framework is lacking, the symbolic dimension of the building cannot disclose itself to the subject and thus cannot appear from out of the background. The notion of "remaining in the background" should not be understood in an objectivist sense, as though there existed a universal symbolic meaning of the transparent building merely waiting to be uncovered. If the passerby is unable to perceive the symbolic dimension evoked by the building's transparency, then this symbolic dimension is not merely in the background – it simply does not exist for them.

To further illustrate this point, consider that the ECB Tower was constructed in conjunction with the former Großmarkthalle, a site imbued with symbolic meaning, as an architectural masterpiece of the 1920s which was in the Third Reich repurposed to serve as a collection point for the deportation of Jewish residents (Draghi, 2015). For a passerby who is unaware of this historically charged architectural constellation, this dimension simply does not exist – and consequently, it cannot be experienced.

The Symbolic Dimension Imposes Itself

There are also technical artifacts whose symbolic dimension tends to impose itself upon us due to their inherent expressiveness. When searching for examples of such experiences, it makes sense to consider objects that were deliberately designed to symbolize something specific – objects whose symbolic dimension we can hardly avoid recognizing in the very act of perceiving or using them.

Let us consider, for instance, the example of a red Porsche or so-called "poser bikes" equipped with modified exhaust systems. In both cases, the symbolic dimension of the object imposes itself quite directly: in the case of the red Porsche, through its elegant design; in the case of the poser bike, through the loud noise produced by its customized exhaust. Those who drive such vehicles do so not merely to get from one place to another, but also to make a deliberate statement. The red Porsche, for example,

is designed to be interpreted as a symbol of luxury, whereas the poser bike is intended to draw attention – and perhaps even to provoke. No matter how one chooses to interpret these objects – whether as expressions of freedom or of clichéd masculine fantasies – in both cases, the symbolic dimension asserts itself and shapes the way in which we perceive these objects, or even the way we engage with the world through them. A passerby might feel irritated by the presence of poser bikers, while the person riding such a bike with enthusiasm may experience the world in a markedly different affective mode. The fact that these vehicles elicit certain affective responses is not incidental but rather an intended effect, integral to their design. In both cases a particular symbolic charge is deliberately embedded and meant to be projected outward.

The red Porsche and the modified motorcycle thus serve as two particularly illustrative examples of technical artifacts whose symbolic dimension imposes itself precisely because it is constitutive of their identity – indeed, they are designed in such a way that this symbolic dimension is perceived. Whether this dimension actually imposes itself upon me is, of course, another matter entirely; I may, for instance, be so lost in thought that I fail to notice the loud poser bike passing by, or I might simply remain indifferent to it. As previously noted, these reflections are no concered to assume a psychological perspective that seeks to determine the conditions under which one becomes aware of an artifact's symbolic meaning. Rather, I am interested in the mode of experience – how the symbolic dimension of an artifact manifests itself to us. My claim is therefore not that we are somehow determined to perceive the symbolic dimension when, say, a red Porsche or a poser bike passes us. Rather, what I wish to describe is that, once this symbolic dimension presents itself, it does so in a manner that imposes itself upon us.

Undoubtedly, we can also consider examples in which the symbolic dimension imposes itself on us without being constitutive for the artefact. Consider, for instance, the case of a Tesla vehicle, whose public image has been inextricably linked to that of Elon Musk. It is well known that Musk made a highly controversial gesture during the inauguration of U.S. President Trump – a gesture that was widely interpreted in public discourse as a Nazi salute. Now let us assume that we are dealing with a Tesla owner deeply troubled by the political developments in the United States, perceiving them as highly problematic. If this individual now enters their Tesla and involuntarily associates the car with these political upheavals, this cannot be dismissed merely as a subjective projection or an active interpretative effort on the part of the driver.[5]

From a phenomenological perspective, a certain symbolic dimension imposes itself here, leading the driver to experience the vehicle in light of these broader political contexts. This interpretative framing – whereby the driver associates the Tesla with unwelcome political transformations – presents itself to the subject almost unavoidably. Much like the case of the poser bike, the Tesla vehicle confronts its users with a symbolic dimension that asserts itself. However, unlike the poser bike, this vehicle was not

[5] As a result, special stickers were developed for frustrated Tesla drivers allowing them to explicitly distance themselves from Elon Musk. Various media outlets have reported on decals with slogans such as "I bought this before I knew Elon was crazy" (Mones, 2023).

designed so as to assert the symbolic meaning that temporarily attached itself to the Tesla and that is therefore not constitutive of the artifact's identity.

Let us now consider another example that illustrates the same idea I demonstrated with the Tesla vehicle. I would like to recount an anecdote here: A friend of mine, who works on German memory culture with regard to the Holocaust, traveled to Israel some time ago and made a striking observation. He noticed that the same red double-decker trains that are ubiquitous in Germany also operate in Israel – something that took him by surprise, as he strongly associated these trains with Germany. At first glance, this observation may seem unremarkable, especially to those who have encountered these trains in other countries. Yet for my friend, who perceived the trains as bearing a distinctly German identity, a symbolic dimension imposed itself unavoidably. He could not help but interpret this shared design as a gesture of historical reparation, reasoning that such a resemblance could hardly be coincidental trains with Germany (figs. 1 and 2).

Figure 1. Red double-decker train in Israel

Figure 2. Red double-decker train in Germany.

What exactly this symbolic dimension consists in – whether it expresses a sense of solidarity between the two countries or symbolizes a gesture of historical reparation – can remain an open question. Nor is it particularly relevant here that these trains were manufactured by a Canadian company, Bombardier, whose production sites happen to be located in Germany, which somewhat complicates the idea of a straightforward German-Israeli connection. My aim is not to determine which interpretation is correct or whether it is well-founded. What matters is that this symbolic dimension imposed itself upon my friend and directly shaped the way he perceived and experienced the Israeli railway.

When the symbolic dimension imposes itself upon me, I experience myself as a *witness to an occurrence* – an occurrence to which I am inevitably drawn to respond interpretively. Unlike the case where the symbolic meaning needs to be recovered from a background (see above), I do not experience myself as the agent who actively brings the symbolic content to light through deliberate attention to the object. Rather, in the scenarios described here, I have no real choice but to become aware of the symbolic dimension, for it simply befalls me.

The Symbolic Dimension Challenges Us

Finally, the symbolic structure of technical artifacts can also present itself in such a way that it challenges us to interpret its meaning precisely because we are not entirely sure how to understand it in the first place. In such cases, the artifact confronts us almost like a subject, prompting us to adopt a reflective, interpretive stance in which we are called upon to draw on our own creativity to make sense of what we see. This, as I aim to show, constitutes yet another kind of experience – distinct from the kind in which the symbolic dimension of an artifact imposes itself upon us. The type of experience I describe here typically arises when we encounter technical artifacts that, to borrow a phrase by Theodor W. Adorno, possess a "character of enigma" ("Rätselcharakter") (Adorno, 1973, p. 185). These are artifacts that invite us to take note of their symbolic dimension in a way that calls for an interpretive, contemplative attitude.

Let us take, as a particularly striking example, an artifact from the world of art: the installation *Black Flags* by the American choreographer William Forsythe (fig. 3). In this piece, we witness enormous – indeed, almost monstrous – robotic arms moving large black flags through space in a captivating choreography.

Figure 3. Black Flags, William Forsythe, 2014
Photo: Julian Gabriel Richter (by permission)

Undoubtedly, we are dealing here with a technical artifact. Yet this artifact performs an action we are unable to readily categorize. We do not know what the purpose of this movement is; rather, we are invited – indeed compelled – to reflect on this simultaneously monstrous and elegant configuration. We are prompted to ask what kind of symbolic expression is being enacted here. In contrast to the tuned "poser bike," whose loud

exhaust we can easily interpret within familiar symbolic frameworks, *Black Flags* eludes such conventional categorization. The symbolic dimension evoked by this artwork resists straightforward conceptual fixation.[6]

With the *Black Flags* installation, I have chosen an example from the world of art. However, it is certainly not only artworks that can elicit the kind of experience I wish to highlight – namely, an encounter with a technical artifact in which its symbolic dimension challenges us to interpret it. Alternatively, we might consider unusual architectural structures, such as the Selfridges Building or the Walkie Talkie skyscraper (sometimes dubbed "Walkie Scorchie") – constructions whose unconventional forms likewise provoke us to engage not only with their physical design but also with the symbolic meanings they might embody. When we become aware of the symbolic dimension of such buildings, we typically adopt a contemplative and engaged interpretive stance – one in which interpretive frameworks do not present themselves readily, but rather compel us to formulate our own questions.

CONCLUSIONS

To summarize, there are indeed a variety of ways in which the symbolic dimension of an artifact can present itself to us. Depending on how this dimension manifests itself, we adopt different interpretive attitudes from which we come to discern symbolic meaning.

In some cases, the symbolic meaning imposes itself upon us, making us witnesses to an event in which this meaning seems to emerge spontaneously. Here, the symbolic content reveals itself without requiring any active interpretive effort on our part – the interpretive frame, so to speak, precedes our reflection. For instance, the symbolic dimension of a poser bike might present itself to me unavoidably: I hear its loud engine, feel provoked by the noise, and consequently label the rider a poser.

By contrast, a different kind of experience arises when we must exert interpretive effort ourselves in order to uncover the symbolic content of an artifact. In such cases, the symbolic dimension presents itself in a way that remains in the background, so to speak, and must be actively brought into the foreground. Here, we do not assume the role of a passive witness, but rather that of an attentive observer who discloses the symbolic meaning of the artifact through their own capacity for discernment. I have illustrated this with the example of a transparent building such as the ECB Tower. While the building's transparent appearance indeed evokes a symbolic dimension – suggesting notions of openness or accountability – this meaning does not impose itself upon me. Given the prevalence of transparent architecture today, I am not necessarily drawn into the symbolic register. It is only through conscious reflection that I may come to notice and articulate this layer of meaning.

[6] On the artist's website, one finds a brief interpretative note: "Two industrial robots are programmed to choreographically propel two large black flags with a digital precision conceptually approaching Platonic ideals" (Forsythe, n.d.). Yet rather than providing interpretive clarity, this description opens up even more questions –particularly for the engaged interpreter.

In some cases, the symbolic dimension of a technological artifact may present itself in a manner that conceals itself from us. Typically, this involves technologies that operate through imitation or simulation, such that we remain unaware of their artificial nature. It is only when we discover that we are dealing with a technology designed to deceive or mimic that its symbolic dimension becomes accessible. I have illustrated this with the example of the AI-generated Tenth Symphony of Beethoven: we interpret the musical piece in a fundamentally different way once we realize that it was composed not by Beethoven, but by an artificial intelligence designed to emulate his style. In such instances, we find ourselves in the role of a discoverer – someone who has unveiled something hidden. The symbolic dimension emerges through the very act of this uncovering.

A particular and exceptional role emerges when we find ourselves challenged by an artifact in such a way that we feel compelled to interpret its symbolic meaning – not because it readily presents itself, but because its very ambiguity provokes us. In such cases, the artifact confronts us almost like a subject, inviting us to engage in a thoughtful and creative act of interpretation. We experience ourselves as questioning and meaning-making beings, immersed in an aesthetic mode of reflection.

Certainly, I could express myself in much simpler terms and merely state that technical artifacts can also possess symbolic meaning. However, if we limit ourselves to this general assertion – that technical artifacts may carry symbolic significance beyond their practical utility – it remains quite unclear how exactly this symbolic dimension manifests itself in our experience. Phenomenological analysis, by contrast, is concerned precisely with the nuances of how we experience things. It operates under the maxim that what is nearest to us is often also the most distant, and thus requires a particular effort to be brought into view. This, as I have sought to demonstrate here, also applies to the way in which the symbolic dimension of technical artifacts becomes manifest to us. More precise research in this area, however, remains in its early stages.

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Статья поступила 19 марта 2025
одобрена после рецензирования 10 мая 2025
принята к публикации 19 мая 2025

Received: 19 March 2025
Revised: 10 May 2025
Accepted: 19 May 2025