# Spengler, Urbanism and a New Primary-Symbol

**by David Beauchamp** (July 2015)

Of the many great philosophers produced by the German speaking lands over the centuries, Oswald Spengler was one who has not quite endured the way others have. Perhaps it was his uneventful personal life as a school teacher, his sweeping quasi-scientific style and esoteric leanings, or his ideological tendency to authoritarianism before his death in 1936. Whatever the reason, he never earned a lasting reputation as a serious scholar.

I can't help feeling slightly sad about this, because, despite his obvious shortcomings, Spengler remains an accessible and strangely compelling figure. His breadth of learning and passion for history are palpable and invigorate every page of his most famous work, *The Decline of the West (Der Untergang des Abenlandes),* published over two volumes in 1918 and 1921. This ethnographic history of civilisations is a testament to his encyclopedic knowledge of areas as diverse as mathematics, architecture, art, drama and music throughout the ages. From this immense store of philology, Spengler would bring his own unique innovations to the philosophy of history of his day and further stimulate the intellectual landscape of inter-war Europe.

Central to Spengler's philosophy is the challenging of the then prevalent Eurocentric paradigm of linear progress, which viewed history as moving from ancient to medieval to modern eras. This was replaced by the notion that great cultures (Spengler counts nine: Western/Faustian, Classical/Euclidean, Arabian/Magian, Russian, Egyptian, Mexican, Chinese, Indian and Babylonian) are self-contained and organic in nature; that is, they are defined by their own unique characters and arise, develop and decline in a series of inevitable, irreversible phases, much like the life of a plant (Spengler, 1918, p. 21). In addition to this, and it is here he slipped into the kind of semi-spiritualism that has weighed on his reputation as a serious thinker, Spengler claimed that each of these great cultures was defined by a *primary-symbol*, an inwardly felt concept which was born out of the geography of the culture's homeland and which represented living man's response to his own deeply felt mortality.

Thus the Western man's primary-symbol of freedom through extension into boundless space had its genesis in the "…broad plains of Franconia and Burgundy and Saxony" and is present in the soaring Gothic cathedral, the contrapuntal music of Bach and the oil landscapes and portraits

of Wattheau and Rembrandt. Likewise, the primary-symbol of Classical man was the physically static body.This was manifested in the statues and busts and two dimensional frescoes of the Classical world and arose from the "…multitude of little islands and promontories of the Aegean" (Spengler, 1918, p. 203).

As fanciful as these notions may seem, Spengler's thinking takes on a more pressing relevance than ever in our globalised, urbanised, technologised present. One hundred years after he started writing his *The Decline of the West*, and around the time that he predicted the final expiration of our thousand year Faustian culture, we may well such questions as: "Where does Western culture go from this point?", "Is there a definable Western culture at all?", "Is there a new aesthetic, a post-post-modernism, awaiting us in the 21st century?" and "What cultural or moral connection remains between ourselves and the physical geography of our ancestral homelands?"

Around 2009, mankind passed a remarkable historical milestone which, retrospectively, seems to have barely registered in mainstream media discourses. It was in this year that the number of urbanites surpassed the number of rural dwellers and, needless to say, this trend is set to continue into the present century. A child born today will more likely experience their first perceptive moments within the boxed confines of a generic apartment or terraced house than a traditional peasant dwelling. They will more likely breathe the air of the city street with its motor vehicles, tarmacked surfaces and towering multi-storey structures than that of the plains or the forests or the hillsides. Will this increasing uniformity of environment impress upon the world's urban population a shared inner feeling, something approximating to Spengler's primary-symbol, which will become apparent through art, music and science? Spengler saw the megalopolis as being the end point of civilisation, the final stage of an exhausted decadent culture it before collapses back in an amorphous ahistorical dark age from which a new culture is produced. However, with urban life now so firmly rooted in humanity, we might expect to see the vast metropolitan areas of the world – connected through the net, a shrinking number of lingua franca and economic and cultural exchanges – form a transcontinental urban plateau from which a new great culture may arise, its primary-symbol uniquely inspired by the man-made concrete jungle in which the bulk of humanity share their waking lives.

What common inward feeling then, might this urban race possess in the face of its own mortality? As the influences of their ancestor's traditions and religions dilute in the face of globalism, consumerism and mass media, we might speculate as to what form the ascendant primary-symbol could take.

*The infinite repetition of standard forms* is a notion that is necessarily tied to urbanism and modernity. One might see its stirrings as far back as the printing press or the standardisation of weights and measures and their necessity in mercantile, urban economies. What separates these early occurrences from the contemporary experiences is their level of saturation into society. In all walks of life today we can see the phenomenon of duplicated perfect forms. It invades the artistic, the economic, the commercial, the communicative, the political, even the dietary spheres. Not only in surface semantic content, but also in fundamental form and mode, the urbanite experiences and adds to the infinite repetition of finite, standardised forms. Through the digitalisation of information, the standardisation of marketed goods and the informational infrastructure of the personal computer and the internet, mankind attempts to confront his mortality and impress himself upon the world in a way that could only occur in a specific era and environment.

**Repetition of standardised forms in visual aesthetics**

Visual expression and communication in our contemporary time is the product of the urbanised culture and the dead hand of the city is felt in its production and reception. Photography has been gradually liberated being the preserve of experts over the last 150 years or so to the extent that photographic images captured by both amateurs and professionals alike saturate our daily lives. Each photograph represents the fixing of a perfect, standardised form.  With modern technology, these forms can then be proliferated infinitely throughout any human environment urbanised enough to support the equipment needed.

In film, as much as photography, a similar trend has emerged in recent decades. The experience of drama as an art form has almost completely shifted away from the physical stage production, with its every performance being unique in a multitude of ways, to performances frozen on the screen, each production standardised before being infinitely duplicated across the world. It is the eradication of the unique character of each performance in drama, just as it is the eradication of the personal interpretation of the landscape or human form in imagery that defines the visual shift towards infinite repetition of form.

The same removal of organic, living, haphazardness has taken hold of our daily communication. No longer is the standardised form of the printed word restricted to newspapers and official signage. Whereas once written communication bore the living hallmark of both the writer’s hand and the materials and styles specific to a certain location, today we can expect to encounter messages in a handful of acceptable fonts, known across the world by those who are engaged in the professions of commerce, journalism, information technology, marketing and management.

Beyond the graphological level we find the variety of modern discourse being increasingly standardised through use of acronyms, memes and phrases. Thus we find “OMG”, “Just sayin’”, “Keep calm and…” replicated *ad infinitum.* Such phrases have no relevance to those born outside the urbanised or at least urban influenced world with its common language incubated in the technological, commercial and entertainment hubs that are our international cities.

Finally, the garish face of heavyweight consumerism is visually created, standardised and reproduced in the form of corporate logos. It is perhaps in this example more than any other that we find 21st century man’s need to dominate and proliferate across the economic, urban and communicative spheres. The logos of McDonald’s, Starbucks, Nike, Coco-cola, all are symbols not only of products but of mankind’s need to produce something of duration, something universal. Common understanding of these symbols creates a common trans-national experience. Consider the scenario of a holiday in the rural wildernesses of some undeveloped part of the world. After a week of trekking, who amongst us 21st century urbanites could fail to feel, on returning to the first built up transport hub, a sense of homecoming as we rest our eyes on the golden arches, regardless of our opinion of the product they represent?

**Repetition of standardised forms in music.**

In the art form of music, there is an even more rapid and smooth progression from the expression through physical materials in real time situations to the capturing of forms for infinite possible replication.

By the late nineteenth century, western society had acquired the ability to record sound on discs and cylinders and then to mass produce them for consumption by and for the growing urban population. Thomas Edison’s breakthrough may well have been primarily appreciated from a technological point of view at the time; nevertheless, we can now see what an epoch defining rift this was from the old world. Over the next few decades, the highest form of artistic expression would be increasingly experienced not as it was for the Greeks with their lyres and aulos or Baroque man in the church or chamber; that is, as a live performance subject to the conditions of mood, timing, environment, conditions of instruments, but as a limited number of productions frozen in form and projected repeatedly across the world where technology would allow through radio or record.

The capturing of performances in forms was only the first step of the unfolding realisation of the new primary-symbol. In 1944, in the great and historic conurbation of Cairo, a young agricultural student and music enthusiast named Halim el-Dabh used a wire recorder to record part of a Zaar ceremony. The mechanically manipulated outcome was the first example of

electric music and signaled the beginning of the use of loops – short excerpts of rhythmically repeated sound – in music. He was followed by other pioneers in the late forties and fifties, most notably Frenchman Pierre Schaeffer, whose *musique concrete* further developed the use of loops and samples as standardised forms structured to form a collage of music (Holmes, 2002). However, it is not until the sixties that we find examples of looped music being refined to beyond the experimental level and made palatable for mass consumption.

In 1967 Kenneth Tynnan of the Times described *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts' Club Band* as "a decisive moment in the history of Western Civilisation" (MacDonald, 2005, p. 249). In fact, the decisive moment had already passed him by, coming with the previous year's release. From a Spenglerian perspective, there is something of a delightfully smooth transition from 1965's *Rubber Soul*, with its neo-folk flavour, as good an example as can be found of a dying culture's nostalgia for the art of its past, to the rhythmic loops of *Tomorrow Never Knows* less than a year later. It is this, the closing track of the album *Revolver*, which signals the break from string based music to that of loops and samples destined to seep deeper and deeper into the public consciousness over the coming decades.

By the late eighties and into the early nineties, EDM (Electric Dance Music) had become a popular grassroots movement that completely dispensed with the strings, skins and reeds that had formed all of humanity's previous musical output. Perfectly formed beats, loops and samples, repeated to infinity, this was the consolidation of the revolution formed in the clubs of the great urban centres of North America and Europe. And like all revolutions it provoked a panicked reaction from the existing social order. Small wonder that the devotees of the new music appeared to many as Bacchanalian primitives engaging in tribal ecstasies. Small wonder that the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 made special provisions for the targeting of raves, defining this new music as "…sounds wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats" (legislation.gov.uk)

**Repetition of standardised forms in bio-technology**

The perfect reproduction of audio and visual forms of expression is only possible to the extent witnessed today by use of digital binary code. This code is itself an example of two perfect forms, the 1 and 0, reproduced potentially infinitely for the purpose of creating a greater meaning, to immortalise human creation and further develop society. Its use in computers is what allows the primary-symbol to become manifest across vast, interconnected urban areas.

As binary code is to the audio-visual product, so the genome is to the biological product. And

modern humanity has been busily manipulating this, too, into forms it considers beneficial. Although selective breeding of animals and plant strains has been a common agricultural practice for centuries, it is only with urbanised, technologised man that standard forms have been so tightly controlled, categorised and mass produced. Examples include genetically modified crops produced to a specific design. These gene sequences are patented and distributed throughout a global trade network, showing that even the foods we consume are examples of standardised, repeated forms.

To the living human being, this idea extends. Mastery over the human form, as with mastery over the rest of nature, is a prerequisite to immortality. Questions over ethics currently hamper further development of the therapeutic cloning of organs via stem cells to prolong our lives. Such hesitation, however, can hardly be expected to hold back technological advancement forever. Indeed, human cloning may have already been secretly achieved. The first cloning of an animal from an adult cell, Dolly the Sheep, was planned, and executed long before it was made public.  In the long term, urban man will face only as many restrictions on replication of his living form as his ever increasing pool of scientific knowledge will allow.

**********

Whereas the strings of an orchestra shimmer like sunlight through pine branches, the beats of EDM hit the listener like a flow of evenly spaced streetlights on a drive through the city at night. While the Greek sculptor might have sought one perfect form, the corporation’s mass production of a certain model of car seeks to flood the world with many.  And while Arab man might have confronted his mortality by raising his eyes to the roof of the domed heavens, urban man may yet confront his mortality by producing a fresh heart or set of lungs.

Had Spengler survived another thirty three years or so, he would no doubt have considered the moon landing to be a perfect signaling of the completion of the possibilities of Faustian man. What better example of the extension into infinite space could exist? Less certain is whether he would have appreciated the significance of way in which the feat was witnessed. Across the globe, approximately half a billion people experienced the same film, the same stills, the same famous words from Neil Armstrong as they were beamed to wherever the commercial and technical infrastructure needed to sustain television could be found. Immortalised in film and audio to be reproduced endlessly, the exit of the outgoing primary-symbol heralded the entrance of the new.

**Bibliography**

Holmes, T. (2002). *Electronic and Experimental Music: Pioneers in Technology and Composition (2nd ed).* London: Routledge.

legislation.gov.uk. (n.d.). *Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994*. Retrieved from http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1994/33/part/V/crossheading/powers-in-relation-to-raves

MacDonald, I. (2005). *Revolution in the Head: The Beatles Records and the Sixties.* Chicago Review Press.

Spengler, Q. (1918). *The Decline of the West – Form and Actuality.* London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.

---

**David Beauchamp** is a budding writer on things historical, political and philosophical.

To comment on this article, please click