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Poetry at the Age of Mechanization: Louis MacNeice's The Burning Perch (1963)

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**Yann Tholoniât – “Poetry in the Age of Mechanization:
Louis MacNeice and *The Burning Perch* (1963)”**

Saarbrücken conference, June 15th, 2020

I would have called my talk “MacNeice’s machine aesthetic”, but I noticed that in architecture, the phrase “machine aesthetic” was used by the architect Le Corbusier and some of his contemporaries, and it alludes to “a design whose initial idea derived from engineered forms like those of ocean-going liners, cars and aeroplanes, in other words, designs that were modern because they derived from industrial processes” (Acton, 2004: 310).

But as you probably have noticed, I had in mind **Walter Benjamin**’s 1935 essay *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, sometimes translated as *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanization* and from which my talk borrows its title. Benjamin’s essay famously reflects on the consequences of a gradual and pervasive mechanization in relation to art in Western societies.

Historians have noted that after WW1, and probably for the first time in human history, artefacts are designed to live longer than their owners, and indeed do live longer than them¹ – artefacts such as those designed in Charles Chaplin’s protagonist in the factory when he works for a short period, in the movie *Modern Times*, released in 1936. One of the most memorable scenes of that film for me shows the hero-worker gradually becoming mad as he toils on the conveyor-belt. Standardization, taylorism and fordism become pervasive in huge factories over the first half of the 20th century.

Louis MacNeice, born in 1907, grew up and lived in that period of tremendous technological change, right until his untimely and unexpected death in 1963: he died out of a badly-treated pneumonia he had contracted in a mine where he was gathering noises for a future radio-play for the BBC. He died a week after the publication of his last collection of poems, *The Burning Perch*.

The aim of this talk is to study the pervasive presence of machines in *The Burning Perch*, and to what extent some of the poems are built like machines, meaning-producing machines.

¹ Daniel Roche, *Histoire des choses banales*, Paris, Fayard, 1997.