**The Promethean Gap:**

**Modernism, Machines and the Obsolescence of Man**

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It belongs to the essence of our modern world that it no longer seems to be what it is, that it does not manifest itself, that in a certain sense it has become invisible.

Günther Anders, *After “Holocaust” 1979[[1]](#endnote-1)*

Mr. Muddle thought highly of man and did not believe newspapers could be made better, whereas Mr. Keuner did not think very highly of man and believed newspapers could be made better. “Everything can be better,” said Mr. Keuner, “except man.”

Bertolt Brecht, *Stories of Mr. Keuner[[2]](#endnote-2)*

The drive to transcend the human that pervades the modernist avant-gardes is a supremely equivocal, over-determined one. The negation of the Christian and bourgeois images of man, of the figures of individuality, autonomy, reflection, and representation that together composed the ideology of the European nineteenth century, is as contradictory as the epoch that gave birth to it, upturned by imperialist conflict, the crisis of liberalism, and accelerating technological development, especially in the fields of communication (or reproduction) and warfare (or destruction). Invocations and allegories of the inhuman can be found in exhortations to colonial aggression and panegyrics to socialist brotherhood alike. The wish to break with the experiential limits of humanity, whether conceived naturalistically as species or historically as culture, can surface as a prominent motif in works that do little to challenge a governing representational *habitus*; it can also permeate experiments in form whose avowed social or ethical content remains *prima facie* “humanist.” In a *détournement* of a crucial dictum from Louis Althusser’s autobiography, we could say that an aesthetic anti-humanism can sometimes serve as the prelude to a political humanism, just as a political anti-humanism can dress itself up in the trappings of aesthetic humanism.

The most obvious and recurrent locus for modernism’s “inhumanism” is no doubt the machine. Yet our automatic identification of the machine with that which reduces, surpasses, or negates humanity risks occluding the plurality of figures and levels of machinism among the avant-gardes, as well as a more sustained investigation into the problems of agency, history, and representation that underlie the man-machine nexus. In order to sketch out an avenue for problematizing this machinic facet of modernist inhumanism, I want first to consider two instances of its articulation from politically opposite wings of the avant-garde, in Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Dziga Vertov. Having delineated the political polysemy of “the machine,” the rest of the article will draw on a largely neglected philosopher of technology, Günther Anders, to think through the deeper stakes of the abasement before the machine, and the aspiration towards it, that can be detected across modernism’s political spectrum. I will suggest that his conceptions of “Promethean shame,” but especially “the Promethean gap,” provide a fecund angle through which to think of modernist inhumanism as the site of a discrepancy or conflict between our capacity to produce and our capacity to perceive. In conclusion, I will suggest that Anders’s localization of this lag in technology should be supplemented or sublated by a consideration of the capital-relation, but especially the problem of what Marx identified as the rising “organic composition” of capital—the tendency for human living labor to be overwhelmed by machinic constant capital—as the crux of a thinking of the origins of the politics and aesthetics of the inhuman.

**Marinetti and the aerial centaur**

The strident bombast with which Filippo Tommaso Marinetti called for a fusion of man and machine seems to repel any interpretive nuance. Take his “Multiplied Man and the Reign of the Machine” (from *Le futurisme*, 1911), a text that broadcasts its “frank misogynist optimism” and organizes its breathless examination of mechanical beauty through a relentless eroticization and spiritualization of the machine and an equally insistent repudiation of all femininity, affection, and bodily gravity.[[3]](#endnote-3) Any psychoanalytic acumen would appear to be otiose when faced with declarations such as “The *multiplied man* of whom we dream will preserve his genital power until death, as one does one’s stomach, and will never know the tragedy of old age and impotence!” (92). As the beauty of the machine later shades into the beauty of fascism’s racist, colonial aggression and Marinetti’s paradigmatic aestheticization of politics, the temptation would be to see the “imminent and inevitable identification of man and motor” declaimed by the Italian futurist simply as a revanchist fantasy of domination of an insecure artist-intellectual, with the machine a glorious instrument for the suppression of the Other, be it woman, worker, or colonized (90). While the latter is certainly true, the specific modalities of the futurist invocation of the machine bear greater scrutiny.

To begin with, the interpenetration of the human and the machinic is *personal*; Marinetti delights in telling of mechanics washing the “bodies” of their machines, as a lover might caress his beloved, and explaining the reluctance of French railwaymen to sabotage their machines to this intimacy—thus transvaluing eroticism *against* woman and extirpating class struggle from the man-machine relation. The precondition for this inhumanism is thus a kind of anthropomorphic affective transfer that posits “a new sensibility of the machine” and a kind of machinic-organic continuum across which there can occur “a continual interchange of intuitions, rhythms, instincts, and metallic disciplines” (90). To ground this hypothesis of hybridization (in which machinic man rises above both woman and work) Marinetti must repudiate the mechanism of Darwinian selection for the sake of an explicit Lamarckianism: the directed mutation of man in contact with the machine into “an inhuman type, one in which moral suffering, generosity, affect, and love will be abolished, poisonous corrosives that sap the inexhaustible supply of vital energy, interrupters of our powerful physiological electricity” (it was the possibility of “inhuman will” manifest in a “physiology of matter” which, notwithstanding his misgivings about the “stupidity” of the contrast between matter and woman, drew D.H. Lawrence to Marinetti) (90). This inhuman type requires the ersatz Nietzscheanism of a war on morality, but above all an *adaptation* to the demands of a present environment defined by “continuous shocks”: it must be “constructed for omnipresent velocity . . . naturally cruel, omniscient, and combative,” and for this to be possible it must *grow new organs* (90). Marinetti deliriously envisages—with explicitly irrationalist references to “externalized will” in spiritual séances and the possibility of “mechanical divination”—“an organ that will resemble a prow developing from the outward swelling of the sternum, which will be the more pronounced the better an aviator the man of the future becomes” (91). The main threat to such a creative, mutant adaptation of “multiplied man” to the machine is “affection” as an enduring need, hence the call to turn the heart into a stomach for the brain, or to live like heroically loveless men “in an atmosphere that is the color of steel” (91).

Few texts like Marinetti’s so effectively corroborate the view of fascism as a male fantasy, the martial mirage of an eroticism at last emancipated from affection and reproduction. For the latter to be sublimated or substituted, the figure of the machine has to be a very peculiar one: the *personal*, *sensual* relation mentioned above must take place with an *individual* machine, namely with the airplane, that machine which can relay regressive fantasies of aristocratic warfare, as well as a whole allegorical apparatus of spiritualization, dematerialization, and escape from the “heaviness” of woman, work, and earth. And though superficially opposed to the romantic repudiation of the machine, Marinetti’s erotics and poetics of aviation shared with it an aversion to the *rationalism* of the machine. As Jeffrey Schnapp has elegantly demonstrated, the orientation towards aviation, and in particular to the material and sensory properties of the propeller, was founded on its being the bearer of “power, danger, *and unreliability*” (emphasis mine), making possible “a body/machine complex founded on notions of struggle, sacrifice, feverish effort, and expenditure: an aesthetic (i.e. non-productivist) body/machine complex that runs counter to the complexes being devised within the domains of scientific management (Taylor) and the ‘science of work,’ which were founded on notions of body/machine harmony, energy conservation, and freedom from fatigue.”[[4]](#endnote-4) To this crucial observation about futurism’s *anti-productivism*, we could add that the rationalist figure of the machine is precisely based on its existence as an *ensemble* or *apparatus* whose individual components are substitutable and thus devoid of the kind of singularity demanded by Marinetti’s erotics of male domination. The futurist fantasy of adapting to the new machines—which has been seen as a symptom of Italy’s belated industrialization and uneven development (and was encapsulated in Wyndham Lewis's racist quip that only wops like Marinetti could be so taken with machines)—can thus also be read as a response to the inability to adapt to an industrial society.[[5]](#endnote-5) In this light, the factory workers and tram commuters that populated Marinetti’s anti-proletarian anxieties were much more “modern” figures of subjectivity than the imperialist aviators whose colonial massacres Marinetti would celebrate over and again. Futurism was in this sense always an anachronism. Forty years ago, Allan Sekula captured the class character of this fantasy, which sees “the exercise of reactionary political violence” as “an occasion for synesthetic rapture,” with unparalleled precision:

Above all else, Futurism is a defense of the connoisseur in the teeth of a “rationalized” world order. Futurism attempts to resuscitate the masculinity of warfare *within* the logic of mechanization. Masses of conscripts submit to this logic. But the fascist warrior-dandy is the only *subject* capable of both surviving and relishing war’s “dreamt of metallization of the human body.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

The fascist fantasy of being vitally present at one’s own annihilation, whether moral or physical, is also a disavowal, consequent on an incapacity to represent, of the overwhelming and invisible complexity of the apparatus (not to mention the socio-economic causes) of war. The seeming extremity of the “inhuman” experience of war in the man-machine nexus—in that “aerial centaur” or “composite monster” that the nationalist ideologue and Marinetti confidant Mario Morasso had celebrated in his *The New Weapon (The Machine)*—thus serves to parry the class anxieties of an artistic and intellectual elite before the industrial onslaught of *mass* society and the associated threat of socialism, with its rationalist conception of the system of machines as open to collectivecontrol rather than individual risk.[[7]](#endnote-7) In Marinetti's futurist aviator we encounter a resistance to instrumental rationalism (risk-less, predictable, efficient flight) on the basis of an irrationalism of the instrument (the dangerous symbiosis of man and machine). The machine is here figured more as a wild animal to be bridled and mounted than as a complex apparatus and component in a system of machines based on mathematical matrices and economic imperatives.

In a recent interpretation of futurism, Christine Poggi has perspicuously suggested that behind the customary image of a celebration of machinic acceleration and transformation by Marinetti and his comrades there lay a profoundly unsettled experience of the personal and poetic *shocks* wreaked by the advance of urban-industrial modernity in an economically-retarded Italy. The speeding trams, faceless mobs, and nocturnal lighting of Milan are not objects of celebration in Marinetti's poetry, which registers a distress all-too-common among nationalist and reactionary modernists of the time, especially anxious about “the revolt of the masses” and its supposed challenge to subjectivity of the creator. The aeronautic adventurism and the cult of speed, as well as the numbingly reiterated calls for cruelty, are also an over-compensation and displacement; the call for a wrenching adaptation to the environment of shocks is also a way of disavowing a horror at the plebeian features of modernity and at one's own bodily and social precarity. Trauma is mastered by an “active embrace of its destructive power,” but also by a Freudian “stimulus shield,” appearing “in the fantasy of a metallized body resistant to threats and shocks, in the desire to dominate time and space by imagining oneself as a speeding projectile, and in the assumption of a state of perpetual, combative ‘readiness’ to parry external blows.”[[8]](#endnote-8) This “homeopathic” solution, incorporating and indeed exacerbating the very vectors of the subject's destruction, is a profoundly selective one. In a complex ruse to maintain the sovereignty of a subject through its very transcendence and dissolution, the impersonal threat of industry is displaced onto the risk of the personalized, eroticized machine; the “inhumanity” of masses shorn of individuality (“the automatic and bituminous crowd”) is shifted onto the sovereign inhumanity of the “warrior-dandy”; bodily precariousness is sublimated into a celebration of its possible demise, conceived as an act, an event, and not as the banal quotidian fate of soldiers or workers. The airplane thus condenses the figure of a possible erotic death and transfiguration of the subject that would ward off its social death at the hands of a plebeianized collective and an ultimately unrepresentable system of machines. The man-machine complex, its fantasy, can thus be regarded as a disavowal or antagonism towards the inhumanity of the *collective* and that of *capital*. It allows the reactionary modernist to rise above the suffocating modernization and conflict-ridden modernity of a city whose new spatial form is profoundly disorienting and at the same time as it is claustrophobic, carceral. As Marinetti wrote in an essay from 1901:

Beginning at 10 a.m., Milan becomes the station of a gigantic city that doesn't seem real. It is the reign of electricity and of vapor: bells, trumpeting alarms, aggressive bicycles, smoke and noise. Milan has no horizon, no sky. Over this city, flat and surrounded by walls like a dungeon, one has installed prison bars in the guise of a ceiling: for electric tramways they say; to restrict flights of genius, the malicious say. The fact is that an Italian artist finds himself exiled, outside of Italy, and, in a manner of speaking, like a fish out of water. With iron mesh overhead, one feels absolutely caught in a great net. (quoted in *Inventing Futurism*, 18)

Marinetti fled this net both practically and metaphorically through a poetics of speed and cruelty, in which the communion of the warrior-dandy with the individual machine played a determinant function. From an individual dwarfed into insignificance by the urban complex of masses and machines, Marinetti wants to fashion a new form of aesthetic sovereignty. According to Poggi, his

desire to fuse flesh with metal functions . . . to fortify an all-too-vulnerable body, rendering it hard, phallic, and immune to attack, whether from within or from without. In Marinetti's imaginary universe, as well as in his life, psychic processes of defense and discharge are intimately linked, so that he takes intense pleasure in becoming machinelike, in developing an impenetrable surface and an antihuman psychology, but he simultaneously thrills to the hyperstimulation of speed and the sensation of an exploding, expanding self. (*Inventing Futurism*, 34)[[9]](#endnote-9)

Futurism's strategy with regard to industrial modernity is in this light one of adaptation through a kind of homeopathic acceleration that assumes control, in the guise of an assumed risk, of the impersonal processes that had threatened to render the artist-intellectual wholly obsolete. The warrior-dandy flees into the skies, into the orthographic analogies of machinism (the onomatopoeic “words-in-freedom”), into the fantasy of the centaur, so as to flee the gravitational pull of romance, of feminized social reproduction, of horizon-less urban modernity, of masses and classes.

**Vertov and the camera-eye**

If futurism finds its machinic figure, its talisman, in the airplane (or even, as Schnapp has argued, in the propeller itself), Dziga Vertov's attempted revolution in cinema famously revolves around the technology of reproduction, the camera (in conjunction, as *Man With a Movie Camera* itself intimates, with the editing table, the one operated by Vertov's wife Elizaveta Svilova, splicing the footage shot by Vertov's brother Mikhail Kaufman, the trio forming what their communiqués christened The Council of Three). Besides the drastic divergence on the political spectrum—itself potentially a misleading index of the deeper determinants of these artists' political aesthetics—attention to the human-machine nexus in these works suggests some initial juxtapositions, which may carry some analytical and diagnostic value. The one just mentioned, namely the reflexive centrality of the technology of visual reproduction to Vertov's work—the camera as theme and apparatus, form and content—as contrasted with Marinetti's erotics of the aerial centaur, provides a useful starting point in mapping some of the contours of modernism's relation to the machine.

By contrast with Vertov, it is striking how ultimately *mimetic* and *analogical* futurism's relation to machinic speed is, be it in the rhythmic, lexical, and visual forms of poetry, or in the later vogue of *aeropittura*. The forms of synaesthesia and disorientation are invariably reterritorialized onto the artist-as-overman, the detachment turns into a “*reattachment* under conditions wherein the aviator is free to dictate his law of infinite novelty (against monogamy, monotony, and other principles of repetition and decay)” (Schnapp, 165).[[10]](#endnote-10) As was already powerfully intuited in Walter Benjamin's reflection on the capacity of cinema to effect what Vertov would have termed a kind of communist decipherment of the senses, there is deep and complex affinity between the technologies of reproducibility and the psycho-social landscape of modern masses who, *depending in part on the uses to which such technologies are put*, can appear to themselves as classes in conflict or be spectacularly reified as trans-class peoples, nations, or what the fascists, in a grotesque *détournement* of Marxist doctrine, termed “proletarian nations.” Vertov's project to overcome a dead, theatrical cinema with *cinema-truth* (*kino-pravda*) and the *cinema-eye* (*kino-glaz*) depends on affirming the camera as a technology at once “inhuman” (in a sense we'll presently explore) *and collective*. The individual synesthetic experience of the aerial centaur or warrior-dandy, for whom the machine is an occasion to *enjoy* disorientation and horizon-less while escaping their social forms, can thus be usefully contrasted to the conception—dear to Vertov but also to many other prominent figures in the Soviet avant-gardes—of the machinic overcoming of the bourgeois sensorium and of the monadic isolation of workers *in order to render dynamically “transparent” the building of revolution*.

The sensori-motor figure that is “man” is here surpassed *for the sake of a communist humanity* (of men *and* women), not in view of the sensory apotheosis and self-transcendence of the super-individual that characterizes Italian futurism. By contrast with the interpenetration of the machine and man which for Marinetti is the condition of the latter's “multiplication,” Vertov's cinema envisions a much more mediated role for sensation, one that is inhabited by the modernist imperative of a *derangement of the senses* but which does not translate it into a personal erotics of the machine, but into a project of collective transmutation. Against the Lamarckian fantasies of Marinetti, Vertov starts (contrary to the customary view of a Soviet faith in the biological mutability of mankind) from the relative inertia of the individual human sensorium. As he writes:

The kino-eye moves in time and space; it gathers and records impressions in a manner wholly different from that of the human eye. The position of our bodies while observing or our perception of a certain number of features of a visual phenomenon in a given instant are by no means obligatory limitations for the camera which, since it is perfected, perceives more and better. We cannot improve the making of our eyes, but we can endlessly perfect the camera.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Not an individual centaur, then, but a kind of collective prosthesis. The gambit of Vertov's political aesthetics is that the cognitive and sensory emancipation of the working class is dependent on the liberation of the machine, the setting-free of the apparatuses of visual reproducibility to realize potentials that the limitations of the human perceptual and representational system enduringly repress. What this process promises, again in contrast to Marinetti, is not the synesthetic intensification of individual experience (at the limit as the experience of one's own annihilation as a subject, but more commonly as the enjoyment of the annihilation of others) but the transformation of mediated, collective experience, the supplementation of human experience and cognition by machine-sight. Communist mastery of social conditions is here wedded to transcending bourgeois mastery over the machines of representation. As Vertov declares: “Until now, we have violated the movie camera and forced it to copy the work of our eye. And the better the copy, the better the shooting was thought to be. Starting today we are liberating the camera and making it work in the opposite direction—away from copying” (16). When it comes to perception and representation, to emancipate man from capital we must emancipate machines from man.

This transcendence of the human *habitus* via the machine does require a break with its sensori-motor and spatio-temporal coordinates. Yet this is not in the direction of an inhuman individual synesthesia but of an indirect and collectively mediated construction of new spaces and times of sensation, where individuality remains but in the ancillary role of pilots, engineers, and directors. As the communiqué of The Council of Three declaims:

The mechanical eye, the camera, rejecting the human eye as crib sheet, gropes its way through the chaos of visual events, letting itself be drawn or repelled by movement, probing, as it goes, the path of its own movement. It experiments, distending time, dissecting movement, or, in contrary fashion, absorbing time within itself, swallowing years, thus *schematizing processes of long duration inaccessible to the normal eye*.

Aiding the machine-eye is the kinok-pilot, who not only controls the camera's movements, but entrusts himself to it during experiments in space. And at a later time the kinok-engineer, with remote control of cameras.

The result of this *concerted action of the liberated and perfected camera and the strategic brain of man directing, observing, and gauging*—the presentation of even the most ordinary things will take on an exceptionally fresh and interesting aspect. (19, my emphases)

Passages such as this resonate with a broader avant-garde Soviet discourse on the machine or the object as “comrade,” promising a politically humanist transfiguration of the inhuman.[[12]](#endnote-12) Endowed with a complex kind of agency, the camera-machine is no inert instrument, and though it is not anthropomorphized or eroticized in a fashion akin to Marinetti, it is still the bearer of a formal and sensory *vitality*—one that is incommensurably greater in potential than that of the individual if not necessarily of the collective. Here, there is an interesting resonance with the rhetoric through which Marinetti conveys the rise of that futurist composite-monster or aerial centaur. As Schnapp details, Marinetti's “Technical Manifesto” leans heavily on prosopopoeia, on letting the voice of the machine itself speak. There, Marinetti's ubiquitous and bombastic ego is relayed by the object: “a propeller will dictate from on high the laws that are to govern modern poetic discourse and define the desublimated forms of individuality and subjectivity attached thereto.” For Schnapp, this turns not to be a mere vanishing mediator or pretext for the intensification of the poet's voraciously centripetal and centrifugal ego, but a powerful index of the way in which Marinetti's poetry crystallizes, among other things, “the cognitive possibilities opened up by the experience of flight, and the way in which certain modes of organization and coordination that first arose during the early years of aviation (and, especially, *military* aviation) rendered ‘thinkable’ forms of literary expression like those prophesied and practiced by Marinetti” (“Propeller Talk,” 154). Leaving aside for now Schnapp's meticulous demonstration, I am struck by the need to embody an over-determined nexus of technological change, social mutation, and upheaval in the forms of subjectivity through the ancient rhetorical device of the object's ventriloquism, through this dramatic humanization of the inhuman. It is not accidental, one may hazard, that Vertov's own manifesto for the kino-eye, equally desirous to wage war on a previous representational *habitus*, should also resort to prosopopoeia, dramatizing a revolution in the senses emerging from the technologies of reproduction themselves. In Vertov this gesture is much more radical than in Marinetti, deposing the mastery of the artist, and indeed the very order of creation:

I am kino-eye, I create a man more perfect than Adam, I create thousands of different people in accordance with preliminary blue-prints and diagrams of different kinds.

I am kino-eye.

From one person I take the hands, the strongest and most dexterous; from another I take the legs, the swiftest and most shapely; from a third, the most beautiful and expressive head—and through montage I create a new, perfect man.

I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it.

Now and forever, I free myself from human immobility, I am in constant motion, I draw near, then away from objects, I crawl under, I climb onto them. I move apace with the muzzle of a galloping horse, I plunge full speed into a crowd, I outstrip running soldiers, I fall on my back, I ascend with an airplane, I plunge and soar together with plunging and soaring bodies. Now I, a camera, fling myself along their resultant, maneuvering in the chaos of movement, recording movement, starting with movements composed of the most complex combinations. (17)

**Promethean shame and the problem of modernism**

The bodily transvaluation of man in the centaur-aviator in Marinetti and the sensory surpassing of the human by the cinema-eye in Vertov—both expressed in a kind of machinic ventriloquism—base the modernist project of the avant-garde on the inferiority or retardation of the human sensory apparatus. Bracketing for the time being the profoundly divergent political valences of these projects (Marinetti's practically anti-humanist fascist individualism, Vertov's politically humanist communist collectivism), the rest of this article will explore the hypothesis that they both instantiate a “Promethean shame” that drives a large swathe of modernist production. The term “Promethean shame” (*prometheische Scham*) and its closely related notion of a “Promethean lag” (*prometheische Gefälle*) are the pivotal concepts in Günther Anders's (1902-1992, pseudonym of Günther Stern) two-part masterwork *The Obsolescence of Man* (*Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, volume 1 published in 1956, volume 2 in 1980), a massive experiment in what he termed “occasional philosophy,” “a hybrid cross of metaphysics and journalism,” but also a philosophy of exaggeration and discrepancy.[[13]](#endnote-13) Anders is a complex figure—dystopian fantasy novelist, anti-academic philosopher, student of Heidegger, associate of Brecht, distant cousin of Benjamin, first husband of Hannah Arendt, resolute campaigner against nuclear weapons—almost entirely neglected in English since his best-selling epistolary exchange with a repentant participant in the Hiroshima bombing, Claude Eatherly, *Burning Conscience.* Though I will not delve here into the consuming concern of Anders's postwar production—that historical singularity and absolute object that is the nuclear bomb—I would suggest that the concepts he generated to explain our blindness in the face of impending Armageddon can also serve to provide some insight into the modernist problem of machines, understood as a question about the inhuman. All of Anders's work was obsessively dominated by the epochal moral and political problem of a humanity that had produced the technological conditions of its own annihilation, that had generated an object—the bomb—which harbored the potential of the destruction of objectivity and subjectivity alike. But his relentless inquisition into the philosophical presuppositions and anthropological consequences of the nuclear age also produced a fiercely unique constellation of concepts, which, in its pitiless verdicts and impassioned exaggerations, continues to challenge our ethical, political, and aesthetic reflection on the present.

In particular, I want to argue that an inquiry into modernism and the inhuman can learn much from Anders's historical phenomenology of shame, from a philosophy that is centrally concerned with the way in which contemporary man is humiliated by the contrast between the quality of “his” products and that of his self, and especially of his own *body*—a bodywhich in the dynamic of modernity and modernization increasingly appears as the unintentional *saboteur* of mankind's works.[[14]](#endnote-14) This shame measures the abysmal gap between the perfectibility and prowess of machines which “we” have produced (and which increasingly produce themselves, with mere “collaboration” from humans) and our own fading praxis.[[15]](#endnote-15) The “journalistic” origin of Anders's thesis about Promethean shame is located by him in comments made by a friend of his during a guided visit to a Californian factory during his wartime exile. Crucially (and resonating with the centrality of “natality” to Arendt's own distancing from Heideggerian ontology), Anders notes that shame is a matter of *origins* and that what causes his friend's shame in the face of industrial excellence is “having become instead of having been made” (UA1, 32). The shame is at the *natum esse,* at the having been born.

Here Anders identifies an element critical to Marinetti's machinism (though not to Vertov's, whose films don't shy away from representations of female bodies and births): *the hatred of reproduction*. The context for Anders's comments, though, is the full-bore development of commodity society, and we may wonder to what extent what he calls “industrial Platonism” (the immortal superiority of the idea of the infinitely reproducible product over its serial instantiations) and its humiliation of human uniqueness are operative in Marinetti's own formative urban shock, where that artist's dwarfing by the city, its masses and machines, and the retardation of Italy vis-à-vis other technological and imperial powers jointly elicit a deeply contradictory ideological resolution. Or perhaps, as we have already noted, the futurist erotics of the machine is a disavowal of its fully industrial and commodified nature: the airplane is still a singularity of sorts, the aerial centaur is not a factory cog or a serial consumer. Marinetti's futurism operates the contradictory aim, the male fantasy, of foreclosing birth while retaining uniqueness. Half a century later, Anders perceives a mass malaise implicitly driven by the desire to become substitutable, in the face of commodities that exist as so many mute witnesses to our own insufficiency. The irony of this shame, contrary to vulgar theories of reification and alienation, is that it is occasioned by the impression that one is failing to attain the serial perfectibility of the thing, that we are falling short in the global game of reduction and reification. Anders muses about what a theologian in the year 2000 might declare about this predicament:

Because there did not exist a demon or Marcionite God to condemn man to the existence of a machine or to transform him into a machine, man invented such a God; or rather, he even had the daring to attribute to himself the part of this supplementary God; but he took on this part exclusively with the aim of wreaking upon himself that damage which he could not invite upon himself from other divinities. He made himself sovereign only in order to make himself a slave in a new way. (UA1, 53)

This passage conveys an important feature of Anders's “exaggerated” diagnosis of the discrepancy between man and machine: humiliation need not be accompanied by humility, Promethean shame may (and indeed often does) issue in a kind of “arrogant self-degradation”—perhaps a useful prism through which to think the oscillations of hyper- and anti-humanism, fantasies of mastery and subordination, which pervade reactionary modernisms while also haunting the radical modernisms of the Left.

Perhaps one of the most powerful insights produced by Anders's method of exaggeration and by his vision of an obsolete modernity animated by shame at man's inferiority before his products concerns violence. Analyzing the My Lai massacre carried out by US Infantry soldiers in Vietnam in 1968, Anders begins by noting the moral discrepancy that technowar has normalized, whereby it is permitted for the technical apparatus centered on aerial warfare (cluster bombing, napalm, defoliation, Agent Orange) to exercise a brutality which it is not (officially) permitted to individual soldiers directly to carry out. This is what Anders calls the “*gap between human morality and that of the apparatus*” (UA2, 269). The crime of My Lai is the ethical index of a pathological revolt against this lag that obtains between the violence accorded to “our” machines and the one that is licit for us humans. It is on the background of the basic condition of Promethean shame that the categorical imperative behind My Lai can reveal itself not as “stop your machines from operating according to maxims that could not be those of your actions” but instead as “calmly carry out everything that does not contradict the maxims of the apparatus in which you are inserted, and affirm your ability to act in this way.” For Anders, My Lai is an epochal event, because after the “indirect” hecatomb of Hiroshima it presents a new stage in the man-machine nexus, the *retranslation* of indirect into direct action, the attempt to appropriate the “morality” of the machine into that of men—not in order to supplant or destroy machines, but to match their violence, to become *sicut machinae*. Anders’s description of the US soldiers at My Lai can double as a diagnosis of the futurists' “dreamt of metallization of the human body”: “They did not want to survive as men to a desired destruction of machines, but on the contrary as parts of machines to the desired and even invoked destruction of the human world” (UA2, 270). The man-machine nexus of reactionary (or revolutionary-conservative modernism) can be viewed in this light as the violent (and ultimately desperate) attempt to *catch up with the machine*.

Beneath the mechanisms of shame and its repercussions (which we could combine with those of shock and its shields, as identified by Poggi) there is a deeper argument in what Anders calls the Promethean gap (*Gefälle* could also be translated as lag or incline), a *moral, cognitive, and even ontological* argument about the incapacity of our faculties to represent, imagine, and articulate the effects of our praxis, of our production. The most effective statement of Anders's doctrine is actually to be found in his sole English-language book to date, the exchange of letters with Claude Eatherly. It appears in a brief essay entitled “Commandments in the Atomic Age” which he sends to the US airman, where Anders writes of

the effect of the daily growing gap between our two faculties; between our *action* and our *imagination*; of the fact, that we are unable to conceive what we can construct; to mentally reproduce what we can produce; to realize the reality which we can bring into being. For in the course of the technical age the classical relation between imagination and action has reversed itself. While our ancestors had considered it a truism that imagination exceeds and surpasses reality, to-day the capacity of our imagination (and that of our feeling and responsibility) cannot compete with that of our *praxis*. As a matter of fact, our imagination is unable to grasp the effect of that which we are producing. Not only our reason has its (Kantian) limits, not only *it* is finite, but also our imagination, and even more so our feeling. At best we can repent the murder of *one* man: more our feeling does not perform; we may be able to imagine *ten*: more our imagination cannot perform; but to destroy a hundred thousand people causes no difficulties whatsoever.[[16]](#endnote-16)

In the second, 1980, volume of *The Obsolescence of Man*, Anders speaks retrospectively of three forms of this gap, whose respective emergence follows the shifts in consumer and nuclear society. The first of these forms, which had dominated the 1956 volume, is the gap between what we are able to produce and what we are able to imagine. This, Anders repeatedly notes, is shamefully small. This becomes a gap between what we produce and what we can use, and then between the maximum that we can produce and the maximum that we can have a need for (UA2, 12). For the sake of delving into the man-machine nexus of modernism, I want to focus solely on this first form of the gap.

The predicament of twentieth-century man for Anders is best understood as that of “stunned prehistoric animals” wandering among their products, incapable of remaining “up to date” with their own fabrications. In a bitter *détournement* of Lautréamont's notorious turn of phrase, Anders quips that the most classical realization of surrealism is to be found in the image of a calculating machine and a man standing in front of it. The Promethean gap is this “*incessantly growing asynchronisation between man and the world of his products*” (UA1, 24). The thesis of uneven development as a source of modernism reappears here as a matter of philosophical anthropology, as an unevenness epochally inscribed in our historical praxis. Notably, Anders himself likens it to the Marxist conceptualization of the different rhythms in the development of base and superstructure, which is here revisited as the seemingly unbridgeable gap between a collective, machinically-mediated production and our (individual and group) faculty to imagine, control, and *live with* our products. As a mortal, *bodily* creature man is a humiliated rearguard being, “covered with folkloristic rags,” unsychronized with his own production (UA1, 25). In light of Anders's diagnosis—“Every one of us comprises a badly connected series of variously antiquated individual beings, marching at a different rhythm”—we could conceive the man-machine nexus in the modernism of Marinetti and Vertov as the index of an effort to vault this gap, to *synchronize* man and machine—in one case through a heroic fusional “metalization” that *directly* promises to accelerate and adapt the warrior-dandy to a world of shocks, in the other through a collective and mediated, *indirect* use of the camera's ability to open up and decipher a spatio-temporal world beneath the threshold of our individual perception (UA1, 25).

In this regard, the moral problem posed by the Promethean gap is aesthetically anticipated—no doubt in what are often fiercely ideological guises, especially in Italian futurism—by modernism itself. The rise of the machines demands of men that—to adapt a formulation used by Fredric Jameson for the closely related problem of cognitive mapping in postmodernism—*they grow new organs*.[[17]](#endnote-17) Anders's commandment for the atomic age translates much of the impetus behind modernism's relationship to the “inhumanity” of the machine:

Thus, your task consists in bridging the gap that exists between your two faculties: your faculty of *making* things and your faculty of *imagining* things; to level off the incline that separates the two: in other words: you have to violently widen the narrow capacity of your imagination (and the even narrower one of your feelings) until imagination and feeling become capable to grasp and to realize the enormity of your doings; until you are capable to seize and conceive, to accept or reject it (*Burning Conscience*, 13)

But the imperative that closes off Anders's secular sermon to Eatherly is alien to the manifest discourse of the modernist avant-garde: “your task is: *to widen your moral fantasy*” (13). From Anders's perspective, it would be the immoralist Nietzschean legacy within modernism (right and left) that might explain why it too belongs to the catalogue of failed metamorphoses that have ultimately made possible our “blindness before the Apocalypse.” Contrariwise, especially in light of Vertov's articulation of cinematic anti-humanism and political humanism, it could be argued, contra Anders, that it is necessary to disjoin the shame and the gap, in other words to think how *collectively* and *politically* (and not merely *individually* and *morally*) confronting the gap between our alienated praxis and our cognitive capacities, bridging this debilitating unevenness and conflict among our faculties, might *require* the mediation of technology, especially of the technologies of representation. One of the gambits of early Soviet cinema was arguably this—that new practices of montage could contribute to the widening of our *political fantasy* to include an understanding of the machinic complexes in which we work, as well as the human solidarities that might be mobilized in their transformation; to make workers and factories visible to one another, beyond the limits of a socialist realism that simply papered over the lag between praxis and products with anachronistic icons of the human, celebrating the crushing of living labor for the sake of veritably titanic projects like the Moscow-Volga canal immortalized in *USSR in Construction* by modernists now “synchronized” with the demands of Stalinism.[[18]](#endnote-18) Here Anders's linking up of the widening of moral fantasy to the widening of our sense of time (necessary for thinking the upheaval in the nature of the “future” effected by nuclear technology), but also to vaulting the “schizotopia” that has made possible the complete diremption between the place of the agent and the site of violence (as in aerial bombing), can also be fruitfully linked to the spatio-temporal investigations of modernism.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Though Anders resists the need to think the inevitably *mediated* character of the faculties required to bridge the gap, morally and cognitively to grasp what “we” have produced, his reflections on the obsolescence of man also contain some important observations on the ways in which art might represent this impasse in representation, or how our incapacity to imagine our action may in turn be actively imagined. Most pertinent here is the essay on Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, the third and shortest of the four that comprise the first volume of *The Obsolescence of Man*. “Being Without Time,” which anticipates many of the themes of Theodor Adorno's far better known “Trying to Understand *Endgame*” (which in turn mentions Anders's comments on the parody of the master-slave dialectic in Beckett), treats Beckett's play as a kind of anti-allegory of the impasse of contemporary action, of a praxis which, crushed into insignificance by its products, nevertheless soldiers on in the incapacity to give up on meaning.[[20]](#endnote-20) This late modernism is also a parable of the impossibility of nihilism, of our incapacity to actually *live with meaninglessness*, manifest in an abstract farce that demonstrates the impossibility of tragedy—for tragedy requires a world against which a subject might collide. *Godot* is above all perhaps a parable of modern *work* (an abiding theme in Anders), a situation in which “real labour and the most fictional of labour ‘exercised out of desperation’ do not present the least structural or psychological difference” (UA1, 212). But the most interesting observations advanced by Anders for our purposes come at those moments in the second volume of *The Obsolescence of Man* when he interrogates the possibility of representing the Promethean gap itself.

This is particularly so in a “remembered” and fictionalized dialogue in which Anders aggresses a realist painter about the ineptitude of his landscape paintings to carry any truth about the present, and especially about the painter in question's utterly misguided desire to “paint” the atom bomb. This dialogue, which follows one in which Anders provides a qualified defense of surrealism against an older friend who rails at its conservatism of form (“But it's all Böcklin!,” she shouts), nicely conveys what for Anders is the predicament of artistic representation faced with the widening gap between praxis and products (UA2, 294). Crucial here is the question of *appearance*. As he states in an essay by the same name (also included in the second volume), which distantly echoes Brecht's famous critique of photographic realism, contemporary apparatuses (rather than individual machines or products as such) are *mute*; their appearance no longer reveals their real potentiality: “*today's ‘misterium’ is inside colossal apparatuses and complexes of apparatuses, given that these are only apparently visible, but in reality remain invisible. The attempt to perceive their meaning through our senses would be a meaningless enterprise*.” That is why it is useless to represent in realist painting machines that don't reveal anything, as socialist realism might try to do—“if machines themselves remain ‘mute’ then the images of what is mute must remain even muter” (UA2, 29).

To persist with realism is to defraud oneself and the viewer, and to abandon the moral and cognitive requirement to grow new organs, to develop forms of fantasy adequate to the Promethean gap. If the visible features of things no longer reveal their truth (something demonstrated with unbearable extremity by the “appearance” of an atom bomb), then the role of fantasy and imagination must be transformed. When we are no longer capable of imagining what we can invent and make, when our fantasy can't live up to our fantasy—as Anders paradoxically suggests—then we require the kind of fantasy that doesn't rise above reality but allows us to grasp it. Whence the reversal: while the stubbornly realist painter is a fantasist, surrealist fantasy may prove to be a much closer approximation to the invisible, unfathomable reality of our own productions and their consequences. Contrariwise, retaining a traditional conception of the visual field in a world that has become horizonless is mendacious; the optical angle is false, as Anders notes, when it “simulates an all too narrow world, given that today every point of the earth can be reached, can be threatened, or rather is threatened by any other”—which is why, in an interesting twist in our narrative, aerial photography carries for Anders a greater truth than easel painting (UA2, 304). When material truths, the truths of the apparatuses that govern our life, are super-sensible, subtracted from perception, in a massive inversion of the empirical and the fantastic, a kind of “sur-realism” is required. Accordingly:

He who today reproduces a piece of the world precisely as it is offered to his perception, hence in a “realistic” way, takes refuge in an ivory tower, because the image of his perception no longer has anything in common with the image devoid of images of the contemporary horizon; even if he disguises this tower by placing on its entrance way the word “reality”, to trick himself and others. (UA2, 303)

With these reflections, Anders provides a potential bridge between modernism's attempt to grow new organs to adapt to a new age of machine shocks and the postmodern predicament of cognitive mapping, understood in terms of the incapacity to produce a situated representation of individual and collective praxis within a globalized, financialized capitalist system. The aim of this article has been to sketch how Anders's long neglected philosophy of technology can allow us to explore the question of modernist inhumanism from a novel speculative and critical angle. To complete this operation, it would be necessary to carry out a critique of Anders's theses, to articulate how the invisibility of the apparatus, so key to his reflections on the aporia of representing the Promethean gap, is itself a phenomenon constituted by and constitutive of capital, both in terms of the “invisibility” of its abstract forms of value and in light of how the dwarfing of men by machines is intrinsic to the logic of capital accumulation, and to what Marx called capital's organic composition.[[21]](#endnote-21) If, as Anders himself noted, “the category of the ‘modern’ could develop only in the capitalist world and only in it acquire efficacy,” and historical time is a “form of production,” an account of modernist inhumanism will of necessity demand a more sustained engagement with the inhumanities of capital (UA2, 279).

1. Günther Anders, *Dopo Holocaust, 1979* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2014), 63. [Original publication: Günther Anders, *Nach “Holocaust” 1979*, in *Besuch im Hades* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1985).] My translation. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Bertolt Brecht, *Stories of Mr. Keuner*, trans. Martin Chalmers (San Francisco: City Lights, 2001), 65. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, , “Multiplied Man and the Reign of the Machine,” in *Futurism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 89-92, 92. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Jeffrey T. Schnapp, “Propeller Talk,” *Modernism/modernity* 1.3 (1994): 153-178, 161. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For an acute comment on Lewis and Marinetti's futurist differend, and an inspiring discussion of the attempt to subjectivize oneself as machine across the modern and the postmodern, see Benjamin Noys, *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Allan Sekula, “The Instrumental Image: Steichen at War,” *Artforum*, vol. 14, no. 10 (1975): 33-51, 46. The continuation of the passage bears quoting: “Nowadays, American military contractors and bureaucrats have managed almost completely to rationalize the same procedures that Italian fascism sought to decorate. On a strategic bomb run over Indochina the most important questions of taste had to do with the flavor of the box-lunch sandwiches” (47). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Thomas Hippler, *Le gouvernement du ciel. Histoire globale des bombardements aériens* (Paris: Les Prairies Ordinaires, 2014), 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Christine Poggi, *Inventing Futurism: The Art and Politics of Artificial Optimism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. It should be noted that the “shield” is compatible, or even requires, an affirmation and properly sociopathic celebration of the body's vulnerability. The shredding of the flesh is the price happily paid for the unity of the reactionary modernist ego. The following war diary entry from Marinetti is emblematic in this regard: “The airplane in flames has fallen among the wire mesh in our line of resistance. The smoke chokes me. The wood the flesh the bones the fat and the aluminum burn. A leg without a foot still bandaged is already charred and half in ashes. The arm that grips metal shows a roasted elbow the color of varnished mahogany. The elbow makes me think of the bone of a lamb leg well cooked on the spit. Among the contorted metal the tubes turned into tie-knots and the rusted wire mesh the gutted fuel tank and on top a fully uncovered brain boiling and frying. It makes me think of a delicate little machine all little nickel and silver tubes too oiled and greased full of steam. I take an aluminum tube and we descend.” Quoted in Emilio Gentile, “*La nostra sfida alle stelle” Futuristi in politica* (Roma: Laterza, 2009), 48*.* My translation. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. This could be usefully contrasted with the way in which Wyndham Lewis's vorticist prose also sought to adapt and absorb the inhumanism of the machine, not at the level of theme as much as of sentence production. Fredric Jameson writes of “the prodigious force with which Wyndham Lewis propagates his bristling mechanical sentences and hammers the reified world into a forbiddingly cubist surface [which] may be thought of as a virtual cooptation of the machine, a homeopathic expropriation of its alienated dynamism. In Lewis, indeed, the machine seems to have absorbed all the vitality of the human beings henceforth dependent on it.” *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (London: Verso, 2008 [1979]), 81-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O’Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005). In my commentary on Alain Badiou's *The Century*, I tried to detail how Vertov's work moves beyond some of the modernist variations on the dichotomy of vitalism and mechanism: “Vertov does not oppose the *mechanism* of montage to the *organic body* of cinema. He dissolves this opposition in order to demonstrate how the new cinema transfigures the physiological and theatrical eye of the habituated spectator into a kino-eye, a sort of transhuman conduit for a life of sensation that can only be experienced in its vital truth to the degree that it is machinically constructed and composed. . . . The ‘emancipation of the camera’ from the habituated eye is the very condition for this ‘inhuman’ experience of the life of sensation. . . . In the transvaluation of the eye into ‘kino-eye’ we see the century's promise—at the intersection of political and aesthetic militancy—that the emancipation of human subjects will entail the emancipation of the inhuman from the representational *habitus* of humanity.” Alberto Toscano, “‘European Nihilism’ and Beyond: Commentary,” in Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Polity Press, 2007), 184. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen: Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution* (München: Beck, 1956); Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen 2: Über die Zerstörung des Lebens im Zeitalter der dritten industriellen Revolution* (München: Beck, 1980). I will be referring below to page numbers in the Italian edition, *L'uomo è antiquato*, 2 vols. (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003), abbreviating the two volumes hereafter as UA1 and UA2. Translations are mine. The best resource on Anders in English is the site maintained by Marcuse's grandson: http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/anders.htm

    The reasons adduced by Anders for the centrality of exaggeration to his writing are suggestive, especially as they foreground the questions of scale and representation, the link between perceptibility and conceivability, which dominate his understanding of the Promethean lag: “there exist phenomena that cannot be treated without accentuating or magnifying them; that is because without that deformation they could neither be identified nor made out and, given that they withdraw themselves from observation with our naked eye, they confront us with the *alternative: 'exaggerate or give up on knowing them’*” (UA1, 23). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Anders's work on this theme could be fruitfully contrasted to that of another heterodox student of Heidegger's, Emmanuel Lévinas, whose phenomenology of shame can be found in *On Escape/De l’évasion*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. For Anders, unlike for Vertov, there seems to be no emancipatory promise in man's becoming ancillary to the machine. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Günther Anders and Claude Eatherly, *Burning Conscience: The Case of the Hiroshima Pilot, Claude Eatherly, Told in his Letters to Günther Anders* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1961), 12. The theme of the Promethean gap is also present in Anders's late memoir of his relationship with Hannah Arendt. There he glosses the concept in the simpler tenet (dramatized through remembered conversations with Arendt) that our feeling lags behind our knowledge, and that philosophers' “dishonest pre-Copernicanism”—their anthropocentric bad faith in other words—has impeded a moral and speculative reckoning with the fact that we are not able to live up to our cosmic irrelevance. It is significant that in this text, which probably reflects Anders's greater identification with the Left during the 1930s, humanism is dismissed as a trick of the dominant class. Günther Anders, *Die Kirschenschlacht. Dialoge mit Hannah Arendt und ein akademisches Nachwort,* ed. Gerhard Oberschlick with an essay by Christian Dries (Münich: C. H. Beck, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 39. Jameson briefly mentions Anders and “Promethean shame” on p. 323 to describe our cultural predicament. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. On these questions, see Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2015), especially chapter 2, “Seeing Socialism.” [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. On schizotopia, which Anders juxtaposes to syntopia, see UA2 and part 2 of *Besuch im Hades: Auschwitz und Breslau 1966. Nach “Holocaust” 1979* (Münich: C. H. Beck, 1985). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. An English translation of Anders's essay can be found in *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965). It would also be interesting to explore the resonance between Anders's claim about the obsoleteness of modernity and Adorno's remark about “modernism as what is obsolete in modernity.” Theodor W. Adorno, “Trying to Understand *Endgame,*” in *Notes to Literature, Volume One*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 241. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. I have sketched out such a criticism in “The World is Already Without Us,” forthcoming in *Social Text*; see also chapter 7 of *Cartographies of the Absolute*. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)