

Results

In the works of the authors considered in these pages we can identify three model images of the machine. These images have been drawn on at various times, also outside the realms of philosophy, and they still provide the backdrop for our knowledge of the machine, which has circulated in a great variety of languages. First of all, and especially in Marx, the machine is seen as a super-subject equipped with the capacity to compete with human beings, doing the same type of job, but far more effectively because they are more powerful and virtually immune to fatigue, at no risk of failing due to wear and tear. Man projects his own ego onto his machines, but in the form of a super-powerful being; in the practical relationships of the factory floor, the machine ultimately takes the boss's place and uses the human worker like an animate component. The idea of dominion implicated here is that of an autocracy of the artificial on economic grounds. The changes that the machine induces in human beings are all attributable to the simplicity with which the operator is connected to the machine, and to the repetitive intensification of certain serial movements that exploit only a particular part of the human body. Man tends increasingly to resemble the machine because he concentrates on developing the more mechanical characteristics of his human nature. Then Anders introduces a new sentiment in our relationship with the machines that tower above us, and that is a sense of shame, which somehow confirms in its emotional overtones that what is human is totally inferior to what is artificial.

In the other authors' writings, the machine takes on the status of a wholly impersonal and anonymous super-entity. In Ernst Jünger and Heidegger, its steel body expresses the character of an age. The machine exerts its dominion inasmuch as it is the "spirit of the time", the horizon of meaning, an acceleration and intensification that mobilizes human practices, transforming them from the inside. Everything takes on the automated traits of the machine, and even life itself tends to be superseded by mechanical perfection. But here the authors' predictions on the destiny of mankind are not entirely self-explanatory. While Jünger still considers it possible to reawaken Titan, a type of man capable of controlling technology because he has been selected by the latter, for Heidegger it is only if the epoch-making opportunity

unveiled by technology were to prove an illusion that there might be another chance for human existence. Man can do nothing to stop the machine, he can only accept it and allow it to govern his destiny.

Finally, in Gehlen, we find a third interpretation. Starting from anthropological considerations on man as a being with weaknesses, the machine becomes an element of that second nature that our species has been obliged to develop in order to cope with otherwise excessively difficult natural living conditions. The machine compensates for our organic weaknesses, it completes us. Our deficient structures are integrated, intensified, and facilitated, thereby ensuring the full development of what was initially a primitive and unspecialized being. It goes without saying that, in this case, the mechanical is not in opposition to the natural: for man, the machine embodies what is most natural to him, and that is the specific trait of his being incomparable and unique.

There is a unifying element detectable in these analyses, however, and that is the “power” factor, which is given at least three different meanings: as an attribute intrinsic in the machine; as a determinant of the relationship between man and machine; and as an effect of using machines on human beings.

In the first sense, the machine is powerful inasmuch as it is capable of doing more work per unit of time. The machine can complete complex sequences of movements faster than even the most expert human operator. In doing so, it interacts directly with the sources of energy that it transforms, i.e. with the fuels that it consumes in huge quantities. That is why we instinctively associate a machine’s actions less with its output and more with factors such as its consumption, utilization and exploitation of resources. Second, the machine is powerful – or it might be better to say superpowerful – in its relationship with man. To (some of?) the authors discussed in this work, it is like a “being” equipped with super powers (though these powers are still comparable with those of humans), and capable of using them in opposition to man, to dominate mankind. The machine is considered hierarchically superior to human beings, and it keeps the latter in a state of inferiority, or even of servitude. In actual fact, this aspect is clearly attenuated in the anthropology of Arnold Gehlen, who instead embraces the idea of the power of the machine in the third sense, as a form of empowerment. Machines do not limit our human faculties, they are modelled on them, but they take them to a higher than normal level. The fact that they can exalt our capacity to take physical action on our environment, even to the point of enabling new and unnatural functions (such as human flight), goes to show that machines are capable of forming part of a man-machine assembly for the purpose of going beyond boundaries previously believed impossible to overcome. If there should ever be an advance that goes beyond what is human, it will happen on the horizon of the machine.

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