

Known by his Tooles: Digital Rage

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In *Terminator 2: Judgement Day*, Sarah Connor watches the Terminator robot, who has been sent back in time to protect her son from assassination by another, more sinisterly squelchy machine from the future, playing with her son:

Watching John with the machine, it was suddenly so clear. The terminator would never stop. It would never leave him, and it would never hurt him, never shout at him, or get drunk and hit him, or say it was too busy to spend time with him. It would always be there. And it would die to protect him. Of all the would-be fathers who came and went over the years, this thing, this machine, was the only one who measured up. In an insane world, it was the sanest choice.

The mechanism of rage is one of the most pressing and importunate of all the interbreedings that constitute the human relation with machines, relations that, taking a certain modest satisfaction from the almost total lack of infective success the term has had since the leak I first engineered from my laboratory in 2016, I have called psychotechnography (Connor 2016).

In one sense, rage represents the dividing line between humans and machines. A machine cannot feel rage, any more than it can feel tenderness, remorse, or wry amusement. The scene of [Basil Fawlty thrashing his car](#) acts out the comic logic of anger prompted by the inanimate item that is punished for its failure to be obediently animate. Fawlty first of all ventures the infantile logico-mechanical justification offered by tyrants and parents throughout human history ('I'm warning you, if you don't start ... I'll count to three. One, two ... three. Right, that's it'), and then asserts the dominion of human over object by enacting the very automatism that is stubbornly lacking in the machine itself. That this is engineered for the purposes of comedy points to the rhyme with the Bergsonian logic according to which 'The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine' (Bergson 1911, 29). The force of life exerts itself against the scandal of the reduction of the organic to the material by the action of laughter

that, like rage, is at once ecstatic and automatistic. This kind of rage is a triumphantly impassioned inertness.

Basil Fawlty's action is a demonstration of the proverbial principle that a bad workman blames his tools. The *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* records that versions of the proverb can be found since at least the 13th century French 'mauveés ovriers ne trovera ja bon hostill', 'bad workmen will never find a good tool'. 'Never had ill workeman good tooles' is recorded in 1640 (G.H. 1640, A4^r) and, a little later, 'An evil Workman quarrels with his tools' (Codrington 1664, 186). The proverb is sometimes framed in a more positive way, as in the sentiment that 'Hee is a cunning workeman, which with an ill toole will worke cunningly' (Cartwright 1611, 233); or 'a good workman neuer wants matter nor tooles' (Anon 1617, sig. B1^r); or 'He is a good Workman, that can use every Tool' (Wase 1678, 98), or in George Herbert's 'The cunning workman never doth refuse/The meanest tool, that he may chance to use' (Herbert 1633, 12). 'A workeman is known by his tooles', a sentiment that faces in two ways, is recorded (Swetnam 1617, 9; Clarke 1639, 180). Slightly puzzlingly, we also have the assurance that 'in Arts most curious Schools,/The Best workmen make their own Tools' (Elys 1655, 24). The inverse proposition is also entertained, as in the judgement that 'by good right the workman may finde fault with that toole, which wil not abide to be handled' (Bèze 1582, B5^v), and the assurance that 'we know the best Workman, if he has but bad Tools and cross Stuff to work on, will make but indifferent Work' (Anon 1690, 20). Richard Brome ventures the sly intimation that "New workmen are delighted with new Tooles' (Brome 1659, 34). One early commentator is explicit at the link between ire and instruments:

Choler is nothing else but a motion sudden and turbulent, that takes from us the free exercise of our Actions; and that is the Reason why we are not only angry at our Servants, but at all those with whom we Converse; and more at every one that would hinder us from doing what we will. When a Pen writes not according to our Fancy, we break it; a Gamester throws his Dice and Cards out of the Window; a Workman is angry at his Tools, and throws them away. (Goussault 1698, 55-6)

Running across the whole oscillating sentimental machinery is the most riddlingly intimate form of instrumentality of all, as asserted in the principle that 'the soule is the workman, the body the toole

wherewith he worketh' (Jones 1635, 686). Rage has an essentially instrumental relation, for the most economical definition of rage would be the emergency effort to close the gap by force rather than intelligence between mental intention and physical effect. One can stiffen one's sinews by other means, like the invocation of various kinds of imperative, categorical or not, but one becomes angry in order to concentrate the emotional and physical resources required when other forms of motive power have proved insufficient. In an odd way, in other words, what most enrages is inefficiency, with rage representing the invocation of the override setting of fury. Frustration is the assertion of the imperative end over the inadequate means.

An intricate little drama plays out through the word *frustration*, which is related to fraud or deception, perhaps from an Indo-European root *dhru-* to bend, break or injure, and **b^hrus-to*, broken, as expressed in *frustum*, a crumb and *frustillatim*, broken into tiny pieces. There might be much to be gained from an exploration of the will to atomisation that seems to be the *ne plus ultra* of so many forms of rage, as in the paranoid-schizoid states evoked by W.R. Bion as a kind of absoluteness of dissolution (Bion 1984, 26-33). Indeed, rage, as opposed to anger, is inefficiency itself, since rage is anger that is so intense it actually loses sight of its intention and becomes pure discharge and futile diffusion of tension.

As Peter Sloterdijk has explained, the first word of the *Iliad* gives the sense of invocation that is related to a certain kind of wrath: Μῆνιν ἄειδε, θεά, Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος (Sloterdijk 2010, 1-10) The natural translation would give primacy to the act of singing, which is the action performed by the poem itself, as in Stanley Lombardo's 'Sing, Goddess, Achilles' rage' (Homer 1997, 1). But translators have often sought through inversion of word-order to engineer a transfer of force from song to wrath, as in Dryden's 'The Wrath of *Peleu's* Son, O Muse, resound' (Dryden 1700, 189) or Pope's '*Achilles' wrath*, to *Greece* the direful spring/Of woes unnumber'd, heav'nly Goddess, sing!' (Homer 26), or A.T. Murray's 'The wrath sing, goddess, of *Peleus' son Achilles'* (Homer 1999, 13). As Peter Sloterdijk explains, this line evidences the invocation of a higher power that rage often involves. Μῆνις is wrath, a word which implies the anger of God, or of the gods, so that 'it is not the human beings who have their passions, but rather it is the passions that have their human beings' (Sloterdijk 2010, 9). Since there are no gods of any kind and never have been, wrath must be regarded as the nonce-deification or *Augenblicksgott* (Usener 1896, 279-301) of anger

itself, anger giving itself the right to be anger by evoking some higher power, even though this is no more than the power of anger itself. If this is a kind of Munchausen manoeuvre, the effort to disavow bootstrapping absurdity (somebody howling ‘it’s not *funny!*’ is always irresistibly so) is just the force of levitation that anger claims. My profession has allowed me to return at intervals throughout my life to the paradox, first intimated casually in class by a schoolteacher, that in moments of passion, of which the animating force is always perhaps an allotrope of anger, one’s language tends not to dishevelment but rather to increased formality – as in the thundering iambs of Lear’s ‘Then kill kill kill kill kill kill kill!’ (Shakespeare 1997, 341). In such an arrangement of derangement, tension is wound up to a breaking point between atomising force and the pent tension of the pentameter. Perhaps all poetry is the enactment of the force of sacred rage in some degree. If rage is a kind of *deus ex machina*, a way of forcing things to a conclusion, we might perforce say that all rage is *ira ex machina*, machine-rage. It is a rage that, in order to achieve its desired outcome without delay, works itself up into the peculiar affect of immediate effect we call rage. So we may rage against the machine, but in doing so aspire to a divinely mechanical mode of sacred rage.

One might reasonably expect this kind of rage to erupt from the closeness of things with which we can experience the closest kind of identification, effacing the difference between subject and object. Workmen blame their tools, because tools ought to behave as obediently as extensions of our bodies, like T.S. Eliot’s ‘boat [that] responded/Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar’ (Eliot 1969, 74). The Spitfire seems to have been preferred to the Hurricane largely because of its speed of responsiveness, which made it seem, in the words of one pilot, that the aircraft seemed to begin to make the manoeuvre you wanted it to perform before you had even decided on it yourself. We speak nowadays of ‘intuitive technologies’, an animistically inverted usage that surprisingly is not yet registered by the OED, meaning technologies that encourage, reward or disclose intuitive understanding in their users. This therefore implies technologies that may seem to intuit the uses we might intuitively wish to put them to. As with so much of the language of technology, this usage relates to angelology, since intuition was the term often used in sixteenth and seventeenth-century scholastic philosophy for what the OED admirably defines as ‘the spiritual perception or

immediate knowledge, ascribed to angelic and spiritual beings, with whom vision and knowledge are identical’.

So rage brings about a strange intimacy of human and mechanism. One might also say that it is often the horror of intimacy itself, experienced as a presumptuous closeness, that one must attempt to keep at bay, as in the dim erotism of Wilfred Owen’s ‘I am the enemy you killed, my friend’ (Owen 1983, 149). Owen’s line seems to remember the origin of the word enemy in *inimicus*, *in* + *amicus*, and so murmurs an intimation in neighbour tongues of the homonymy of *enemi* and *ton ami*, or the acrid amity of *Feind* and *Freund*. The savagery of Freud’s ‘narcissism of minor differences’ (Freud 1953–74, 21.114; 1991, 14.473) [*Narzissmus der kleinen Differenzen*] has confirmed over and over again that although ‘the Other’ may be officially despised, it is never hated as much as the near-at-hand semi-identical, where the peril of love unleashes loathing. (Sir Humphrey Appleby assures the astonished Jim Hacker in *Yes Minister* that the purpose of the nuclear deterrent is not defence against the Russians, but against Britain’s real, ancestral enemy – the *French*.) Anger is the opposite of intimacy because it is also its intimate.

Metatechnics

The reason that we say, to ensure that we can feel, that there is ever more technology in our lives, in the face of all the evidence of a massive, grinding slowdown in technological innovation more or less coinciding with the growth in computing, is that computing is a metatechnics, or second-order technology for the control, application and modulation of other, existing technological operations. Digital technologies can be regarded almost entirely not as technology itself, but as operating systems, which allow for, and are directed towards, the adaptation, enhancement, amplification, coordination, monitoring, modulation and attunement of other technical processes. This is why, unlike earlier technologies, digital technologies so rarely in fact replace or abolish earlier forms of technology or media, but rather refine them, typically by making them more subtly and intimately pervasive and responsive. Digital technologies are intimacy-amplifiers and optimisers. The fact that the leading function of digital technology is that of controlling other technologies puts it, as we say, in the driving seat, mindside of the mind/body confabulation.

Digital technology allows for the whole of social life to be experienced in the mode not of Heideggerean *Gestell*, or inert availability for use, but of manageability, or a being-to-be-administered. Essential to this disposition is a condition of feedback-saturation. Late in his life, in a short essay entitled 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', Gilles Deleuze influentially suggested that this development would represent a move from a Foucauldian disciplinary society to a society of control. Societies of control are societies in which control is exercised immanently and dynamically, in intricate subject-object comminglings, rather than exercised crudely and violently by governing subjects over passively suborned objects. The characteristic of control societies is therefore the closing of distance, in patterns of distributed intimacy. The term, evidently derived from the work of Gilbert Simondon (Hui 2015), that recurs in Deleuze's characterisation, is *modulation*: 'Controls are a modulation, like a self-transmuting molding continually changing from one moment to the next, or like a sieve whose mesh varies from one point to another' (Deleuze 1995, 178-9). Deleuze evokes a society without meaningful distinctions between work and leisure, or different kinds of closed institution:

Open hospitals and teams providing homecare have been around for some time. One can envisage education becoming less and less a closed site differentiated from the workspace as another enclosed site, but both disappearing and giving way to frightful continual training, to continual monitoring of worker-schoolkids or bureaucrat-students. ... Compared with the approaching forms of ceaseless control in open sites, we may come to see the harshest confinement as part of a wonderful happy past. The quest for "universals of communication" ought to make us shudder. (Deleuze 1995, 175)

James Brusseau finds a straight line of succession from Deleuze's speculation to the datafication of contemporary society: 'The most pressing question Deleuze asks is, *How can there be control if nothing is forbidden?* The answer is predictive analytics: data-driven marketing and social media strategies that regulate through incentives' (Brusseau 2020, 2).

In one sense a Deleuzian society of control is also a society of remote control, characterised by self-monitorings, precautionary procedures and frictionless anticipations. Such a society gives the sense of the

dissolution, or reduction to a tremulous minimum, of every kind of delay, detour or detention, and the diminution of every duress into a caress. Digital technologies seem to offer a sort of immediacy that, because it promises absolute responsiveness, frustrates all the more when that immediacy is impeded and that promise of compliance is thereby betrayed. The intimacy of digital rage comes not from the resistance that digital technologies seem to offer, but their disappointment. We might see disappointment as rather a rather milk-and-water way of putting this ('Nanny is not angry, she is just very disappointed'), but Sloterdijk's *Rage and Time* emphasises the vehemence that can attach to disappointment, with much of the animating force of contemporary psychopolitics as driven by disappointed rage-collectives.

If this condition of technical intimacy, enjoining and instructing the feat ballet of thumbs rather than the crude application of biceps, encourages a certain kind of infantile omnipotence, it also makes for a touchy intolerance of anything that does not yield immediately to control. In a world of engineered short circuits, impediment impels the short-circuiting force of tantrum. This may be why the agitated inertia of the rapid circuits of feedback enabled by dense networks of instantaneous communication can so easily erupt into epidemics of anger-transmission, following the logic of Girardian mimetic rivalry. This is the anger not of opposition but of emulation, an anger that aims not at overcoming a resistance but at amplifying and being amplified by a wave. It is not rage against the machine but machine-mediated rage.

The modulating and feedback relations of control technology are a form of intimacy that seems to abolish the traditional relations of labour between subject and object. In a world without objects to serve as the other to subjects, allowing space for the 'cogito of striving' (Bachelard 1948, 78) and the Hegelian 'labour of the negative' (Hegel 2018, 11), subjects themselves lose all definition and recoil into a conscientiously narcissistic self-care that is always ready to self-ignite into anxiety and rancour. We use the word *friction* as a synonym for conflict but, as Michel Serres used stubbornly to maintain, the friction of objects may in fact be the only thing that stands between us and the war of all against all.

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