

Discussione

C. J. Müller, *Prometheanism: Technology, Digital Culture and Human Obsolescence*

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As of the time of writing, the scientific formalization of the Anthropocene remains undecided, but the Anthropocene Working Group has reported that its members almost unanimously consider it to be stratigraphically real, and that a clear majority believe it should be designated as commencing around 1950. While this date could be associated with the so-called 'Great Acceleration', that is, with all the massive worldwide consequences of mass-production consumer capitalism, in fact within the working group the currently most popular and highly specific candidate for primary marker has little direct connection to capitalism and none to climate change: the plutonium fallout that resulted from the atmospheric testing of fusion bombs. This fact is thus somewhat anomalous with the 'everyday' notion of the Anthropocene associated not just with the marked consequences of the dominant techno-economic system on geographical, biological and other planetary systems, but with the limits of globalized capitalism, that is, with the fact that such consequences can undermine the conditions of the continued functioning of the system as such, due to anthropogenic climate change but also to contaminations and impacts on many aspects of the social or human systems whose function is, in part at least, to ameliorate the disruptions caused by an economy premised on permanent techno-economic innovation, that is, on accelerating obsolescence. And this would seemingly be all the more anomalous for the human and social sciences, which have taken up and taken hold of the concept of the Anthropocene largely by seeing it as calling for a thinking of these limits, and for an investigation of the limits of our thinking to date insofar as its unquestioned presuppositions have been exposed by the harming and destruction of all these systems. In short, this destruction of systems, reaching of limits and inexorable crossing of thresholds has been thought to put in question the very categories of thinking, and especially insofar as this thinking remains imprisoned within a confused metaphysics of the human, the natural and the technological: what the Anthropocene calls for, then, would amount to a kind of paradigm shift in thinking itself.

Christopher John Müller's *Prometheanism: Technology, Digital Culture and Human Obsolescence* responds to a similar call issued by Jean-Luc Nancy, for whom the «precipitate and unbridled character of our “mastery” [...] demands a new sort of thinking»¹. For Nancy, this ‘mastery’ points to a misunderstanding and denial at the heart of our thinking in general, and of our thinking of technology in particular, in that we have (with the qualified exception of Heidegger) failed to grasp that technology is itself an expression of finitude. Müller agrees that «in order to understand the technological, we need to consider our experience of finitude» (p. 14), and his specific response to Nancy's call consists, as he says, in taking «a progressive step back» to the «philosophical anthropology of the technological world» undertaken by Günther Anders, in particular in his two-volume *The Obsolescence of Human Beings*, a portion of the first volume of which (1956) Müller includes in English translation for the time. Around Anders's «On Promethean Shame», Müller constructs an account of this experience of finitude, describing the way in which contemporary technology both enhances our perception and obscures our vision, increases our capacity to control while at the same time giving rise to what Gilles Deleuze called a society of control, itself now running out of control. As an attempt at thinking these limits, and at taking thinking to the limit, Müller's step back to Anders's finite thinking promises to provide resources for a new thinking in and of the Anthropocene.

Günther Anders (1902–1992) – born Günther Stern, the son of psychologist William Stern, cousin of Walter Benjamin, and the husband (for a time) of Hannah Arendt, student of Martin Heidegger and doctoral candidate of Edmund Husserl – is in some ways an unlikely prospect for such a resource: firstly, because the transformation of the world in the sixty years since the publication of *The Obsolescence of Human Beings* has been profound and unimaginable, bringing with it problems and challenges equally unimaginable even to this perceptive and imaginative German Jewish exile in consumerist California; secondly, because there remains in his thought some metaphysical residue that tends, despite everything, to oppose technology and humanity (as when he criticizes the «transhumanist» notion that humanity may just be leaving its «childhood» behind by invoking the notion of the human «swept aside» and the catastrophe of «total dehumanization» – p. 44); and thirdly, because, despite his unimpeachable post-idealist German philosophical pedigree, Anders is not above generating a kind of mass-audience shock appeal that operates by adopting a method referred to (perhaps slightly disingenuously) as «philosophical exaggeration» (Anders, p. 58).

Nevertheless, the very old ‘Promethean’ foundations of Anders's reflections do offer fertile ground for a new sort of thinking, insofar as he thinks finitude in terms of the relationship of humanity to tekhnē: «To put it paradoxically,

¹Jean-Luc Nancy, *A Finite Thinking* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 25.

artificiality is the nature of the human beings and their essence instability» (Anders, p. 4). For Anders, the inherently unfinished character of our individuation, its indeterminacy and singularity, exposed for instance in our being the being for whom being is a question, or in the way language joins us together while simultaneously exiling us in idiomatic artifice, ultimately derives from our perpetual and primordial relationship to prostheses and supplements. This inextricable entanglement with art, artifice and artificiality, which must be thought today, as Müller recognises, «in the wake of Heidegger [and] Leroi-Gourhan’, as well as Bernard Stiegler, must also be understood as what “opens us to the very possibility of thought”» (pp. 10–11). However much Anders’s account of this ‘finitude’ of ‘humanity’ owes to Heidegger, this fundamental insight that the opening of thought is always enabled and conditioned by technology is one that always eluded his teacher, as Stiegler shows in *Technics and Time*, 1². What ought to follow from such an insight, even if perhaps it did not dawn on Anders in quite this way, is that the human and the technological absolutely cannot be opposed, and that the ‘new thinking’ called for by the existential challenges of our current techno-economic epoch could be derived only from some re-composition of this relationship.

Anders does recognise that it would be false and wrong to see today’s problems as stemming from the technologization of the world or of ourselves: they derive, as he sees it, rather from the fact that artificiality ‘increases’, and does so to the point that (anticipating the so-called ‘Singularity’, coined two years later in 1958 by cybernetician John von Neuman and mathematician Stanislaw Ulam, but taken up in the twenty-first century by advocates of ‘transhumanism’ such as Ray Kurzweil) «human beings are no longer a match for what they have produced», that humanity can no longer keep up with itself (Anders, p. 47). Two consequences follow: firstly, that «humans become the products of their own products»; and, secondly, that the depth and scale of technology exceeds our ability to conceptualize it, so that «we are unable to visualise what we are actually producing» (Anders, p. 100). Let’s examine each of these consequences in turn.

If the possibility of thinking always involves technological mediation, what threshold must be crossed for humans to become the products of their own products? If, hitherto, the «most extreme image of dehumanization» was the exploitation of workers by their working conditions (Anders, p. 44), forcing them to exercise a form of self-discipline so as to create new internal «automatisms» (Anders, p. 82), the advent of analogue technologies meant the start of a new kind of ‘unpaid work from home’, in which this ‘production’ would consist in consumption: «These homeworkers conduct the work required to transform themselves into mass human beings through the consumption of mass content. Their work consists of leisure» (Anders, pp. 133–4). Anders here shows remarkable insight into the significance of these new forms of

² Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), part 2.

communications technologies: not only does the advent of radio and television change the conditions of thinking, not only do they exploit the «disorientation» (Anders, p. 63) wrought by technological acceleration, but they amount to a colonisation of so-called 'free time' and the confounding of the separation of work and leisure.

The origin of this separation lies, as shown by Stiegler in 2004, in the distinction between the monastic, 'free' time of otium and the subsistence time of negotium: from its inception the Weberian 'spirit of capitalism' consisted in a reversal by which the time of business was privileged over and progressively colonized the 'spiritual' time of otium³. It is remarkable that already in 1956 Anders understood that the intrusion of this apparatus into domestic space represented a new form of 'human engineering' and the colonization of leisure by a form of labour whose aim is the cultivation of dependence (control society) and the production of a new kind of subjectivity (consumer society). And Müller is equally right to see in this analysis the foundation of an understanding of the 'escalation' of this situation brought by digital and network technologies in their march towards what has been termed 'algorithmic governmentality'⁴, a world of consumers in which «everything that they can see also sees them» (Anders, p. 75), not in order to 'seek to classify what we are, but [...] what we might still be in the future» (p. 157), that is, in order to engineer what we can become as behavioural beings, that is, consumers. Furthermore, the algorithmic mechanism at work in this new, digital form of human engineering is precisely the imposition of new automatisms, extended from the world of production to consumption and indeed to every aspect of knowledge and conceptualization⁵.

This automatization of knowledge as such and in general also bears upon Anders's second consequence: his claim that we have crossed a threshold in our ability to make sense through our senses of the prosthetic envelope that surrounds us. Anders states:

Our faculty of perception is too limited to enable us to comprehend the state of the world today. It is too short sighted to show us the enormous, or rather, the monstrous dimensions of our deeds, because it continually transforms abject monstrosity into something that is inconspicuously ordinary. (Anders, p. 126)

As Müller comments, this obscurity of the technological milieu is produced systemically when our increasingly intimate relationship to the now ubiquitous screen becomes performatively overdetermined by algorithmic processes

³ B. Stiegler, *The Decadence of Industrial Democracies: Disbelief and Discredit*, 1, Cambridge 2011, ch. 3.

⁴ A. Rouvroy and Thomas Berns, *Gouvernementalité algorithmique et perspectives d'émancipation*, «Réseaux» 1 (177) (2013), pp. 164–96; Antoinette Rouvroy, *The End(s) of Critique: Data-Behaviourism vs Due-Process*, in M. Hildebrandt and K. de Vries (eds), *Privacy, Due Process and the Computational Turn: The Philosophy of Law Meets the Philosophy of Technology* (Abingdon and New York 2013), pp. 143–68.

⁵ See B. Stiegler, *Automatic Society, Volume 1: The Future of Work*, Cambridge 2016.

responding to our every keystroke at near light speed: «Because a relationship to technological artifice comes naturally to us, the trickery of machines slips from sight the more it is incorporated into our intuitive sense of self» (p. 123). It is really *this* thought – that our senses are increasingly insufficient to demonstrate this monstrousness, outstripped and overtaken as they are by processes that are more rapid and more powerful than our own sensorimotor capacities – that lies behind the method of philosophical exaggeration adopted by Anders. Because if sense data is no longer able to provide sufficient ingredients for a synthesis of reason, then the faculty of imagination becomes the crucial mediator, and does so *instrumentally*:

The task of imagination required today departs from what imagination has meant up to now. [...] Quite the opposite: the task consists in mobilising our imagination as a way of approaching the truly fantastical reality of the world today [...]. Imagination, like a telescope, does not make our organs of perception superfluous. It is only when we use it that we give our perception a proper chance to see and comprehend. (Anders, p. 126)

Only through deploying this *telescopic* imagination will it be possible, according to Anders, to make visible the hidden, indeed mathematical, interstices through which the contemporary technological milieu infiltrates *in advance* the souls of those caught so intimately in its digital webs that they can no longer perceive the very medium that surrounds them. Hence is invoked an aesthetic war, not as a struggle *between* imagination and technology, but one in which, recognising that imagination has *always* been equipped (which Kant failed to recognise), the problem becomes the search for new aesthetic (and therefore technological) weapons, enabling a new conflict of interpretations. As Anders himself states (and Müller glosses) in a canny reversal of the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, this is, *precisely*, a question of thinking (at) the limit:

‘It is not enough to change the world. Humans do this anyway. [...] We also need to interpret this change, in order to change it. So the world no longer changes without us, and does not end up being a world without us.’ As part of this task, Anders repeatedly calls for a ‘Critique of Pure Feeling’, not one aiming at ‘reaching a moral verdict’, but a critique in the Kantian sense – a critique, therefore, that seeks to trace the limited performance and plasticity of our feelings in a world populated by ever smarter and more autonomous machines. (p. 106)

This call for a new kind of critique, one no longer based on the precipitate and unbridled ‘mastery’ that Nancy sees contaminating thought with the illusory possibility of remaining uncontaminated, one founded on thinking the limits of the relationship between thinking and sensibility, is necessitated, as Müller recognises, by the assault on psychic individuation effected by algorithmic performativity, which he expresses in Althusserian terms: «Interpellation, in effect, combats singularity with aesthetics» (p. 155). The way in which Anders relates to this question, however, is curiously ambivalent.

On the one hand, Anders is fully aware of the fact that the relationship to the instrument is a question of *knowledge*, and of the knowledge stripped from the worker, or the instrumentalist. Hence he describes the need for a violinist to «become attuned to their instrument», and to increase the «field of expression» of the body by «transforming the violin» and «incorporating it as a new organ into the organism» (Anders, p. 83). And he precisely contrasts this adoption and incorporation of the instrument to the ‘labour of adaptation’ undertaken by proletarianized workers dispossessed of such knowledge and no longer expected to inaugurate any transformation, having been themselves reduced to «passive machine parts» (ibid.).

Furthermore, just as the question of the ownership of the means of production can be interpreted as a matter of the ownership of *knowledge*, where the industrial revolution is then understood as precisely a process of the transfer of the ownership of this means – in the form of the craftsman’s *knowledge* – to the factory owner, so too Anders understands the difference between language and contemporary communications networks in terms of the difference between the inherently unownability of language (we all don’t own language together) and the *always owned* character of the information carried by these more recent networks that, in the context of McCarthyism, Anders characterizes as an «“*abhör-Apparat*”, literally a “bugging device”» (p. 156). As Müller does not fail to note, this resonates more than a little not just with the ubiquitous surveillance exposed by Snowden, but with the constant stream of data sent forth each day by billions of users, and which is currently the target of intense competition for ownership by Google and its adversaries. And when this deprivation of knowledge is extended along these networks to the social capacities through which a social body is formed and without which one loses the feeling of existing, it leads to compensatory mechanisms both desperate and doomed to fail: in this regard Anders’s critique of «iconomania» (pp. 56–8) is both exceedingly prophetic and highly pertinent.

On the other hand, however, when Anders turns his critique of feeling and aesthetics to the combat *against* singularity allegedly fought by jazz music and jazz dancing, the diagnosis is peculiarly anachronistic, perceiving no positivity in *this* form of instrumentalization. For Anders, jazz music and the dancing it provokes is an attempt to «overpower our sexuality» by transforming sexual energy into «*machine-like movements*» (Anders, p. 77), where syncopation should be understood not as a musical phenomenon but as a symbol of the machine and a «*refutation of the body*», and jazz dancing as «*an enthusiastic pantomime with which the body re-enacts its own utter defeat*» (Anders, p. 78). All of Anders’s lengthy account of the «Industrial Religion» of jazz is highly reminiscent of Siegfried Kracauer’s account thirty years earlier of the way in which such forms of music and dance have ceased to be a cult practice, becoming instead a ‘cult of movement’ according to a rhythm that «wants to rid itself of meaning», for, despite the «negroid» roots of jazz rhythms, «they reveal and perfect the

mechanization already at work in the melody»⁶. When Anders pursues such thoughts even further, seeing in these rhythms a *coitus interruptus* in which the dancer finally accomplishes their transformation (*'I am being switched off [...] therefore I must be part of a machine'*), the fundamental silliness of the hyperbole may go some way to explaining why it took six decades for even a portion of the work to be translated into English, and it is unsurprising that Müller does not incorporate *this* critique into his 'progressive step back', even when he himself attempts to pursue the question of the industrialization of desire.

And yet, even here, where Anders's method of 'philosophical exaggeration' clearly over-reaches (and thus becomes 'over-exaggeration', to use today's exaggerated parlance), it may be that the telescopic imagination at work still succeeds in anticipating phenomena appearing only in the internet age. There is undoubtedly something irredeemably simplistic if not just plain wrong about describing jazz dancers as «transformers whose duty it is to convert animalic into mechanical energy» (Anders, p. 77). Nevertheless, if we take this as a kind of description of the exploitation of the libidinal economy by the production economy, could we not transpose this critique to the more recent, prevalent and industrialized phenomenon of internet pornography, understanding this not as an exceptional machine but as an exemplary technological object? As in, for example, when Anders writes: «The alliance with the sexual is not entered into so that the machine can work in unison with it, but in order to transform the trapped, sexual energy of the body into energy of its own kind» (ibid.). There is a strange kind of prophetic validity at work when the consequences of this exhaustion of libidinal energy are described in terms of a kind of mass-produced, an-erotic depersonalization that makes little sense when applied (as intended by the author) to jazz, but a fair deal more when considered into relation to that industry and market that more than any other directly solicits the drives, and which, itself operating algorithmically, accounts for a significant proportion of all internet traffic:

during the orgy the [performers] *lose their face*. [...] The face *either* mutates into a mere *body part*, the naked and uncontrolled appearance of which no longer surpasses the likeness of a shoulder or backside; *or*, it turns into a blank poker face that is *cut off from the orgy* and so remains in the dark about what is going on downstairs. (Anders, p. 79)

Ultimately, the question about the exhaustion of desire, and the energy of desire, is a question about the relation to the future, inasmuch as desire, motive, reason are all species of anticipation of and orientation to the future, dependent as such on the cultivation of some or other form of care. It was Anders's thought that without a method of telescopic imagination our perception of the monstrosity of the future is reduced to the false witness of the quotidian:

⁶S. Kracauer, 'Travel and Dance', *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London 1995), pp. 66–7.

the counterpoint to this was supplied in 1967 by Jacques Derrida, for whom the future can only be anticipated as a break from normality, as absolute danger and a sort of monstrosity⁷. This dual relationship to the monstrosity of the future is the key to unlocking the problem of the relationship between the digital epoch and the age of Anthropocenic consciousness. For Anders, the questioning being that is Heidegger's *Dasein* enters into this path of individuation through the shock of discovering its own originary technicity, when «*Dasein*» discovers itself as an «it» (Anders, p. 93), that is, discovers the 'Prometheanism' of its inextricable entanglement with artificiality. Hence it is that the *mortality* of *Dasein*, its anticipatory awareness of its end, in the mode, mostly, of not knowing it, ultimately derives from the temporality opened up by the relationship to the artefact, which Stiegler would later make so clear in *Technics and Time, 1*.

But mortality is a question not just for psychic individuals (for *Dasein*) but for collective individuals, and, in its essentially technical conditions, this *collective* mortality, too, has its ages and epochs. This is what Paul Valéry conveyed in the wake of the First World War, when he began his 1919 essay «The Crisis of the Mind» (of *esprit*) by declaring, «We later civilizations...we too now know that we are mortal»⁸. For Anders, this question of the collective individual, of the *we* as a process, has two sides: on the one hand, the great risk associated with massive technological acceleration is, as we saw, the production of a 'world without us', by which he meant, as Müller explains, «not merely a world that is devoid of life [...] but a world in which human contributions have been devalued to such an extent [...] that "we" the figurative "99%" who remain excluded from these processes no longer find the space and opportunity to settle in a world increasingly belonging to and shaped by others» (p. 106). What is precisely excluded and systematically destroyed in such a proletarianized world 'without us' is the very possibility of collective individuation insofar as the latter is necessarily composed of incalculable singularities.

On the other hand, however, for Anders the date of 6 August 1945 marked the advent of a new epoch in the mortality of civilizations, or, beyond civilizations, a new 'world condition': «for there is no possibility that its "defining aspect," the possibility of our self-extinction, can ever end – but by the end itself» (Anders, p. 112). The advent of the age of atomic weapons, the absolute danger of what Derrida called the «absolute *pharmakon*»⁹, might seem the absolute embodiment of this disindividuating possibility of a 'world without us', but it is also, as Müller states, the creation of «the first all-inclusive, absolutely unconditional "we"» (p. 112). «Hiroshima is everywhere», as Nancy said with respect to Anders, and now is so perpetually, and, as such, in «Anders's writings, [...] the atom bomb is *not an exceptional machine*, but [...] *the exemplary* technological object» (p. 113). This exemplarity of the potential nuclear holocaust is revealed when, just

⁷J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, corrected edition, Baltimore and London 1998, p. 5.

⁸P. Valéry, *The Crisis of the Mind, The Outlook for Intelligence*, Princeton 1962, p. 23.

⁹J. Derrida, *No Apocalypse, Not Now: Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives*, in Id. *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Volume I*, Stanford 2007.

like the mortality from which Dasein flees in assuming the character of *das Man*, our collective knowledge of this absolutely unconditional *we* is evaded, as a «“Blindness to the possible Apocalypse” that turns perception into “false witness”», which seems unavoidable in a world defined by its character of ‘not yet’ having been destroyed (p. 141).

And so, it perhaps turns out that, by reading this ‘philosophical anthropology’ sixty years later, we can discover the *exemplary* character of the proposal to date the Anthropocene from 1950 on the basis of plutonium fallout as a primary signal. A world that is perpetually ‘not yet’ destroyed (until it is, or until it ‘tips’ into being too late, which effectively means it is) is one that is *newly tragic*, that is, marked by a new, absolute technological ambivalence and hence by the need to make an absolute difference, or an absolute *différance*, in the sense made possible by the advent of an absolute *pharmakon*. What Anders succeeds in making clear is the contemporary conjunction of a process of collective individuation and disindividuation marked by the entwined poles of the absolutely unconditional *we* and a world without *us*: this is as true of the atomic Anthropocene as it is of the climatological Anthropocene... and as it is of the Facebookian Anthropocene. The great virtue of Müller’s progressive step back to Anders would thus be of having opened a necessary path towards something like a new affective and philosophical anthropology of *all these Anthropocenes*, inaugurating a critical conflict of Anthropocenic interpretations without which it is inconceivable that we could make a *différance* capable of, not a step, but a progressive leap forward, above and beyond the Anthropocene.

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