CYBERNETIC FICTION

Machine as Metaphor

from *The Soft Machine* (1985)

David Porush

Why is the image of a soft machine--a construction part human and part machine--so prevalent in postmodern fiction?…Cybernetics is a science originally invented by theoreticians who sought a way to recover certainty after the code of physics became "marred" by the uncertainty of quantum physics.... Artists such as Paul Valery and Edgar Allan Poe and many later Modernists, enacted the same struggle by attempting to free their art from the contingencies of invention, from accident, from mere chance by making their works as technically pure as any machine (a struggle Wylie Sypher explores in his excellent book *Literature and Technology*). After cybernetics offered a larger and more effective vision of the *machina mundi*, however, the postmodern reaction set in. Our contemporary era finds writers seeking some refuge from technique in the techniques of fiction. Or to borrow a medical metaphor, postmodern authors seek a way to inoculate themselves against technique by injecting its hardness into the soft body of their texts. Cybernetic fiction, the result of this dialectic, is the subject of this book….

This book portrays the see-sawing of an argument whose roots are as old as western thought and whose resolution lies in the unforeseeable future....The machine metaphysic has begun to find its ultimate embodiment (in the shape of computers, artificial intelligence devices, robots and other human cousins) with daring and remarkable rapidity. This proliferation has been motivated by, and is reflected in, cybernetics. The proposal of counter-metaphors has taken on its vivid form in cybernetic fiction, which is trying to tell us something…. (ix-xi)

The works I treat in this volume were all written before 1980. The latest, Joseph McElroy's *Plus*, was published in 1976. The others, fiction by John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Samuel Beckett, William Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut, are products of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. That metaphor to which they respond, the simple cybernetic one, is even older. The fear that we are only machines is a heritage of the Renaissance. As early as 1641, Descartes suggested that the human body "be considered a kind of machine"….Swift's Lagadan Word Machine is one of the first literary uses of the machine as metaphor….

The machine usually represents both an invitation and a warning; it is simultaneously fascinating and threatening, both superior to and somehow inferior to the punier humans who build, operate and sometimes are subjugated by it....Art is one of our only remaining tactics for making the machine vulnerable again.... The nineteenth-century image of the machine has already been documented in great depth by Herbert Sussman in *Victorians and the Machine*, John Kasson in *Civilizing the Machine*, and Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden*. H. Bruce Franklin's excellent critical anthology, *Future Perfect*, also looks at the way the machine fascinated nineteenth-century American writers such as Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe...

On the one hand there are those who aestheticize the machine, and on the other there are those who view the machine as a threat and a metaphor for a potentially dangerous impulse in civilization....As the success of literary innovation grows into literary formula the work of art tends to become alienated from its spontaneous sources...Roussel's *Locus Solus* is not only devoid of the hazards of life but of life itself. By contrast, the cybernetic fiction I discuss...shows that such a project is doomed to failure...That art which subjugates itself to is own technique is ultimately led away from Nature and into the laboratory, into a kind of "studio artifice" in which calculation and rationalization supplant experience….

Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* is one of the first "techtopian" fantasies...H. G. Wells portrays the machine as an evolutionary extension of man, who uses the machine to cultivate a moral and intellectual garden in an amoral anarchic Nature; however, he also portrays that garden being overrun by machines meant to tend it. The Martians of *The War of the Worlds*, though they operate powerful, indestructible juggernaut machines,

are themselves an effete, diminished race, weakened by their reliance on their technology....The visionary aspects of Forster's novel, *The Machine Stops*, written in 1906, are remarkable. As the title suggests, the machine stops, leaving the totally dependent race of humans to an apocalyptic end. Their civilization first goes mad, then crumbles...

As literature attempts either to protect what is vital and human by resisting this ever more sophisticated machine, or somehow to appropriate its invulnerability through the application of technique, it becomes more sophisticated, more abstract, more formalistic, more hypertrophic, and apparently less human. This is the revolutionary point of departure for cybernetic fiction: what should literature look like in an age when machines are capable of outstripping certain human mental operations by unimaginable distances and whose limitations are unknown, perhaps nonexistent....

[The machine] constitutes "a Jungian archetype"….

This volume explores the way that cybernetic fiction reveals the soft machinery not only of itself but of human language and thought. Cybernetic fiction presents itself as a machine, but only ironically, for underneath the mask lies the softness, vulnerability and instability of our humanness. Jacques Ellul... defines technique as "the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency...in every field of human activity." In Ellul's view, "Technique has become autonomous; it has fashioned an omnivorous world which obeys its own laws and which has renounced all tradition." His vision, however apocalyptic, was and still is powerfully persuasive. Its influence, if not his work directly, is visible in the fiction of Pynchon and Barthelme particularly, and is echoed by Barth, Vonnegut, Burroughs, Beckett and McElroy….

Cybernetic fiction is a means for the author to present himself or his literature as a soft machine, a cybernaut-like hybrid device, combining human vulnerability and imagination with machinelike determinism...It answers the call for a literature that will rehumanize the cybernetic metaphor from inside that metaphor. Cybernetic fiction does succeed in softening the machine, in exposing (and perhaps allaying) the fear that we are only machines, communicating devices for whom learning is only feedback, experience is only input, expression is only output, and meaning is only raw data. By employing the metaphor at the same time that it counters it, cybernetic fiction strikes a creative, if temporary, resolution between the vital aspects of human experience and its mechanical ones by showing that as terms of a deep paradox, they are accomplices of each other and therefore amenable to reconstruction. (1-23)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Conclusion: In the black box: Donald Barthelme's "The explanation"

<div align="right">
David Porush
The Soft Machine (1985)

Michael Hollister (2015)
</div>