

# THE PURE RE/

# UNCANNY MACHINE

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The Pure Machine is first noted by Edgar Allan Poe in his 1836 essay: 'The Chess Player of Maelzel.' Poe was writing about one of the most remarkable inventions of his age – an apparently autonomous chess-playing machine. The machine, built by Wolfgang von Kempelen in 1770, was, by the 1830s, touring the aristocratic courts of Europe in the hands of Johann Maelzel.

**Poe wrote**—No exhibition of the kind has ever elicited so general attention as the Chess-Player of Maelzel. Wherever seen it has been an object of intense curiosity, to all persons who think. Yet the question of its 'modus operandi' is still undetermined. Nothing has been written on this topic which can be considered as decisive – and accordingly we find everywhere men of mechanical genius, of great general acuteness, and discriminative understanding, who make no scruple in pronouncing the Automaton a 'pure machine,' unconnected with human agency in its movements, and consequently, beyond all comparison, the most astonishing of the inventions of mankind.

April 27th, 2018  
Tobias Revell  
The Pure/Uncanny  
Machine



Poe is quite clear about what makes the automaton a 'pure machine' and evokes a phrase that subsequently describes all pure machines as '...unconnected with human agency in its movements.' The pure machine has been the guiding star of technological development from the earliest stirrings of automation in the industrial era – the dream of machines disconnected from human control, requiring no oversight or direction. It is predicated on the notion that humans are somehow flawed or inadequate at being human and require more than augmentation, they require automation. Take for instance, the autonomous car which is perhaps the most foregrounded pure machine today. It is 'safer', 'cleaner', 'more efficient' than allowing humans to drive themselves everywhere. This narrative of the 'better' pure machine on one hand appears to target and solve cars as fast, heavy, dangerous, poisonous chunks of metal but on the other hand targets humans as weak, squishy, easily poisoned snowflakes that can't deal with the responsibility of their mortality and the planet themselves.

Paired with this notion that humans are a technological problem to be solved, the pure machine disconnects us from technology when it becomes uncanny. When the pure machine goes wrong or fails to fulfil its promise of 'better' it becomes uncanny. The world is filled with uncanny machines, Freud's unheimlich – the unfamiliar familiar is present most obviously in creepy human-like androids but also in autonomous car crashes, Amazon Echo's Alexa suddenly laughing without provocation, internet-connected door locks failing and locking people out of their homes and a litany of other bugs that are just as prevalent in the autonomous world of pure machines as they were in the ones that went before.

As a global technoculture, we steer towards the pure machine, it is entrancing and mysterious – an ever-receding techno fantasy. More than ever we are filling the world with uncanny machines that unsettle us and make our human position in mastery of the technical world uncertain.

**DUEL** What impact does it have that some of the technologies that influence our lives the most have become 'invisible' algorithms and software for data collection and analysis? (ie. the recent exposure of Facebook's connection with Cambridge Analytica, seemingly influencing both the US election and the Brexit vote). How do we define and understand 'uncanny' when the machine or technologies become materially intangible?

**Tobias Revell** You're right to suggest that they're not 'invisible' but intangible. The metaphor of monsters becomes especially helpful here. Monsters of the modern and pre-modern era were usually mutations or perversions of the human form – werewolves, vampires and so on. They were about the morality and corruption of humans but they were discrete and objectified in their nature; they could be pointed at or chased with torches and pitchforks. The monsters we have now are gothic – the Cthulu of Lovecraft or the invisible monster of Ambrose Bierce's Damned Thing. Even the aliens of Annihilation. They exceed human form, occupying more dimensions and having materially different qualities that are unperceivable to the human sensorium. Like the Old Ones, the contemporary monsters of big data, capital and climate change see us as nothing more than scurrying animals, part of the landscape. A lot of theory in design and technology of recent years has decentred the human and I think one of the biggest (perhaps positive) impacts

of these 'hyper-objects' suggested by Timothy Morton is that we are beginning to reassess our own identities and to overthrow the myth of individualism.

**DUEL** Can you describe a future or perhaps remember a past scenario of an interaction with a pure machine? As automation liberates certain labours what are some consequences you see in relationship to daily life, work and ownership?

**Tobias Revell** Well, the Turk is definitely one. I'm not sure that a pure machine can exist – the idea of something unconnected with human agency is almost impossible to imagine – even the most advanced fully-autonomous AI would still be built from and for a social impetus. As a designer I'm wary of both extreme visions of automation – the luxurious, work-free utopia or the oppressive, poverty-stricken dystopia. Automation will be like everything else, poorly implemented and inconsistent. The door to my studio is 'automated' – in theory I swipe a card and it should open. However, I also have to bash it with my shoulder at the same time because the wood is swollen at the bottom where there was a leak a few years back. There will undoubtedly be changes but we've been automating labour for 250 years, it's not that new. It's also worth remembering that humans will always be cheaper than machines.

**DUEL** The notion of a 'pure machine' seems to rely on a suspension of disbelief or at least a willingness to accept the illusion of

a kind of willful autonomous automation. In fact the famous engravings of von Kempelen's Turk make this explicit by showing a person inside the chess table, presumably controlling the automaton. What do you see today as the kind of underlying control mechanisms in automation – and are these perhaps the most significantly impactful robotics rather than the actual self-driving car itself? Also, how can we understand this common willingness to accept such an illusion and how might that interact with social emotions like trust, sincerity and familiarity?

**Tobias Revell** As above, the pure machine is imaginary rather than a real thing but there's a larger social imaginary at play – we've gotten used to reading the world like a machine. We think of everything as a machine of interlocking parts that can be controlled with the proper application of force at the right point – we name and classify animals and set them in a food pyramid and try and engineer their DNA for new outcomes. We plant forests in orderly rows to maximise growth. We give people tasks and jobs and deadlines and performance indicators. It's impossible for humans to interact or imagine anything without it being a technology. And one of the truest things about models is that once we've abstracted the world into a model or a map or any other visualisation, we expect it to perform like that model and the best way of guaranteeing that is to reshape the world to resemble the model. So automation is driven by a social imaginary that the world should work like a machine so we turn it into one. To deal with more intangible elements like trust we make contracts – currency, terms of service, patents, license, agreements, insurance, blockchain, credit scores, criminal records etc. etc. that give measurable input to the machine we built. Whether this is an illusion, a social hallucination or anything else is very much up for debate. We're quite willing to suspend disbelief about a lot of things; the question of 'belief' in folk culture, magic and religion has long eluded anthropologists and the era of objective truth has been long dead. Is it an illusion if you don't realise it's an illusion? Even if you knew it was an illusion would that change how you felt about it? 'It's still magic even if you know how it's done,' as Terry Pratchett wrote. I don't think there's a base-level reality that all of the universe can agree on. The idea of secret knowledge – that we can somehow reveal the trick, expose the conspiracy and share the secrets – is kind of its own illusion.