

Reanimating the Dead:  
Robo-Huey and the Political Uncanny

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If fascism came to America it would be on a program of Americanism.

-- Huey Long, attributed

I want to begin by reading two performances, or "twice performed behaviors," in the Louisianian imaginary.<sup>1</sup> The first is a staged pose in celebration of new, college supported enhancements of the Department of Military Science at Louisiana State University. On the cover of the bi-annual newsletter of the College of Arts and Sciences titled *Kaleidoscope: Enhancing Creativity*, dean Guillermo Ferreyra appears, with a rather toothy smile, brandishing a Kimber .22 caliber target rifle, along side the chair of the Department of Military Science, Mark A. Caruso, who is dressed in military fatigues. The rifle was one of fifty purchased by the college in support of the revival of the ROTC's competitive marksmanship program, perhaps the closest

cousin to the lesser recognized, unsupported, yet successful, competitive program of symbolic warfare housed in the Department of Communication Studies: collegiate debate. The politics of representation here is characteristically Louisianian: the activity of debate, which claims the motto Kenneth Burke assigned to rhetoric and argument, *ad bellum purificandum*, might seem to many a more suitable representation for the goods internal to a collegiate institution. Instead, the instrumentality of war and its Real implement, the gun, was chosen to symbolize the aspirations and creativity of the college and the diversity of its achievements in the past semester. *Prima facie*, the deathly threat of "the dean with a gun"--which should strike fear in untenured faculty everywhere--tacitly reinforces the new, aggressive (or shall we say *preemptive*) vision of the college to reclaim the coveted "Harvard of the South" status.

The compliment to the "dean with a gun" image is the performative politics of a new exhibit at Louisiana's Old State Capital building, which is now a state museum: in a darkened room on the west side of the building, a golden statue of Huey P. Long stands behind a podium. Behind the bronzed politician a series of heavy, velvet blue curtains drop to the floor; in the line of his gaze is the kind of floor-standing radio popular in middle class households in the 1930s. The scene is reminiscent of those in many of David Lynch's uncanny noir films, in which a seemingly inanimate person is seated in a cold, mysterious, and richly colored room. When one enters the exhibit, an invisible beam of light is broken, the already dim overhead lights dim further, and the previously frozen statue Long comes to life in playful banter with an unseen radio announcer, whom the automaton patronizingly refers to as "radio boy." I do not wish to describe the exhibit in too much detail, because in my capacity as a Red Stick ambassador I want to encourage those of you here today to visit the museum, and I don't want to spoil the fun. But I will tell you this: the robotic demagogue speaks on a variety of topics, all of which boast about

Long's many political accomplishments during his short, political career: from an expressed fondness for LSU's football team, to his repeal of the poll tax, to his program for free school textbooks, to his initiative to pave Louisiana's roads, the robot of Long, whom I affectionately call Robo-Huey, re-enacts the presumed oratorical style of the historical Huey to the delight the curious spectator (I will not lie: it is an amusing spectacle).

The express rationale of those in the Louisiana Department of State for building a robot of the most famous and powerful demagogue in United States' political history remains somewhat of a mystery. For Louisianians, Long is a much cherished and hated figure, and historically his influence on the governance of the state is undeniable. Given the country-wide fascination with his figure (perhaps signified no more strongly than by the multi-million dollar remake of *All the King's Men*, which is happening as I speak), it is understandable why those interested in Louisiana tourism would encourage another exhibit on Long. Yet this one is unquestionably strange because it features a half-million dollar robo-man. Further, unlike the friendly, animatronic figures of theme parks that Walt Disney dreamed up over half a century ago, Robo-Huey is intended as a bronzed statue come to life, he represents a deliberate attempt to provoke an uncanny response among spectators. Robo-Huey is thus more directly a descendant of the automatons dreamed into existence by Jacques Vaucanson in eighteenth century France: like the mime, automatons were originally scientific marvels, figures that one assumed were statues until they startled the spectator by moving.<sup>2</sup> Given the historical origin of the robot in the fear of the inanimate dead coming to life, the creation of Robo-Huey is designed to produce a confrontation death. Like the exhibit itself, which is articulated to another that enshrines the mystery of Long's assassination, the advertisement of the exhibit leads the reader to Huey's death:

Huey Long once described himself to reporters bet by saying, "I am *sui generis* (one of a kind), just leave it at that." Senator Long was truly one of a kind. He was the most eccentric, controversial, and successful politician Louisiana has ever seen. He knew what he wanted to do and he saw to it that it was accomplished, whatever it took. . . . Long had his eyes on the presidency, but was shot by an assassin on September 8, 1935 . . . . Before he died two days later, he was said to have uttered, "God, don't let me die. I have so much to do."

Despite the obvious messianic overtones of this promotional rhetoric, the fact remains that Long is dead—*long* dead. Rather than serve as a melancholic testament to Louisianian's inability to mourn the loss of a much beloved and hated son, Robo-Huey, precisely because he is automaton, reassures the spectator that Huey Pierce Long is dead. Yet it only does so by threatening his impossible return; it is deliberately posed as both a comfort and threat, erring on the side of comfort. Today, I want to suggest we should not be so comforted.

Despite their obvious dissimilarities, I want to suggest that the image of the "dean with a gun" and the performance of Robo-Huey are linked to the threat of killing machines. From a psychoanalytic perspective, I argue that a homologous, ambivalent desire animates these performances in the processes of "surrogation," the mournful dialectic of remembering and forgetting that Joseph Roach suggests helps people to reckon with the trauma of death and the unbearable meaninglessness of atrocity through the provision of surrogate love objects.<sup>3</sup> Both Robo-dean *with* his machine, and Robo-Huey *as the machine*, are scripted, functioning mechanically and animated by elements in the Louisianian political imaginary. By "political imaginary" I mean to refer to a collective reservoir or myth, trope, symbol, image, and so on, which provides the rhetorical material for identitarian, or representational, politics.<sup>4</sup> By

imaginary I also mean to refer, however, to the psyche and psychical structures that inhere in collective consciousness, which are recorded materially in terms of the performance of the archive (documented or textualized records) and the repertoire (embodied performance).<sup>5</sup> Robo-Huey, I suggest, is the performance of death par excellence, and a closer examination of what he represents helps us to see better the uniqueness of the Louisianian political imaginary as one that explicitly embraces an aesthetic of death. I will conclude by suggesting this aesthetic also has national representatives.

### *On Death Machines: The Case of Louisiana*

In his masterful study of Louisianian politics, Wayne Parent notes that “in almost every category of state politics studies . . . Louisiana is usually marked by an asterisk denoting a peculiarity or exception to the general rule.”<sup>6</sup> Whether one refers to the 1991 gubernatorial race in which the racketeering Edwin Edwards defeated his opponent David Duke with a barrage of bumper stickers urging Louisianians to “Vote for the Crook,” or to the demagogic legacy of the Longs, the rhetoric and oratory dominating what in any other place would be termed “politics” is anything but “usual.” Parent locates the uniqueness of Louisiana's political culture in a number of factors, but perhaps none more important than those concerning the complexity of immigration patterns, Louisiana's geographical location and abundant resources, and the states' long and complex history with issues of whiteness, race, and class. My concern today is to provide at least a partial articulation of the psychical factors informing this motley political culture and, by extension, its choice of self-representational discourse or "rhetoric." Just like a neurotic or psychotic in therapy, the “case” of Louisiana, and in particular, Huey Long, yields unique insights into the often repressed or simply ignored dimensions of political rhetoric and

oratory: the colorful, the bizarre, the seemingly irrational. I will contend, however, that the seemingly bizarre participates in a political rationality that is more familiar than is often supposed. Indeed, an analysis of Louisiana's many colorful symptoms reveals deeper structures that also reappear the contemporary national scene. Louisianian political rhetoric just makes it easier to see.

Although time prevents a thorough examination of the argument, one aspect of Louisianian culture that is markedly unique is its ambivalent embrace of death, a kind of aesthetic best captured by the term "gothic apocalyptic," or perhaps "romantic apocalyptic." As one new colleague from Colorado recently put it, "I've never lived anywhere in the world where people simply don't give a fuck." At the time she made this observation, she was referring to the rampant littering behavior along Louisiana's highways, the sheer amount of buildings in disrepair, the markedly high rate of smokers, and the relatively flippant attitude toward the pollution of petrol-chemical industry and high cancer morbidity rates. In less colloquial terms, my colleague has identified what some would describe as a "death culture" that manifests itself in explicitly licensed enjoyment and relaxed responsibility. In his book on the cultural performances of London and New Orleans, *Cities of the Dead*, Joseph Roach describes New Orleans as a kind of living sepulture, a thriving tomb of funerary rites that embraces life by directly facing and embracing a death that has somehow already arrived. In short, unlike any other culture in the United States, Louisiana is yoked to death; "not giving a fuck" in some sense means having already succumbed to death, if only allegorically.

Only when one recognizes the Louisianian imaginary as "gothic" or perversely (and I would add delightfully) morbid do its apparently strange cultural performances begin to make sense. For example, the apparent lack of forethought behind the decision for the dean to pose

with a rifle for an academic publication goes much deeper than macho, phallogocentric masculinity (which, after Huey will forever be Louisiana's claim to national prominence, if only because of the New State Capital Building looks like an erect penis). The apparent mindlessness of the representation of academic performance is scripted in the uncanny, an experience of doubling that subjects one to performances and perserverations frequently beyond conscious control. The dean *had* to it. He *had* to hold it. He *had* to shoot it. He *had* to be seen with this machine, of which he was supposedly in control. Indeed, "control" is precisely the fantasy offered by weaponry; the truth of the matter is that, excepting sociopaths, killing is always already scripted in the service of something larger than one's self. More importantly, I suggest that the "dean with a gun" image was pre-scripted precisely by the gothic apocalyptic, the same ambivalent desire animating the funerary march of Mardi Gras as a parade of so many mindless, human machines of consumption, gathering on the eve of their demise. It's all about the horrible sublimity of the end, you see.

That the legacy of the LSU College of Arts and Sciences is so deeply associated with the agrarian ideology of the literary elite is, perhaps, even more reason for the appearance of a killing machine as a symbol: you cannot resist change; one is dead to the corporitization and instrumentalization, the scientifi-cation of the academic enterprise. In this respect the cover of *Kaleidoscope* participates in the so-called "culture wars," a wordy melee among those who would protect the literary canon, those who advocate postmodern theory, and learned by-standing reporters (mostly from the *New York Times*) bemused by the whole affair. Indeed, the mechanistic and mechanical is a menacing trope among those inside the academy who resist the rigors of "pomo" thought as so much mindless jargon. As Catherine Liu argues, traditional literary studies has a rather long tradition of denigrating the mechanical and the machine,

especially among those critical of highly theoretical accounts of literature, such as Paul de Man.<sup>7</sup> Bennington notes that "literary studies habitually" uses

the language of machines in a negative way, deploring the mechanical and the technical as the death of values attached to life, form, inspiration, and so on. At best, a 'technical' use of concepts is accorded uneasy neutrality, without ever being allowed to become the heart of the matter. Machines *repeat*, and repetition means danger—compulsion and death.<sup>8</sup>

The cover of the newsletter directly confronts this conceit, but also in a manner that is classically Louisianian. The archetypal dean is cast as a death machine, a representative of the Borg. Here our dean was merely submitting to his pre-scripted role in the academic fantasy, but in a way only tacitly permitted, if not demanded, by death-chic of the Louisianian political imaginary. He *had* to do it; he's *the dean* (which, we all know, is a bureaucratic automaton, a traitor to his home department, and so on).

As Freud reminds us, whether in the language of dreams or the consciously constructed cultural fantasies of literature and film, in the symbolic and its double, the imaginary, there are no accidents. The weapon is an uncanny machine, a semi-autonomic mechanism with moving parts that, in the hands of the soldier, is an instrument of death. As a machine, the weapon calls our attention to the dialectic of control, to our fantasies of Cartesian ambivalence about possessing and possession: he who controls the machine controls the universe; he who succumbs to the machine—to the Borg, if you will—suffers death. If we might better paraphrase what "not giving a fuck" means for Louisianians, it might be this: *suffering death is just alright with me, suffering death is just alright, oh yeah.*

When we think about the rifle and the danger it connotes, that danger is one of automatism. Those in the room may remember the first time (if ever) he or she had held and/or fired a gun: there is, at some level, at least a tacit fear of the accident. What if this thing accidentally goes off and it's pointed at me? I must admit I am personally terrified of firearms because of those suicidal fantasies most of us have entertained: what if I lose my mind and shoot myself, at some level, on purpose? This tacit fear, usually projected into the power to destroy another human being, is none other than the threat of mechanistic automatism, otherwise known as the robot. What if the weapon becomes so automatic that it becomes *autonomous*, that this machine of human instrumentality subjects me to my own creation? Worse, what if I am but a mere machine, an automaton? Lest you think I'm making much ado about nothing, let me remind you that the threat of losing control of the autonomous weapon is rife in Western culture, perhaps no more so than in film: in *Blade Runner*, a hero named after the philosophical paranoiac par excellence, Rene Descartes ("I feel, therefore, I am not a machine . . . right?"), must track down and destroy renegade human robots, or replicants, who have turned against their human masters; in the *Terminator* films, androids are determined to destroy the human race, and only a time-traveling rogue assassin can help the humans avert the secular apocalypse; in the *Matrix* films, everything—even the Messiah—is Memorex; and let us not forget the important way in which fantasies of machine possession are rife in the political imaginary, as *The Manchurian Candidate* makes plain. For these reasons, I submit that Robo-Huey is literally a political weapon, a uncanny machine that threatens to overtake us even though we recognize this would be impossible. To better make this case, however, we must turn briefly to a psychoanalytic account of the figure of the demagogue.

### *The Demagogue as a Neurotic Robot*

Understood psychoanalytically, I have been suggesting that both the figure of the dean and the demagogue are machines animated by elements in the Symbolic, and more particularly, the political imaginary--social roles, scripts, and mythic constructs that provide real people social functionality. To say that deanship and demagoguery are, in part, social scripts performed by flesh and blood individuals is not to suggest that these roles are somehow fated and deterministic, nor is it to suggest that individuals who mimic deanness and demagogery are mindless robots. Individuals are robotic only to the extent that at some level structures—albeit socially constructed ones—run the show more than we would like to admit. After all, we accuse our fellow human beings in the so-called private sector as mere "drones" for "The Man" anyway, so who is to say you and I are not similarly scripted?

Understanding the agency of symbolic elements becomes easier when we grapple with the psychical structures of neurosis, which the theorist Jacques Lacan has specified elegantly in terms of a set number of mind-scripts. Indeed, Lacanian psychoanalysis helpfully simplifies the well known contemporary explosion of disorders, syndromes, and complexes by arguing they are all *symptoms* or traces of a limited number of deeper, psychical structures of subjectivity that form in early childhood.<sup>9</sup> This is not to say there is no biological basis for so-called mood disorders or personality traits. If there is a biological basis for a given trait or characteristic, however, the symptom will be articulated in a meaningful manner to a psychical structure, and therefore the symbolic and social. For the analyst, a given subject's characteristic "structure" tends to fall into three, mutually exclusive categories: neurosis, psychosis, and perversion. The

psychotic and perverse subject are the most unusual kinds of subject structures. Most of us are neurotic, and neurosis comes in two types, obsession and hysteria, which I address in turn.<sup>10</sup>

The obsessional neurotic is an individual who is convinced of his or her completeness and autonomy, and who is resolutely determined to deny the notion of an unconscious or any repressed wish.<sup>11</sup> As Bruce Fink puts it:

The obsessive, as a conscious thinker, ignores . . . that discourse we do not and cannot control which takes advantage of the ambiguities and multiple meanings of words. . . . The obsessive cannot stand the idea of sharing his mouthpiece with that foreign voice, and does his best to keep it down or at least out of earshot.<sup>12</sup>

Fink uses an intriguing imaginary scenario to describe the relationship of the obsessive to the Other and the assumed object of his desiring: The obsessive neurotic is the kind of person who, while making love to his or her partner, arranges for another love interest to phone during the act. He or she answers the phone and has a conversation while still making love.<sup>13</sup> Such a scenario represents an obsessive fantasy of autonomy: by answering the phone (or even by imagining one is making love to someone else) the obsessive erases or denies the Other as having some control or interest in him or her. The obsessive cannot tolerate the fact that another makes demands on him or her, and by extension, that he or she is not in complete, conscious control. The obsessive fears disappearing or “fading” (aphanisis), and for this reason the object of his desires is *never enough*. That is to say, the obsessive is like an addict of sorts, and for him others act as various, interchangeable containers for a desire that cannot be achieved—an *impossible desire*. For practicing clinicians, because masculinity is culturally associated with self-mastery and self-control, obsessives tend to be men (but not always).<sup>14</sup>

Hysterics, on the other hand, deny or erase themselves, continually establishing an unsatisfied desire.<sup>15</sup> The hysteric identifies with the Other's desire and wants to be its object. Or in other words, the hysteric desires as if he or she were someone else, identifying with the gaze of another, kind of like an out-of-body experience. Freud paints a scenario, referred to as the "the butcher's wife," that helps us understand the hysteric, who, not surprisingly, is usually a woman.<sup>16</sup> The butcher's wife (tellingly, Fink underscores that she has no name) notices that her faithful and loving husband flirts with another woman one day who is completely not his type.<sup>17</sup> Later that night she dreams that she *is* this other woman, literally identifying with her as her husband's supposed object of desire. Consequently, the hysteric's subject position "involves a detour via a man," and the pleasure of her self-erasure is derived by self-deprivation. Whereas the obsessive is singular or monumentally phallic, the hysteric is implicated, as the immortal new wave band New Order has said, in a "bizarre love triangle," a circuit of desire that always implicates a mediating thirdness.<sup>18</sup>

Insofar as desire is the desire of the Other, and insofar as most people are either hysterics or obsessives, we can already start to see how demagoguery is, on the one hand, explained by neurotic structures and, on the other, related to gendered styles. I suggest that demagoguery as such can be understood as a relation between the hysterical and the obsessive, which means that demagoguery is essentially a neurotic relationship between a given rhetor/politician and an audience. I should be careful to underscore here that by characterizing demagoguery as neurosis I do not mean to pathologize the discourse, but quite the opposite. Insofar as a psychoanalytic understanding of subjectivity holds that none of us are "normal," then demagoguery becomes a more conspicuous or pronounced example of persuasive oratory in general. In other words, while we are attempting to account for the reasons why orators such as Huey Long are so

mesmerizing (even in death!), there is an important sense in which the psychoanalytic theory of demagoguery explains persuasion in general as a strategy of desire. Indeed, not only are obsession and hysteria *structures*, but they can also be understood as strategies that are designed to *keep desire in play*; the neuroses are processes that work against their own closure, which is what happens when one becomes “fixated” on a given object.<sup>19</sup>

If demagoguery is an interplay or dialectic between an obsessional neurotic and a hysterical neurotic, then no one can get what they believe that they want or persuasion ceases. Delayed satisfaction is central to charisma. The demagogue presents him or herself as a complete, autonomous individual with a tantalizing, emotional power, and his rhetoric will therefore harbor all the hallmarks of a lover who answers his cell phone while making love to you. What has passed as charisma is thus better understood as a demagogue's ability not only to promise love with gifts (the ruse of the emotional appeal), but his simultaneous ability to *withhold* his love, his ability to hint to audiences that *he may be insincere*.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the desire the demagogue sets into motion is not reducible to fooling audiences with presents, which tends to be the way in which he is characterized. What has been misunderstood about the rhetorical power of the demagogue is precisely his ability to deploy and maintain suspicion among his lovers, that he may possibly be insincere, that he may have other lovers in play. Allegorically speaking, Huey P. Long *had* to be killed because the jealous lover was an overdetermined, psychical role (and it is no mere coincidence many charismatic leaders die similarly).<sup>21</sup>

Insofar as the obsessional demagogue engenders a circuit of desire, then, charisma becomes the ability to induce or incite hysteria, when we understand hysteria as the psychical structure whereby an individual identifies with the desire of the Other (as opposed to, for

example, the mindless abandon and chaos that passes for hysteria in Hollywood disaster films). The demagogue hystericizes audiences, encouraging them to *see themselves as he claims to see them*. This notion is similar, of course, to McGee's understanding of the rhetorical function of "the people."<sup>22</sup> The hystericization of the audience, however, is different in respect to the role desire plays in suturing audiences to a given demagogue: the vision of the "people" with which an audience comes to identify is *inextricably* associated with the demagogue. In other words, the true believer is not in love with an idealization of herself as a member of this or that party, or Long's famous "Share the Wealth" club, and so on. She is in love with *his* impossible, perfect people, self-alienated and incapable of satisfying desire. Another way to put this is that demagogues are successful and persuasive only to the extent that audiences derive pleasure from *never truly getting what they are promised*.

If one accepts—even only tentatively—this description of the psychical underpinnings of demagoguery, then one can understand how the automaton is the *logical extension* of the transferential power of the demagogue: like all phallic objects or objects that move on their own accord, the demagogue represents absolute and complete autonomy; he demands our affections by denying a need for them; he engenders love by promising but never *completely* fulfilling the promise; he is, in effect, his own god. Let me return again to the promotional rhetoric of the Robo-Huey exhibit:

Huey Long once described himself to reporters by saying, "I am *sui generis* (one of a kind), just leave it at that." Senator Long was truly one of a kind. He was the most eccentric, controversial, and successful politician Louisiana has ever seen. He knew what he wanted to do and he saw to it that it was accomplished, whatever it took. . . . Long had his eyes on the presidency, but was shot by an

assassin on September 8, 1935 . . . . Before he died two days later, he was said to have uttered, "God, don't let me die. I have so much to do."

Suddenly the slight mistranslation of *sui generis* as "one of a kind" makes much more sense: that which is entitled to its own category is ultimately the charismatic *obsessive neurotic*, whose transgressions can only be disciplined by destruction. Huey P. Long was and is an autonomous, political machine; it is only fitting that he has been petrified into a kind of living death.

The decision to revive Huey as a automaton can be read as a process of surrogation or substitution, a process that deliberately forgets as much as it remembers. Joseph Roach explains that

Into the cavities created by loss through death or other forms of departure . . . survivors attempt to fit satisfactory alternatives. Because collective memory works selectively, imaginatively, and often perversely, surrogation rarely if ever succeeds . . . . the very uncanniness of the process of surrogation . . . may provoke many unbidden emotions, ranging from mildly incontinent sentimentalism to raging paranoia. . . . [in times of tension between generations and over alienation] improvised narratives of authenticity and priority may congeal into full-blown myths of legitimacy and origin.<sup>23</sup>

Of course the figure of Long is the phoenix from the flames of the Lost Cause. But, he is also an object of derision that somewhat startlingly becomes less threatening as surrogation devolves over time into caricature. Instead of depicting Huey as a despot, he is described as Robin Hood. Instead of describing him as arrogant and narcissistic, he is characterized as strong-willed and determined. Instead of calling him a fascist, he is a populist. Perhaps because memory of Long's political machine is choosey, Robo-Huey is deliberately less life-like than his contemporary

animatoric cousins, as if to keep spectators from too closely identifying with his ravenous love of political might. He is not a cheerful mouse, nor a long-haired pirate, nor a breathing granny gazing into a crystal ball. He is a statue come to life, not so much a robot as we know it but the living dead. Unlike other, more familiar automatons, Robo-Huey continuously reminds us of (his?) death.

### *Concluding Remarks: On National Robotics*

Freud defines the uncanny in general as a compulsive obsession with the traumatic, when obsession is defined as the simultaneity of a wish and counter-wish. The uncanny is an *aesthetic* phenomenon involving an event and a feeling. The event is the failure of repression, and the feeling is a variation of negativity (fright, horror, dread, and terror are variously used to denote the feeling). The failure of repression and the "uncanny effect" results when either a "primitive belief," which we have previously repressed, finds confirmation in experience, or when something familiar to us (including a feeling) that we have previously repressed recurs.<sup>24</sup> The experience of the uncanny is caused by with two failure-events in particular: First, an experience of doubling, such as with a doppelgänger or an unexpected mirror image, can invite terror (which Freud speculates is the double of feelings of unity before the ego separated itself from the world). Second, the "eternal recurrence" of the same—repetition of the same character traits in different people, or a recurrence of similar events (*deja-vu*) —can invite an uncanny effect, which Freud asserts reminds us of the *instinctual* compulsion to repeat. It is not surprising that the uncanny object Freud singles out as provoking both failures, the strange object of surrogation *par excellence*, is the automaton: the machine that is not only a double of me, but one that is a mindless me repeating mindlessly.

Insofar as Robo-Huey is inescapably yoked to the political imaginary, we can postulate that he participates in a larger discourse of the "political uncanny," the idea that certain figures on the national political scene are "robots" or puppets animated by a larger, governing will. Again, this is precisely the fantasy animating Hollywood thrillers like *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, but we can also locate the ominous doubles of the repetition machine in public dreams like the 1999 theatrical hit, *Wag the Dog*. In this memorable film, which would seem almost inseparable from the real-life exploits of former president Bill Clinton, a character played by Robert Deniro, "Mr. Fixit," is paid to fabricate a fake war in Algeria to divert the public's attention from a presidential sex scandal. The obvious Orwellian overtones aside, what is mildly uncanny about the film is not only its double in real life political spectacle, but its accurate depiction of the political machine as an autonomous abstraction: politics is a coordinated apparatus comprised of different moving parts, and none of the moving parts have any sense of what the other moving parts are doing. Presumably, Mr. Fixit is orchestrating the whole, but the film constantly tempts the viewer to question how much he is controlling this machine: once set into motion by someone, the symbolic seems to take care of itself. The weapon, in other words, fires on its own accord.

The troubling part of this fantasy is that it is also an undeniable reality. The troubling part of this fantasy is that the political machine, like the invention of the automaton, is ultimately rooted in the capacity of humans to *reason*. Instrumental rationality—if only gleaned from the mundane advent of serialization—fetishizes or mystifies the collaboration of its working parts. This is, in fact, the deathly aesthetic of the automaton, which in Europe arose during a time when proto-engineers were obsessed with hiding the many working parts of machines, as the face-plate of a clock is apt testimony. The mass appeal of documentaries like *The War Room* or even

*Fahrenheit 9-11* is that they promise to remove the face-plate, they promise to disclose how the autonomous political machine works, and frequently in the interests of *no one but the machine itself*. What troubles contemporary historians of technology and human perception like Paul Virilio, however, is that the fetishized aesthetic of the political machine runs cover for a an even more troublesome war machine, a kind of self-driven apparatus that led many to characterize Operation Desert Storm as a "Nintendo War," and recent efforts in the Middle East as parodic replay, "Operation Desert Storm: Reloaded."

In short, I am arguing that Robo-Huey is no mere toy, no mere spectacle designed to amuse and delight tourists. He represents simultaneously that which we fear is coming and that which has already come to pass: politics is on the side of the aesthetics machine. Or as Walter Benjamin once put it,

*"fiat ars—pereat mundus,"* says fascism, expect from war . . . the aesthetic gratification of sense perception altered by technology. This is evidently the consummation of *l'art our l'art*. Humankind, which once, in Homer, was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, has now become one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure. *Such is the aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by fascism.*<sup>25</sup>

Benjamin urged that, in response, we should rigorously and ceaselessly politicize art, even that which passes for the detritus of the rabble in popular culture. This is why we should be more startled than amused by the Robo-Huey exhibit. After all, the Office of the Secretary of State has developed an educational outreach curriculum about the exhibit, with lesson plans for grades K-12.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 36-37.
- <sup>2</sup> See Catherine Liu, *Copying Machines: Taking Notes for the Automaton* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000): 76-105.
- <sup>3</sup> Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
- <sup>4</sup> My understanding of "politics" here is rather broad and Foucauldian, meaning that it concerns questions of identity, representation, and power; politics is always a struggle of meaning.
- <sup>5</sup> See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), esp. 1-52.
- <sup>6</sup> Wayne T. Parent, *Inside the Carnival: Unmasking Louisiana Politics* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2004), 2.
- <sup>7</sup> Liu, *Copying*, 1-20.
- <sup>8</sup> In Liu, *Copying*, 23.
- <sup>9</sup> Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 194-195.
- <sup>10</sup> There is actually a third: phobia. However, phobic structures are not subject structures like obsession and hysteria, and operate rather as a kind of threshold for obsession, hysteria, and perversion. See Fink, , *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 163-164. Lacan the neuroses from psychosis in that both the hysteric and obsessive subject structures form a question: "Am I a man or a woman?" and "Am I alive or dead?" respectively. See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses, 1955-1956*, translated by Russell Grigg (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), 195-182.
- <sup>11</sup> For a description of the symptoms of obsession, see J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), 281-282.
- <sup>12</sup> Fink, *A Clinical*, 122.
- <sup>13</sup> Fink, *A Clinical*, 124.
- <sup>14</sup> Incidentally, obsessives are particularly prone to the Virgin/whole dialectic, another reason why Mel Gibson will eventually be destroyed, at least symbolically, for his epic *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).
- <sup>15</sup> For a description of the symptoms of hysterical neurosis, see Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, 195-195.
- <sup>16</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, translated by Joyce Crick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 116-118.
- <sup>17</sup> Fink, *A Clinical Introduction*, 125.
- <sup>18</sup> New Order, "Bizarre Love Triangle," performed by New Order. *Brotherhood*, Qwest, 1986, compact disk.
- <sup>19</sup> Fink, *A Clinical*, 51.
- <sup>20</sup> I have developed this position elsewhere in terms of the "subject supposed to know." See (reference withheld for blind review).
- <sup>21</sup> Ken Burns' *America Collection* documentary, *Huey Long* (PBS Home Video, 1985) provides a number of stark examples. The film opens with footage of Long on the stump, which is followed by a series of interviews. Three separate elderly and visibly poor individuals share their loving feelings about Long, describing him as "swell" and worthy of much admiration. These scenes are followed by shots of an older woman who proclaims she cannot think of a "Saturday night . . . when we didn't talk about killing Huey Long." Later interviewees would claim Huey "had to die."
- <sup>22</sup> See Michael C. McGee, "In Search of 'The People': A Rhetorical Alternative." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61 (1975): 235-250.
- <sup>23</sup> Roach, *Cities*, 2-3.
- <sup>24</sup> See Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," translated by David McLintock. In *The Uncanny* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 123-162.
- <sup>25</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Reproducibility," second version, translated by Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn. In *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume Three, 1935-1938*, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2002): 122.