Centaurs, Rioting in Thessaly: Memory and the Classical World

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Daedalus and his machines

The figures of Daedalus, automata, like slaves, existing at the bidding of their master and maker, will always flee if they can.
—Page duBois

Daedalus is the maker of labyrinths, but he also the maker of sculptures, of automata, of crafts. He makes wings for himself and his son that extend the possibilities of the human and allow escape from the labyrinth. Artefacts and sculptures are named for him. He exemplifies making. Daedalus designs, builds, extends, but he also creates imaginary structures that, even though they might be linked to the world of nature, are human constructs and fabrications—like mathematics. Like mathematics, the object he makes is part of a multiply stratified ‘ideal’ and constructed world that ‘encounters’ the multiply stratified physical world. The very practice of arithmetic can newly engineer that world of nature, transforming it to make it more suitable human habitations. It can also help to design

1 Page duBois, Slaves and Other Objects (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 248n.
the geometric form of the labyrinth to imprison, confuse, mirror ourselves. Arithmetic can also engineer our post-humanness, creating new prosthetic human forms and automata. Not only is the labyrinth the work of a man, the work of the same man also enables his and our escape from it. Every produced human artefact is Daedalian, produced and reproduced with its own logics often only tangentially encountering nature.\(^4\) Labyrinths, Centaurs, gods are themselves Daedalian. The Centauromachy is a human construction with its own geometries of explanation and power. Humans make things by replicating nature, animals, other human beings through observation, experimentation, technique.\(^5\)

The imaginary entities of the Centaur and the labyrinth are at once the textual production of story lines (appearing as they do in the texts of classical mythology) and as the material production of constantly recurring visual images. In that sense the inhabitation of these texts and images in the imaginary makes possible that constant utilisation of those visual forms in production. They are the matrices of constant human production — the engines and machines which accumulate and produce images and discourses. The textual and visual constitution of those entities are of course not limited to labyrinths or centaurs — those are just exemplars. But each of those exemplars displays something distinctive about a visual architectural form.

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and a visual biological form, and, in fact, they are forms which are linked by their relation in myth.

Living, designing, and building within that world Daedalus used human engineering in both his labyrinth and to become a hybrid being, a monstrous form that would fly. His knowledge accumulated as part of the life-world makes that design possible—but it is only the ‘taking leave’ from the world of his son that reaffirms the boundary between human and bird. The hybrid being was destroyed in that process. Hubris may be why the legends of hybridity and building are so compelling—enmeshed as they are in both the potentiality and limitations of human creativity. And not just the creation and recreation of classical motifs or of the world itself but of their own humanity—constantly seeking to design, to transform, to create machines as extensions of the human being. Human beings, like labyrinths and centaurs are collections of lines—for Tim Ingold—‘After all, what is a thing, or indeed a person, if not a tying together of the lines—the paths of growth and movement of all the many constituents gathered there?’\(^7\) Navigating the labyrinths of the human and the world it has constructed of forms, motifs, replications is the task of a history of visual ‘existents’ and imaginaries.

The idea of Daedalian artefacts as imaginary objects is part of the whole history of the invention of visual forms such as art, architecture, armour, as products of social forces and relations and as structures of signification of the social formation. As Sarah Morris has argued—from the first note of Daedalus in Greek poetry in the *Iliad*, the Daedalus myth is entwined

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with the idea of production. Even if Daedalus himself is a ‘literary creation’ or a device to be emblematic of drawing, design, building, and production. The importance of the Daedalian artefact as an object rests upon three of its properties; that the artefact is a repetitious assemblage of the social-historical and bears its imprint, and can therefore be described and surveyed; that it is a human rather than a divine or natural production and reproduction; and that the recurrence of the visual Daedalian artefact into multiple spatial, temporal, epochal locations bears witness to the primacy of the imaginary in the creation of cultural forms.

The question of the methodological description of the Daedalian artefact is central when there is no such thing as the ‘empirical’ centaur to be described. The description would have to lie in the analytics of the mode of its multiplicity of production. The status of the artefact as a human production displays its contingency, its situated social meaningfulness (rather than natural or divine meaning), and its utility in divergent epochs. The imaginary use of extra-territorial visual forms is concerned with the endless social use and creation of a limited number of original or Ur-motifs and stories. Describing these properties then has a number of implications for the understanding of visual form.

Firstly, that the description of Daedalian artefacts makes problematic the very issue of realism and the documenting of social existence and phenomena because these are essentially imaginary phenomena even when their products are what we have called corporealist. Examining the composite, recursive

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structures of the imaginary means that the description is of derivative, secondary elaborations of an archaic motif going back into antiquity. The ‘world-historical necromancy’ of archaic forms and entities structures contemporary human relations.

Secondly, the search for a historical ‘object’ has always been problematic in the classical projects of social science and historical practice. When these forms are aesthetic ones, it makes even more difficult a project of examination and elucidation specifically if one considered the realm of art (the Furietti Centaurs) to be an essentially autonomous, private space in which there is a sense of the privileged visual form, which should not be ransacked for the traces of social relations invested within it. The task of delineating the specifically social features then becomes the project of description — the sense that there is an ontology of objects which make certain types of narrative extraction possible whilst leaving others in the realm of the aesthetic — that art is in a sense untranslatable and that its significations are resistant to social analytics.

Finally, the sense of the object intimates a more general theory of the production of cultural artefacts which delineates the role of labour, production, and creation as being at the heart of the human life-world, at the same time as that human life-world only offers a limited series of cultural forms available for use and recombination. The extra-territoriality of Daedalian artefacts, de-materialised from their spaces and times of origin, intimates that that labour of production is intertwined with the question of the human as a labouring, and specifically storytelling, machine, and that the stories it produces are an attempt to tell the social about its limitations and capacities to produce other types of machines and powers. Unlike this story,
that story has no end until the end of the human. And unlike the labyrinth, the human has no one centre, no one mystery to solve—its ghosts speak and recur all of the time.

These three aspects, of the imaginary archaic form and its powers, of the resistance of aesthetic forms to social analytics, and of the nature of the story-telling human, are, however only first steps in thinking about Daedalian artefacts and visual methodologies. We might think that if the labyrinth and the Centaur were built by us, they should not defy or refute our descriptions. In many ways this dissonance between the artefact and the description is still the central problematic in the idea of the historical object. We still want to survey our labyrinths and Centaurs because they were the work of a human being.

The idea of the work and making of human beings takes us back to what Page duBois has called the ‘the fabricated statues of Daedalus, who will run if they can, like slaves who want to be free’. The figures of Daedalus are automata, created and engineered, who are trying to escape their master’s will. David Wills has noted what he calls the ‘play of artifice’ and the artfulness of Daedalian objects in his work on the theories of prosthetics. But these artifices as extensions of the human body (wings), as buildings built from our imagination (labyrinths), and as independent manifestations of our will and craft (automata) also point to something of utter importance for created, hybrid entities—the seams between the natural and the constructed, the birthed and the engineered. The seams between the elements and units which combine to create the assemblages of new structures and beings—beings which mirror both our surfaces and our inwardnesses—are grafts of

10 duBois, Slaves, 161.
alien objects. What is the seam that lies between the human and the equine in the Centaur, where is the seam between the human form and the wing attached to Icarus by his father?

Cornelius Castoriadis again can give us some insight into those hybrid, created beings — those Daidala. Human beings are always seamed and grafted — their mode of being is a multiplicity and an ensemble of component parts — our being is a set of strata just like the uncovered city of ‘Troy’ or of the constituents gathered there. The Daedalian automaton is a speculative being, like the Centaur, its human maker can reproduce one after another. But it is also the self-alteration of the own being of its maker. The maker can preserve its own being in the new form, but also self-reproduce and self-alter. It contains within the principle of both generation and corruption, and can extend this out into other beings and forms.

For Castoriadis form can alter itself as form, and the whole idea of closure and ending becomes ‘shattered’ — ‘In other words, man is the only animal capable of breaking the closure in and through which every other living being is’. The self-institution of the human is limited only by her capacity to imagine. The replication of new entities and social forms is itself not simply repetition but constant self-elaboration and self-alteration.

In the Grundrisse notebooks of Marx, the machine is subordinate to the capacity for human fabrication — machines are ‘the power of knowledge, objectified’, organs of human minds

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and hands.\textsuperscript{15} The self-elaboration and self-alteration of human beings means the production of new automata and new social machines — machines in which the seam between biological organism and engineered automata dissolves.

The question is then not the meaning of the Daedalian artefact but what it means to us. The very shape-shifting of the human form, its indeterminacy and permeability, is also the reason why we create and the grounds for that creation and the genesis of new and repeated elaborations of what it is to be human.

If the human being has its mode of alteration at the heart of its mode of being, then the human is a module of possibilities. It can, as Castoriadis has said, play with its possibilities, extensions, alterations.\textsuperscript{16} The classical world is neither petrified nor destroyed, it lives on within our human frames and imaginaries. As George Steiner says — ‘New “Antigones” are being imagined, thought, lived now; and will be tomorrow.’\textsuperscript{17}

As Page duBois has taught us, the classical world was one of light and darkness. One of its central bequests to us has been slavery and human beings as objects. It was a world of savagery, bestiality, and horror. But it also opened spaces for thought and for art. Its fragmentary literatures, its political ideals live on in our cultures. We see ourselves with Achilles in the Achaean camp, we look for our ancestors in the Antigones of the classical world. The development of the imagined territories of democracy and philosophy are about fabrication — these were


\textsuperscript{16} Castoriadis, \textit{Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy}, 31, 39.

\textsuperscript{17} George Steiner, \textit{Antigones: The Antigone Myth in Western Literature, Art and Thought} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 34.
things made by human beings from the things they found in the world around them. The social relations and political economies of the city-states, their heroic poetry, their mythologies were labyrinths created by the peoples of Ionia to mirror and explore themselves and their world.

The demos and the multitude of the classical world offered new ways of organising with and against rulers and states. Even before the advent of the demos, the resolution to stand against power is embodied in the human frame of Achilles and Antigone. But Ionia also raises something even more decisive — that rests upon the fluidity and malleability of humans themselves. As humans design buildings, make sculptures, attach wings they also change themselves, not through compulsion, but through self-alteration. As Castoriadis notes of his own project:

‘What is it that you want, then? To change humanity?’
‘No, something infinitely more modest: simply that humanity change, as it has already done two or three times.’

The Ionian spaces offer us autonomy, self-definition, extension, and self-determination. Ionia does not just construct automata that are fleeing from their masters and creators, but autonomous minds and bodies in a cycle of creation and re-creation.

Understanding the strata of human life and the bodies strewn across those strata means understanding our human entity as a confederation of archaic and newly emerging beings, coalitions and alliances of souls and phantasms coalescing in ever more complex variation. If Daedalus evaded his submergence into

another being, a hybrid of human and bird, by using wings simply as tools, then we may not be so fortunate in our machines today, machines which have become part of our central being rather than prosthetic extensions to replicate animals and their capacities.

The Daedalian automaton is often perceived as a toy or a musical instrument, and is linked to the transmigration of the soul of the murdered Talos into a partridge (itself linked to the partridge dance of the maze). A second Talos emerges as the bronze automaton with a single vein stoppered by a bronze pin which Medea unlocks to kill the monster.\(^\text{19}\) The Greek αὐτόματον is often driven, in its mechanical being, by wind or blood — a combination of nature and technique. These archaic and elemental automata, what we might call ludic proto-robots, often have their will programmed within them but placed there by their maker.\(^\text{20}\) In myth they become the playthings of children or the defenders of realms, ideas that are sustained into the medieval period, specifically the ‘turning castle’ of the Arthurian romances.

The ludic and musical aspects of the classical automata are also sustained into other civilisations — specifically the extant work of the Banu Musa and their ingenious devices in Islam and into the robots of the medieval period.\(^\text{21}\) In fact the automata

\[\text{19} \quad \text{Robert Graves, } \textit{The Greek Myths (Combined Edition)} \text{ (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 311–15.}\]
\[\text{21} \quad \text{See David E. Creese, } \textit{The Monochord in Ancient Greek Harmonic Science} \text{ (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 51–53, where Creese examines the problematic relationship between musical instruments and the idea of scientific instruments — an idea that emerges only in early}\]
are ubiquitous in classical sources as both monsters and play-things. The most significant recent scholarly work by Francesca Berlinzari has examined the classical automaton as acoustic instrument, whether real or fictitious, and its ludic aspects and re-combinations. There is some dissonance in classical accounts about whether the automata are made or whether they were born as descendants of the age of iron. Virgil’s legend of the Iron Man and Talos the Bronze monster could have been either made or born. Perhaps the earliest extant account in the *Iliad* supports the idea that machines were the semblances of women, ‘moving beneath their lord’, and doing his bidding but sentient all the same. As J. Douglas Bruce notes in his discussion of those early accounts and in medieval manuscripts, there was probably little connection between these stories. He does, however, point out that in later discussions of the Daedalus myth there is a hint that his created automata were not machines but humans, and ones that rebelled against him and fled from him.

The question of mechanics and materialism in the classical world has often rested upon understanding mechanistic modes of thought and their origin—something made even more

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problematic by the discovery of the Antikythera mechanism.\(^{25}\) Sylvia Berryman has examined the origin of mechanical and teleological conceptions of humans and their world. Looking at mechanics may have influenced the ways in which the Greeks may have understood themselves as some sort of machine. Although her work stresses that mechanical conceptions were rooted in actual mechanics rather than the stories about previously existing automata the creation of ‘life-like artifacts’ often seemed like ‘an imaginative precursor to the idea that organisms are like mechanical devices’.\(^{26}\) As Berryman notes, however – ‘The relevant comparisons between natural and mechanical devices are not to artifacts that look like natural things, but those involving devices that could serve as a guide in investigating organic functions: they must be thought to work like them.’\(^{27}\) The analogies between the mechanic and the organic would continue to be part of the continuing development of philosophy beyond the classical period.

The extension of the human into its minions, the ludic and acoustic proto-robots, was about will and where it resided. Even if the origin of the will was created by and still subordinate to the maker, defining automata was based on the will residing within the automaton itself (even if placed there) as an independent sentient being. These were not clockwork toys. Further, the danger posed by the minions and archaic machines of Daedalus lay in their becoming both rebellious

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and self-replicating. Certainly we see in the case of Talos that these machines could be machines of destruction, sometimes having the possibility not just of replication, but of redesigning themselves. They were new sentient and semantic machines—hybrid, mechanical, syncretic monsters. In their existential and physical threat to humans (and witness Medea destroying Talos by unpinning his vein) they begin to have the capacity, these monsters of their own invention, to submerge the mastery and identity of their masters. If the automaton is an extension of the human, then the automaton can turn back to that human and colonise it in turn.

Robert Sherrick Brumbaugh’s eccentric and playful intervention into the ludics of the classical world is one of the few studies to take the classical machine seriously in its reconstruction of toys, automata, and tools. Brumbaugh hints that the compulsion to create machines is a product of an essential unity between the human nature of the classical past and of the contemporary world. The classical world created a ‘capital of ideas’ that remains with us.28 The mechanical construction, specifically, of automata was about creating new beings with ‘souls’ as extensions of human beings:

The designers of automata seem to have become progressively more ambitious, and their work more admired. Finally, by about the second century B.C. they aspired to nothing less than duplicating the most creative forms of human behavior with their self-propelled series of mechanical components. This idea of duplicating the powers of life by mechanisms must have reinforced the

28 Brumbaugh, Ancient Greek Gadgets, x.
highly speculative thesis of the atomic theory that all existing things are complex mechanisms...29

The idea that working with machines may have given classical humanity the idea that living beings were also machines further spurred the construction of new automata as human products. The multiple machines found at Knossos (a stamping machine, a pitcher, a three-dimensional map, gameboards, novelty libation jars), for Brumbaugh, confirmed the legend of the Daedalian myths—that ‘...certainly Daedalus had done something remarkable’.30 Understanding the still extant Daidala sculptures as somehow the product of a real or legendary Daedalus would perhaps be of concern to recent scholarship, but they remain significant as an illustration of the imaginary power of craft and design. The Daidala sculptures could have their origins and significance in folklore and magic, represented artistic innovations, or even new mechanical innovations based around specific inventions. For Brumbaugh,

The wonderful statues attributed to Daedalus come from, and refer back to, a period halfway between the world of science and mechanics and its precursor, a world of magic. The truth about these statues, which ‘had to be kept chained, or they would run away,’ has been a real challenge to scholarly ingenuity. In addition to their propensity to run away, there was something remarkable about the eyes of the statues: either they moved or in some other way gave the impression that they could actually see. Unlike the general inventions

29 Brumbaugh, Ancient Greek Gadgets, 5.
30 Brumbaugh, Ancient Greek Gadgets, 25.
the Minoans and Myceneans attributed to Daedalus, the story of the statues suggests some specific and remarkable innovations.  

For Brumbaugh the confusion about the automata lay not in thinking of machines as analogous with or copies of live human beings but a more classically oriented question—whether machines themselves were alive.  

Certainly the fleeing automata display something distinctive about these specific Daedalian artefacts— that they were independent beings with their own will and not one imposed upon them or compelled to be within them by their maker.

There is also the significant question of the Daidalos diagrams referred to by Plato and what they signify for Platonist and Neo-Platonist philosophical practice as Plato reads them.  

John Senseney’s translation of Marsiglio Ficino’s Neo-platonic commentary on the Symposium draws the links between the visualisation and philosophy:

> From the first moment the Architect conceives the reason and roughly the Idea of the building in his soul. Next he makes the house (as best he can) in such a way as it is available in his mind. Who will negate that the house is a body? And that this is very much like the incorporeal Idea of the craftsman, in whose imitation it has been

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32 Brumbaugh, Ancient Greek Gadgets, 58.
made? Certainly it is more for a certain incorporeal order rather than for its material that it is to be judged.  

Senseney notes the relationship between the idea of the diagram and the models of machines as potentially part of the production of machines and mechanisms in the classical. He stresses the importance of the mechanisms of the Daidalos machine; ‘The diagrams of Daidalos do not represent machines, but one’s recognition of the element of *mechanism* that they relate to is important for understanding the world of made objects that Plato knew, as well as the transcendent truth of the universe that he describes’. The incorporeal order made corporeal by craft and design hints at the emergence of imagination as a productive force — what Marx calls the machine as the organ and product of the human brain made material. But also the brain as a machine in itself.

As machines are assemblages in and of themselves of multiple components, so social forms are made of multitudes of machines and beings. These can range from specific automata toys, to war machines, buildings, the social machines of the digital world and abstract social machines which are almost undefinable and ineffable. For Gerald Raunig in his meditation on culture and machines,

> Is it about a machine? The question is not easy to answer, but correctly posed. The question should certainly not be: What is a machine? Or even: Who is a machine? It is not a question of the essence, but of the event, not about is, but about and, about concatenations and

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connections, compositions and movements that constitute a machine.  

His discussion of the origin of the classical machines hints at this decentred concept of the automaton. But it also points to the whole social formation as a set of machines, fluid but territorially expansive. For Raunig,

Abstract machines are things like this, which themselves have no form, are formless, amorphous, unformed. Yet their unformed-ness is not to be understood here as a lack, but rather as the ambivalent precondition for the emergence of fear as well as for the invention of new, terrifying forms of concatenation.

If our classical machines are connections and concatenations, compositions and movements what terrifying forms of concatenation might those machines emerge into? How will they self-alter and self-create as they are fleeing from their master and the essence that he imposed within and compelled within their being? In other words, how can the units of one assemblage resist the social powers of larger assemblages of forces, of creation and design but also subjection and violence. The labyrinth was the work of a human being, but that very human being was both murderer and tyrant, even as he himself was fleeing from the abstract and specific forces that threatened him with

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imprisonment in his own labyrinth. When the automata created by human beings enslave human beings themselves, we find the productive forces becoming the forces of both reproduction and submission. For Marx,

the means of labour passes through different metamorphoses, whose culmination is the *machine*, or rather, an *automatic system of machinery* (system of machinery: the automatic one is merely its most complete, most adequate form, and alone transforms machinery into a system), set in motion by an automaton, a moving power that moves itself; this automaton consisting of numerous mechanical and intellectual organs, so that the workers themselves are cast merely as its conscious linkages.  

The workers are neither the soul or the ghost of the system placed there by the makers of the automaton, nor can they flee, they are merely sentient appendages of the machine itself. The subjection to the machine is itself not a property of technique and automation but of the contingency and serendipity of the social relations surrounding the machine and compelling its advance.  

The role of the human, for Marx, is not to use the machine to produce and ‘transmit the worker’s activity to the object’, but to aid the transmission of the action and work of the machine to the materials with which it is working.  

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41 Marx, ‘Fragment’, 692.
engine of virtuosity, with its own mechanical soul and laws with the machine as part of the action of the automaton. What begins with walking toys ends with machine domination.

The extension of the human in the classical world was then organic and combinatory as in the Centaurs, mechanical as in the automata, and architectural as in the Labyrinth. Each of these posed a danger in the destruction and mastery of the human maker in itself, but essentially they were extensions of the body in space; into minion proto-robots, into the being of other animals, into palaces. They were experiments in spatial extension, but they were also the beginning of the human compulsion to immortality — the extension of human beings in time, extending both territory and conquering history. This often meant becoming gods, or entering the realm of shades to continue their existence. At other times it meant metamorphosis into another being to sustain oneself or seeking sanctuary as a being in the body or soul of another and residing with them.

The semantic machines of the classical world were replications of live things but also the template for new ways of understanding human beings themselves. The automata, the Centaurs, the monster at the heart of the labyrinth achieved the extension of their mechanisms and organisms into the cultures of future peoples, societies who would remain obsessed by these motifs whether they were used to ask the same questions asked by the classical world or had new uses in the social formations in which they were excavated and resurrected.

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42 Marx, ‘Fragment’, 693.