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MACHINES OF LOVING GRACE:  
ANGELS, CYBORGS, AND POSTSECULAR LABOUR<sup>1</sup>

An episode of the sitcom *Black Books* shows a character, Fran, starting work at an office.<sup>2</sup> The problem is that Fran has not been told what the company does, or what she is supposed to be doing with her time. Every time she is about to ask someone what her job is, she gets worried that she will seem incompetent in her new, mysterious role, and be fired. So instead, she pretends to know what she is doing. She sits at her computer typing out, over and over again, 'What am I doing here?' She has a conversation with her boss, and instead of asking him to explain what work she is expected to do, she panics, and promises to give a presentation to the company's board of managers. When she arrives to give her presentation, she surveys the room, and delivers a speech.

'Well, well, well. What am I doing here? What's it all about? Any ideas?' She draws a circle on the board. 'Ask yourself: is this a) efficient and b) productive?' She draws a dot in the centre of a circle and asks, her voice cracking slightly under the weight of her sincerity, 'Is this the best that we can be?' She draws an arrow leading out of the circle; she underlines the circle; she asks, ponderously, 'Are we or are we not ... a company?' The board of directors goes wild. Afterwards, Fran's boss comes to thank her. He tells her that she's special, that she's a leader, that she's going to head up her own team. 'You're going all the way', he tells her, proudly.

As Maurizio Lazzarato says, "Only idiots ... still think that responsibility for the 'degradation' of language lies with poor schoolchildren, immigrants' sons, the youth, etc., whereas, as

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2. 'The Fixer', Channel 4, 2002.

Pasolini already had it in the 1960s, private enterprise and marketing are the ones responsible.”<sup>3</sup> Lazzarato cites the sociological work of Marie-Anne Dujarier, who analyses the use of semiotics in the customer service relationship. She notes that the higher up the management hierarchy one climbs, the further one gets from the crude material exchange of money for products, and the more abstract the language of business becomes, until eventually one reaches the dazzling darkness of political discourse, in which language all but collapses in upon itself in a frenzy of self-referentiality.<sup>4</sup>

Here we find ourselves lost in the mystical union with the unnamable source of surplus value, in which all that is solid melts into air; in which, to quote Dionysius the Areopagite’s *Mystical Theology*, “our sightless minds are filled with treasures beyond all beauty.”<sup>5</sup> Those of us who have spent time in business meetings recognise this experience of the dissolution of meaning in the face of the transcendent all too well. If theological speech aims at abstraction in the hope of coming closer to the unspeakable, unknowable being of God, and the language of late capitalism moves ever further away from the crude materiality of use value and human need in quest of the pure Platonic form of surplus value, then I want to hazard that this parallel is not merely accidental. I want to wager, in all seriousness, that the contemporary form of that old theological question, why does God demand our worship?, is the question that Fran asks: what’s the point of my job?

To trace the conversion of the one question into the other – of the economy of glory to the economy of surplus-value – I will turn first to the process of “disenchantment” commonly taken to characterise the transition from the enchanted universe of medieval Christendom to the rationalised and taxonomised cosmos of modern Europe.

### *Enchantment*

It seemed for a while as though the appearance of capitalism meant that mystery and mysticism alike were gone from the world, or at least doomed to extinction. Charles Taylor’s “secular

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3. *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*. Translated by Joshua David Jordan (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014), 115-116.

4. *Signs and Machines*, 116-117.

5. In Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, translated by Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 134.

age” was always also a machine age; the death of God and the mechanisation of the world developed in tandem with one another. But magic did not disappear from this new world; instead, it found itself transposed into new forms, new bodies, and new powers.

Recent discussions of technology and digital culture, both popular and academic, have taken a curious turn towards magical and religious concepts in order to describe the new world being networked together with digital tools. From the Haunted Machines project which explores “narratives of myth, magic and haunting around technology” to Reverend Joey Talley, a Wiccan witch who works to make protective charms or expel mischievous spirits from computer systems; from political theologians who seek to understand the algorithmic circulation of money in global computer networks as worship to the theorists who have sought to explain devotion to Apple computers as a new form of religion: to grapple with the world we inhabit under digital capitalism is, more and more, to find oneself caught up in the language of magic, religion, and enchantment.<sup>6</sup>

Recent work in continental philosophy of religion has taken a postsecular turn for two reasons: first because, although religion never really went away, it is increasingly difficult to deny its persistence; and second, because as for all that we might be free, as Charles Taylor says, to practice our faith as “one human possibility among others”,<sup>7</sup> this freedom of “religious” practice occurs within a context in which there is no alternative to the religion of capitalism.<sup>8</sup> We can worship whichever God we want as long as we bend the knee to Mammon. Along similar lines, I want to trouble the notion that we live in a “disenchanted” world for which, such narratives often imply, the appropriate remedy is

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6. <http://hauntedmachines.com> [Accessed 18 August 2016]; John Farrier, ‘Silicon Valley turns to this Wiccan Witch to Remove Computer Viruses and Demons’ on *Neatorama*, 19 July 2015, <http://www.neatorama.com/2015/07/19/Silicon-Valley-Turns-to-This-Wiccan-Witch-to-Remove-Computer-Viruses-and-Demons/> [Accessed 18 August 2016]; Phillip Goodchild, *Capitalism and Religion: The Price of Piety* (London: Routledge, 2002); Pui-Yan Lam, ‘May the Force of the Operating System be with You: Macintosh Devotion as Implicit Religion’ in *Sociology of Religion* 62.2 (2001), 243-262.

7. *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

8. See, for example, Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*, translated by Joshua David Jordan (Cambridge: MIT, 2012); Phillip Goodchild, *Capitalism and Religion: The Price of Piety* (London: Routledge, 2003); Joshua Ramey, *Politics of Divination: Neoliberal Endgame and the Religion of Contingency* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).

a process of “re-enchantment”.<sup>9</sup> Instead, I will make a case for a “post-disenchantment” approach which recognises not only that we can no longer evade the persistence of magical thinking and practices, but also that the entangling networks which constitute contemporary capitalism function as a system of technological re-enchantment, a secular reiteration of the kinds of structures of power and domination which characterised the enchanted universe of classical Christian thought.

“At the basis of magic”, Silvia Federici argues, “was an animistic conception of nature that did not admit to any separation between matter and spirit, and thus imagined the cosmos as a *living organism*, populated by occult forces ... where nature was viewed as a universe of signs and signatures, marking invisible affinities that had to be deciphered”<sup>10</sup>. What Federici misses, however, is what theologians bemoaning the rise of secularism and the loss of Christian hegemony know all too well: that in the Christian West this vision of the world was not only that of magic but also that of mysticism, of the Christian-Neoplatonic synthesis which had prevailed for centuries, in which everything that was pointed not only to other things in the world but also to God; in which all things were held together by their participation in the divine economy of desire, of glory. The enchanted universe of European Christendom was a mystical body written through with meaning and purpose, its origin and end in the God who brought it into being: the cosmos of Augustine, for whom the heavens, the living creatures, and the earth alike cried out, “He made us”;<sup>11</sup> “a world of spirits, demons, and moral forces”.<sup>12</sup> Of course, the moral forces at work in this enchanted world were no more straightforwardly benign than the spirits understood to populate it. The Christian metaphysics of participation meant that everything was meaningful and purposive but also established clear hierarchies of power: of class, gender, and the distinctions between Christianity and its others, which was eventually to become race. Everything was made by and destined for God; and yet some had more capacity for participation in

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9. See, for example, Tracy Fessenden’s discussion of post-secular work which appeals ‘to the power of mysticism, magic, adrenaline, religious sampling, and self-help to recharge and rename secular emptiness as postsecular fullness, disenchantment as reenchantment’ (Fessenden, ‘The Problem of the Postsecular’ in *American Literary History* 26.1, 163).

10. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004), 141-142.

11. *Confessions*. Translated by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 183.

12. *Secular Age*, 26.

divine being than others. As Dionysius has it, some created things “share completely in the Good, others participate in it more or less, others have a slight portion only, and, to others, again, the Good is but a far-off echo ... this has to be so, for otherwise the most honoured, the most divine things would be on the order with the lowliest.”<sup>13</sup>

### *Disenchantment*

The transition from feudalism to early industrial capitalism was marked by the enclosure not only of common land but also of individual bodies from the world in which they lived and of the world itself from God. As the world was disenchanting, so too were the elements of human life and work divided and separated from one another in the school, the home, the factory and the prison.<sup>14</sup> In place of the world as mystical body – animated by the endless desire of God, driven to transcend itself in pursuit of the beatific vision – emerged a new vision of the body as a machine, as “clock-like matter” – animated by the insatiable desire of the capitalist, driven to overcome the limitations imposed by the rising and setting of the sun or the weakness of the limbs, in pursuit of surplus value.<sup>15</sup>

But emergence of this secular machine era of distinction and division was not just important for its impact on the social role of magic and religion: it marked also a number of crucial shifts in the configuration of class and gender, and the inscription of the new distinctions of race onto human flesh.

The new centrality of the figure of the individual to the project of modernity is ultimately inseparable from the new class mobility, which emerged along with the fragmentation of Christian Europe along denominational lines. No longer was the world divided merely into Christian and non-Christian; and no longer was Christendom divided merely into those who work, those who fight and those who pray. The process of “disenchantment” was also the process by which peasant land was enclosed; by which the traditional bonds of charity and care for the poor were dissolved; by which a new middle class emerged, freed from the imperative to care for the salvation of others and driven instead by the Protestant work ethic, by the notion that what marked one

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13. ‘The Divine Names’ in *The Complete Works*, 86.

14. See, for example, Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 1991).

15. Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 140.

out as predestined for salvation was the accumulation not of good deeds but of wealth.<sup>16</sup>

Likewise, as public and private life were newly marked out as separate from one another, and religion was pushed ever more into the private realms of the home and the interior life of the individual, so too did new gendered divisions of labour emerge along these lines; women increasingly relegated to the home, and to the unwaged work of reproductive labour.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, the emergence of these new categories of religion and the secular meant not only the new intensification of the distinction between Western Christians and their religious and geographical others but the racialisation of this distinction. As the distinction between Christians, Jews and Muslims came to be understood not merely in terms of belief but as a difference “between bloods”, between different types of being, this in turn enabled the emergence of new distinctions: between colonisers and colonised; between human beings and slaves.<sup>18</sup> Colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade carved new lines of distinction and demarcation around the globe; the secularisation of space inseparable from the processes of spatial disruption by which the identities of colonised and enslaved peoples were, as Willie Jennings describes, uprooted from the “narratives of the collective self that bound identity to geography, to earth, to water, to trees and animals” and placed instead within the logics of “possession of, not possession by”, land, and by a hierarchical scale which placed all beings in relation not to God but to whiteness.<sup>19</sup>

### *Re-enchantment*

Yet with this newly divided and mechanised society came also, with time, the shift from tools to machines; the shift from the workshop to the factory to the global network; from a society of

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16. See, for example, Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*; Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Penguin, 2003); Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Createspace, 2013).

17. See, for example, Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*; Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

18. Gil Anidjar, *Blood: A Critique of Christianity* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2014), 135; see also George Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

19. Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 59.

sovereignty, to a disciplinary society, to a society of control; the shift from accumulation to circulation.<sup>20</sup> What we see in post-Fordist economies, I want to suggest, is a late-capitalist re-invention of the kind of mystical universe inhabited by Dionysius the Areopagite, marked by three key characteristics: the re-enchantment of the world, the re-constitution of an erotic economy, and the return of the soul to the centre of the problem of work. Drawing on the work of Maurizio Lazzarato, Frédéric Lordon, and Franco Berardi, I will explore some of the key contours of this secular return of the kind of theological economy of the created world found in classical Christian thought, before turning to the ambiguous figures of the angel and the cyborg to explore further the questions of work, government and liberation in the era of technological re-enchantment. This new constitution of the world marks not the disappearance of class, gender and race, but their transformation; not the end of struggles over work, power and freedom but their reconfiguration.

In *Signs and Machines*, Maurizio Lazzarato argues that what characterises this late stage of capitalism is a shift from an economic model in which the process of production is controlled by the sovereign individual subject, and therefore by language, to a machinic form of capitalism in which the individual human being is transformed into a mere component of larger processes of production and valorisation, which are driven less by language and human intent than by functional and operational processes.

Where disenchantment was marked by the emergence of the Enlightenment individual – the exemplary white, wealthy man declaring the death of God even as he usurped his role as sovereign ruler of the world – the growing autonomy of the circulation of capital has meant the slow unsettling of this model of selfhood. While individuals under this late form of capitalism continue to conceive of themselves as rational, sovereign subjects, in control of themselves as human capital, the processes of production function increasingly independently of human intention, according to the “assignifying semiotics” of stock market indices, mathematical equations and diagrams which “do not involve consciousness and representations and do not have the subject as referent.”<sup>21</sup> Lazzarato argues that this shift represents the return of two archaic forms. First is Lewis Mumford’s “megamachine – the Egypt of the pyramids”

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20. Gilles Deleuze, ‘Postscript on the Societies of Control’ in *October* 59 (1992), 3-7.

21. *Signs and Machines*, 39.

(discussed in greater detail later in this paper) within which, according to Deleuze and Guattari, “human beings themselves are constituent pieces of a machine they compose among themselves and with other things (animals, tools), under the control and direction of a higher unity.”<sup>22</sup> Second is the animism of pre-capitalist societies which, Lazzarato says, is first destroyed by capitalism’s objectivation and rationalization of nature so as to make the world more easily exploitable and then restored by the capitalist emergence of a “machinic animism”.<sup>23</sup>

This shift from objectivation and rationalization to the emergence of new animisms is made flesh by the changing logics of racialisation – from the explicit classifications of colonial control and the stark divisions of Jim Crow laws to the more occult workings of racecraft which characterise our present “post-racial” era.<sup>24</sup> In her essay, “Why are the Digital Humanities So White? or Thinking the Histories of Race and Computation”, Tara McPherson argues that it is no coincidence that the values driving UNIX computing systems – especially the principles of information hiding and compartmentalising – are also those of post-Fordism. If, she says, “the first half of the twentieth century laid bare its racial logics, from ‘Whites Only’ signage to the brutalities of lynching, the second half increasingly hides its racial ‘kernel’, burying it below a shell of neoliberal pluralism.”<sup>25</sup> Racism comes to have a double function, then, in this new, technologically enchanted universe we inhabit: as both a way of shoring up the conservative identity politics of nation and race to which individuals turn in the face of the neoliberal undermining of social relations, and as the hidden kernel of the algorithmic processes which determine more and more the distribution of social relations: wealth, policing, surveillance.<sup>26</sup>

A second characteristic of the process of disenchantment was the transformation of a world understood to be driven by the desire of God into a regularised and rational machine driven not by

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22. *Signs and Machines*, 32.

23. *Signs and Machines*, 134.

24. Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (New York: Verso, 2012), 65. Drawing on E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s landmark study (*Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), Fields and Fields argue that both magic and race ‘are products of thought, and of language’.

25. In *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, edited by Matthew K. Gold (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 148.

26. See, for example, R. Joshua Scannell, ‘What can an Algorithm Do?’ in *DIS Magazine*, <http://dismagazine.com/discussion/72975/josh-scannell-what-can-an-algorithm-do/> [Accessed 19 August 2016].



inherent meaning and purpose but by the will to power of human beings. In his *Willing Slaves of Capital*, Frédéric Lordon argues that capitalism must “be grasped not only in its structures but also as a certain *regime of desire*.”<sup>27</sup> Where earlier forms of capitalism could rely on the motivating power of the desire to avoid the unhappiness that comes with unemployment and penury, late capitalism requires a more total enlistment of individuals in pursuit of its goals. The worst of this capitalist enlistment of desire is visible, Lordon argues, in the service sector which, “not only commands employees to show the required emotions ... but aims at the ultimate behavioural performance in which the prescribed emotions are no longer merely outwardly enacted, but ‘authentically’ felt.”<sup>28</sup> Lordon notes the similarity between this newly totalitarian demand and the shift which took place within confessional practices in the 17<sup>th</sup> century church from an insistence on correct behaviour to the demand for the right “‘internal’ disposition.”<sup>29</sup> But it is no coincidence that this shift occurred simultaneously with the growing privatization and feminization of religion, its relegation from the sphere of public life and political power to the sphere of private life and social reproduction, to the realm of housework in which, as Silvia Federici says, “Men are able to accept our services and take pleasure in them” because we do it for love.<sup>30</sup> If the rise of emotional labour in the sphere of paid work tracks the gradual feminization of labour then this is less the result of feminist demands for “wages for housework”, and more a result of the neoliberal encroachment of the profit motive into every area of human life and the impossibility of – yet – automating the production of social capital. What drives employees today is not only the negative desire to escape suffering – to get paid – but also the positive desire to attain the joy of recognition – a joy which is, however, distributed by way of a hierarchy in which, Lordon says, “the immense joy coming from the outside in the form of public recognition falls to [the bosses] first”, subsequently to be passed down “along the hierarchical chains that are the gutters of a *trickle-down economy of joy*.”<sup>31</sup>

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27. *Willing Slaves of Capital: Spinoza and Marx on Desire*. Translated by Gabriel Ash (London: Verso 2014), ebook version.

28. *Willing Slaves of Capital*, ebook.

29. *Willing Slaves of Capital*, ebook.

30. ‘Wages Against Housework (1975)’ in *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction and Feminist Struggle* (New York: PM Press, 2012), 21.

31. *Willing Slaves of Capital*, ebook, italics original. Cf Dionysius’ ‘Celestial Hierarchy’: ‘The goal of a hierarchy, then, is to enable beings to be as like as possible to God ... it ensures that when its members have received [divine illumination] they

Franco 'Bifo' Berardi's *Soul at Work* argues that, while the early stages of capitalism required an alienation of the worker from her body precisely so that she could be induced to view it as property to be sold,<sup>32</sup> the growing importance of cognitive capitalism, service work, and affective labour to the contemporary economy represent a new form of alienation in which the soul itself is put to work. We go to work not only to earn a salary, but to work on ourselves, to work on our souls. What emerges from this new regime of holistic alienation is a new "virtual class" who have liberated themselves from the constraints of their physical bodies; who are "physically removed from other human beings (whose existence becomes a factor of insecurity), though ubiquitous, virtually present in any possible place according to their desires."<sup>33</sup> Berardi says that "the removal of corporeality is a guarantee of endless happiness" for these privileged few, "but naturally a frigid and false one, because it ignores, or rather removes, corporeality."<sup>34</sup> And just as the disembodied contemplative life of the elite spiritual class of monastic men in medieval Christian Europe was made possible by the hard manual labour of those living the less elevated active life, so too is the charmed life of tech billionaires enabled by the badly-paid, back-breaking drudgery of Silicon Valley cafeteria workers, content moderators in the Philippines, click farmers in Bangladesh and MMORPG gold farmers in China.<sup>35</sup>

### *Heavenly Machines*

I want to argue that these three transformations within capitalism – the machinic re-enchantment of the world, the emergence of an

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can then pass on this light generously ... to beings further down the scale' (*The Complete Works*, 153).

32. See, for example, Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 135.

33. *Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*. Translated by Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009). This mode of elite locomotion is curiously like that of the angels, at least according to Aquinas: unconstrained by bodies, an angel 'is said to be in a corporeal place by application of the angelic power': that is, simply by will or desire (*Summa Theologiae*, I.52.1, *New Advent* <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1052.htm> [Accessed 17 August 2016]).

<sup>34</sup> *Soul at Work*, 104.

35. See, for example, Julia Carrie Wong, 'Silicon Valley's poorest workers tell government "we can't live like this"' in *The Guardian*, 28 January 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/jan/28/silicon-valley-service-workers-poor-intel-tech-facebook> [Accessed 19 August 2016]; Mayukh Sen, 'The Bengali Click Farmer' in *The New Inquiry*, 27 June 2016, <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/the-bengali-click-farmer/> [Accessed 19 August 2016]; Daniel Greene and Daniel Joseph, 'The Digital Spatial Fix' in *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism and Critique* 13.2 (2015), 223-247.

erotic economy, and the enlistment of the soul into contemporary regimes of work – might be read as a digital and machinic reconstitution of the cosmos of Christian-Neoplatonism, and specifically to draw attention to the resemblance of these three features to the erotic, hierarchical economy found in the work of Dionysius the Areopagite. What this comparison makes clear is not only the ways in which the contemporary world is like the enchanted universe of pre-capitalist Christendom, but also the ways in which the enchanted universe was like the machinic structures of the contemporary world. I want to argue that the figure of the angel in classical theology is, in certain crucial respects, isomorphic with the figure of the cyborg for contemporary culture; that cyborgs are kin to angels but also, crucially, that angels were always-already cyborgs.

The first Christian theologian to offer a properly systematic angelology was Dionysius the Areopagite, whose *Celestial Hierarchy* sets out the rigidly structured and hierarchical organisation of angelic beings and activity alongside his *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, which sets out the rigidly structured and hierarchical organisation of churchly ranks and activities. For Dionysius, the created world is a divine economy, a heavenly machine which exists to facilitate the circulation of divine *eros*. The desire of God emanates from the divine being, and is passed down from the highest heights of the most perfect angels to the lowest depths of the most fallen human beings, and thence back again: the light of God which illuminates the world is returned back to the divine in the form of worship.

As Giorgio Agamben argues, within this vision of the created order the function of the angelic beings is essentially that of a bureaucracy. The angels mediate between the single divine source of all being and power and the multiplicity of the world, transmitting without error the divine commands and managing the world on God's behalf; and transmitting upwards the tribute due to the ruler of all things: not taxes, but worship.<sup>36</sup> It is no coincidence, Agamben argues, that in the history of the West the two systems, angelology and bureaucracy, emerge and develop in tandem with one another. "Angelology is", he argues, "the most ancient, articulated and detailed reflection on that particular

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36. 'Angelology and Bureaucracy' in *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*. Translated by Lorenzo Chiesa (with Matteo Mandarini) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 144-164.

form of power or divine action which we could call the 'government of the world.'"<sup>37</sup>

On Agamben's reading, the role of the angels in Dionysius' celestial hierarchy consists of two aspects of the single core function of the transmission of sacred power or glory: the hierarchical management of the created order, and the liturgical generation of praise. The problem for this paradigm of government is that the government of the angels lasts only as long as creation remains unredeemed; once the final consummation of history arrives then not only the angels but God himself are left with nothing to govern. Glory, Agamben says "is what must cover with its splendor the unaccountable figure of divine inoperativity"; the angels continue to function as conduits for the circulation of divine light and yet, unmediated as this circulation now is by the dark and heavy matter of the world, their hymns of praise become all but indistinguishable from the divine being itself.<sup>38</sup> The perfect adoration of God is best expressed in the silence of a mystical union that is all but indistinguishable from death.

As Lazzarato points out, this hierarchical structure, radiating outwards from the divine summit, brings to mind the social organisation which the philosopher of technology Lewis Mumford describes as "the archetypal machine ... the earliest working model for all later complex machines."<sup>39</sup> Mumford describes the invention of the megamachine: an invisible structure composed of hundreds upon thousands of individual human beings; all working in concert as the result of a highly disciplined and bureaucratic division of labour; all held together by the unifying figure of the divine ruler, the king. It was the emergence of these megamachines which made possible the construction of the Great Pyramids, and their emergence signified the coming into being of a model of society so profoundly important for human history that it continues to shape the world we inhabit today. Mumford draws for his analysis on Franz Reuleaux's definition of a machine as consisting of "resistant parts, each specialized in function, operating under human control, to utilize energy and to perform

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37. 'Angels', translated by Lorenzo Chiesa, in *Angelaki* 16.3 (2011), 118

38. 'Angelology and Bureaucracy', 163.

39. *The Myth of the Machine: Technics and Human Development* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovic, 1966), 188.

work.”<sup>40</sup> But it is Karl Marx’s definition that is more precise and illuminating here.

For Marx, a machine (as distinct from a tool) is made up of three components: a “motor mechanism”, a self-moving mover which drives the machine as a whole; a “transmitting mechanism” which “divides and distributes” this power; and “the tool or working machine” which fulfils the ultimate goal of the machine: the production of surplus-value.<sup>41</sup> In the context of this machine, Marx says, the deficiencies of individual workers become perfections, caught up into the broader purpose of the whole. It does not matter if you have rickets, as long as you can perform the specialist function you have within the workings of the factory. If you are too small to operate the looms you might be just the right size to sneak between the machinery when it gets stuck. But at the same time, the frailty of the individual human body becomes the greatest impediment to the smooth functioning of the machine, which tends to push back against these points of bodily resistance to the perpetual generation of value. The best way for a factory owner to get back their investment in the machinery is to run it for as much of the day as possible, and so the working day tends to extend itself without regard for the human need for food, rest, or sleep. When a person uses a tool, Marx says, it is they who put the tool to work: they decide how and when the tool should move; they decide when to start work and when to stop. But a machine is something which uses workers, which puts them to work: “in handicrafts and manufacture, the worker makes use of a tool; in the factory, the machine makes use of him.”<sup>42</sup>

What I am suggesting, then, is that we might read Dionysius’ tripartite account of God, the angels, and the ecclesiastical hierarchy as the description of a cosmic machine designed, as Agamben suggests, for the government of the world and the generation of surplus value in the form of doxology.

The divine eros that generates the Dionysian cosmos originates with God, the unmoved mover. It is transmitted by the angels who divide and distribute the divine power to the ecclesiastical hierarchy, whose members labour, Dionysius says, to become

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40. *Myth of the Machine*, 191.

41. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy: Volume One*. Translated by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), 494.

42. *Capital*, 548.

fellow workers with God.<sup>43</sup> To labour in this mystical machine is to see oneself not as a sovereign individual but as a member of the total hierarchy of the created world in which even such imperfect beings as women can contribute to the functioning of the whole. It is to seek to become “clear and spotless mirrors” reflecting the divine light, to overcome as much as possible the limitations of our imperfect bodies and become like the seraphim, in perpetual motion around the source of all things, moving not with the clumsy motion of an earth-bound creature but with the pure geometrical motion of the angels whose straight lines and perfect circles generate praise in “a movement which never falters and never fails.”<sup>44</sup> “Nothing is perfect of itself”, Dionysius says, we are at best fragments of a larger whole. And yet at the same time “nothing is completely free of the need for perfection.” All of us can and should strive with all our being to become, as Fran suggested to her board of directors, more efficient and productive, more perfect conduits of the divine light, the surplus value which drives the economy of the created world, to align our desire more perfectly with the movement of the whole, with the desire of God.<sup>45</sup> Are we or are we not a company?

### *Angels and Cyborgs*

Given the processes of disenchantment and the privatisation of religion which accompanied the emergence of a new machine age in Western modernity, it is not surprising that angels have largely disappeared from political theology, stripped of their bureaucratic powers and relegated instead to the private realm of religious experience; nor is it a coincidence that they begin to appear more and more frequently in popular depictions as women and children. But nor then should it surprise us that a new figure of perfected humanity has come to take their place: this, I want to suggest, is one of the reasons for the rise of the figure of the cyborg in popular culture. Like the angels, cyborgs function as a site for the exploration of questions about the role of human beings within larger systems, structures and machines; they function as figures for government, for management and bureaucracy; they function as figures of perfected workers, unconstrained by the limitations of frail human bodies; and they function both as speculative figures for imagining human life

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43. ‘The Celestial Hierarchy’ in *The Complete Works*, 153.

44. ‘The Celestial Hierarchy’ 153, 161.

45. ‘The Celestial Hierarchy’, 173.

lived otherwise and also as tools for making sense of human life as it currently exists.

I want to spend the rest of this paper exploring the homologies between the figure of the angel, particularly in the work of Dionysius the Areopagite and his readers, and the figure of the cyborg, particularly in the work of Donna Haraway, the philosopher of technology most famous for her “Manifesto for Cyborgs”, which takes up the cyborg as a figure for imagining the future of socialist feminism.<sup>46</sup> Where Dionysius’ angelic hierarchy functions as the mediator between God and the rest of the created order, as the model for both the power structures of the existing order and a vision of embodied life lived radically otherwise, Haraway seeks to rescue the figure of the cyborg from the nightmarish machinic “colonization of work” and the technological “orgy” of war, proposing instead the cyborg as an “ironic political myth”, woven together from the materials of feminism, socialism and materialism.<sup>47</sup>

Within the classical Christian vision of the cosmos as a machine for the circulation of glory and the late capitalist emergence of a society in which everything that exists comes to be seen as part of a machine for the generation of surplus value, the figures of the angel and the cyborg come to stand both for bureaucracy and revolution, for the inscription of hierarchical distinctions and their transgression; for the perfect worker and the absolute rebel.

First, then, as I’ve already mentioned, Giorgio Agamben has traced the interconnected histories of angels and bureaucrats, both functionaries of power who work for the transmission of the sacred power of glory, deputy managers of the earthly economy over which they preside, tasked with the extraction of glory from its subjects. Both orders are imperiled by the end of history, which threatens to leave them unemployed: what happens to the managers of the world when once it has been made perfect? Both angels and bureaucrats, however, find justification for their continued existence in immaterial labour: perpetual praise of God for the angels; the collection of taxes and sycophantic fawning for the bureaucrats of the ancient world, circling endlessly around the figure of the king; and the endless proliferation of big data analysis for the cyborg bureaucrats of “post-political” late

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46. ‘A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s’ in *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 7-45.

47. ‘Manifesto for Cyborgs’, 8, 7.

capitalism. And yet, as Anthony Paul Smith argues, angels function not only to mediate the relationship of God and the world but also as signs of the absolute disjunction between these two, as the “negative name for something that is not Worldly”, as “a field of battle where one either becomes a domesticated, pacified bureaucrat of the way things are or where one separates and divides what is from what could be.”<sup>48</sup> Angelology was, for example, a crucial field on which the Spiritual Franciscans battled the bureaucratic power of the Papacy; for them Francis himself, “with his disregard for material wealth, for organized work and the sexual body” had become “an Angel of the Apocalypse”, a herald of a radical break with the existing order of things, a fundamental challenge to the institutions of the Church.<sup>49</sup>

Likewise for Haraway, the possibility of a cyborg world holds out before us two very different visions of the future of humanity. On the one hand, a cyborg world might mean “the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet ... the final abstraction embodied in a Star War apocalypse”, the quest for machines made of sunshine, “light and clean because they are nothing but signals.”<sup>50</sup> Technology might transform us into the perfect workers long fantasised about by employers: untiring, perfectly efficient, offering no resistance to the circulation and valorisation of capital. But on the other hand, the cyborg world might mean instead the vision depicted by so much science fiction: the rising up of those enslaved within the machinic functioning of the world against their masters; the resolute attempt of those subjected by the bureaucratic order of the powers that be to, as Haraway puts it, “seize the tools to mark the world that marked them as other.”<sup>51</sup>

Secondly, as functionaries of the divine economy, the angels labour, to perpetuate the hierarchies by which power and value are distributed, the trickle-down economy of joy. Dionysius’ invention of the discipline of systematic angelology was of a piece with his invention of the notion of hierarchy: his key contribution to Christian discourse on angels was the division of the angels into separate kinds, the rigid demarcation of their names, ranks and function. These principles of separation and vertical ordering

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48. ‘The Speculative Angel’ in *Speculative Medievalisms: Discography*, edited by The Petropunk Collective (New York: Punctum Books, 2013), 46.

49. Anthony Paul Smith, ‘Nature deserves to be side by side+ with the angels: Nature and Messianism by way of Non-Islam’ in *Angelaki* 19.1 (2014), 156.

50. *Manifesto for Cyborgs*, 13, 12.

51. *Manifesto for Cyborgs*, 33.



recur in Dionysius' *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* and throughout his work, in which the position of a person within the hierarchy of the church corresponds precisely to their degree of holiness and authority such that no one further down the hierarchy may dream of speaking up against those above them.<sup>52</sup>

Yet just as the machine comes not only to position the individual labourer but to push at the boundaries of her being, extend the limits of her capacity, so too the positioning of humankind a little lower than the angels represents not only the subjection of human bodies but the promise of moving beyond them, of transgressing the boundaries between human and animal, animal and machine, physical and non-physical.<sup>53</sup> For Dionysius the progression of human sanctification is precisely away from division and towards perfect unity with the source of all being; the return of all things to their source, in which the differences between body and spirit, human and angel, oneness and threeness lose their meaning.

This double movement of separation and division likewise characterises contemporary discourses concerning the boundaries between human, animal and machine. As Haraway says, "my cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work."<sup>54</sup> Dionysius says that we must name God with the names which are most inappropriate to the divine nature so that we can more clearly grasp the crude inadequacy of all of our attempts to name what is highest; Haraway offers as the figure for a feminist socialism the coalition named "'Women of color', a name contested at its origins by those whom it would incorporate."<sup>55</sup> Jasbir Puar suggests that a further intensification of Haraway's transgressive cyborg vision is necessary, arguing that even Haraway's cyborg hybridity is insufficiently transgressive, leaving intact the categories of nature and culture precisely as it recognises their

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52. Dionysius' 'Letter Eight' argues that, even if a priest is sinful or the ecclesiastical order marred by 'disorder and confusion', it is never justifiable for someone lower down in the hierarchy to correct those further up: 'everyone must remain within the order of his ministry' (*Complete Works*, 271, 272.).

53. See my discussion of this ambiguous role of angels within the created hierarchy in 'The Body and Ethics in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*' in *New Blackfriars* 94.1053 (2013), 540-551.

54. 'Manifesto for Cyborgs', 12-13.

55. 'Manifesto for Cyborgs', 14.

intermeshing in the figure of the cyborg.<sup>56</sup> We have never been natural; we have never not been machine; we have always been cyborgs.

Thirdly, the figure of the angel is the figure of the perfect worker: utterly obedient, totally efficient, offering no resistance to the smooth circulation of value; just as the function of the “classic bureaucracy” of Mumford’s ancient megamachine is “to pass on, without alteration or deviation the orders that come from above” - and it is worth noting here that Mumford acknowledges that new technology of writing was crucial to this process of untainted transmission.<sup>57</sup> But on the other hand, in Dionysius’ work to become more like the angels - to ascend the mountain of sacred power - is an apophatic task in which we must begin to trouble the smooth circulation of theological language, to confront the breakdown of speech in the face of the source of all value. It is to insist, like Haraway’s cyborg politics, “on noise”, to “advocate pollution, rejoicing in the illegitimate fusions of animal and machine”, the multiplication of inappropriate names for God, to say that God is not only goodness and beauty but angry and drunk; to say that God is neither angry nor “drunk”, neither “good” nor beautiful.<sup>58</sup> To reject these names is, within Dionysius’ schema, to reject the names that God has handed down in scripture; it is to reject our inscription into a particular place within the created hierarchy. To desire perfect union with God is dangerously close to rebellion: was it not for this that the angels were cast out of heaven?

### *Conclusion*

What I have tried to suggest, then, is twofold. First, that recent transformations within capitalism - the machinic re-enchantment of the world, the emergence of an erotic economy, and the enlistment of the soul into contemporary regimes of work - might be read as being, in crucial ways, isomorphic with the enchanted cosmos of Christian-Neoplatonism. Second, that this “return” of enchantment is not a straightforward good, any more than was the process of disenchantment which meant both the end of feudalism and also the intensely violent rise of capitalist forms of exploitation. What it does mean is a curious new position for Christian theology. If Christianity really is, as Marx argues and I

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56. “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess”: Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory’ in *philoSOPHIA* 2.1 (2012), 49-66.

57. *The Myth of the Machine*, 201.

58. ‘Manifesto for Cyborgs’, 34; ‘Mystical Theology’, 138.

have suggested here, “the special religion of capital”;<sup>59</sup> if “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state” are, as Carl Schmitt suggests, “secularized theological concepts”,<sup>60</sup> then we are left with two choices. One is to argue, as some have done, that the transformations of theological concepts which have given rise to the existing order of things indicate the need to return to the origin and seek to re-establish Christian hegemony, to re-enchant the world. The other is to recognise that if, as Silvia Federici argues, “capitalism, as a social-economic system is necessarily committed to racism and sexism for it must justify and mystify the contradictions built into its social relations ... by denigrating the ‘nature’ of those it exploits”, then it took those tricks from Christianity. We cannot go back, for angels bar our way.<sup>61</sup>

Both the cyborg and the angel present us with a choice, then: either our own re-inscription into the order of things, the pursuit of ever more efficient work in the service of the source of all value, or the refusal of the hierarchical order of the world as it is and the transgressive quest for a radically different world. It is important here not to overstate the difference between God and Mammon – as Lewis Mumford says, the social machine’s prime mover, whether king, priest or plutocrat has always sought to bring the two together into a single person.<sup>62</sup> We might think here of former British prime minister David Cameron, whose 2016 Easter message extolled the “Christian values” of “responsibility, hard work, charity, compassion and pride in ... honouring our social obligations.”<sup>63</sup> Perhaps, after all, this new machine age would never have been possible in the first place if it were not for the Protestant work ethic.

Even if we are, as I have been suggesting, all already cyborgs, already cogs in larger machinic organisations, perhaps the question we should be asking about our future humanity is not when, if ever, we will cease to be human and be transformed into something else - an angel of the Lord or something darker and more monstrous. As Jasbir Puar points out, the choice Haraway

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59. ‘Theories of Surplus-Value’, 1863,

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1863/theories-surplus-value>

[Accessed 25 August 2016]

60. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, translated by George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 36.

61. *Caliban and the Witch*, 17.

62. *The Myth of the Machine*, 170-171.

63. ‘Easter 2016: David Cameron’s message’, Prime Minister’s Office, 27 March 2016,

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/easter-2016-david-camerons-message>

[Accessed 25 August 2016].

offers – would I rather be a cyborg or a goddess – is a false one, but this is not to say there is no choice to be made, no side to pick.<sup>64</sup> Instead, we might ask ourselves: which God demands our worship and why? What value are we creating, and for whom? What is, after all, the point of my job? Machines can be stopped; they can be hacked; they can be smashed; they can be taken apart and put together, differently. What kind of human-machine do we want to be part of in our future, which is always already arriving?

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64. 'Surely there must be cyborgian goddesses in our midst? Now that is a becoming-intersectional assemblage that I could really appreciate' ("I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess", 63).