Hamletmachine: The Objective Real and the Subjective Fantasy

Heiner Mueller’s play Hamletmachine focuses on Shakespeare’s Hamlet, especially on Hamlet’s relationship to the women in his life and his eventual mental break. It is a vivid interpretation of Hamlet’s desire to strip himself of his subjectivity and assert his being as an object, which alludes to questions of desire, objectivity, and the machine raised in Gilles Deleuze’s and Felix Guattari’s Anti-Oedipus. ‘The actor playing Hamlet,’ as he is referred to in the text, states his desire to symbolically shift from the status of body without organs to that of a machine, thus moving from a state of pure subjectivity to a state of pure objectivity.

Toward the end of a long soliloquy, ‘the actor playing Hamlet’ professes his desire: “I want to be a machine” (Mueller, 146). This simple statement grounds the perspective of the entire play, as it incorporates the desire of ‘the actor playing Hamlet’ into one parsimonious utterance; but one must not mistake parsimony for simplicity, and interpret this statement as a straightforward wish to function as a machine. His statement has larger implications than a distraught individual lamenting his own loss by wishing for the cessation of pain. It speaks to an overarching existential question on the part of ‘the actor playing Hamlet:” Why must I be? To begin the analysis of this statement, it is necessary to examine the nature of the machine and how one becomes a machine.

A machine is described as “a system of interruptions or breaks (coupures). These breaks should in no way be considered as a separation from reality; rather, they operate along lines that vary according to whatever aspect of them we are considering” (Deleuze
and Guattari, 36). In the previous quote, Deleuze and Guattari make a definite distinction between a machine that exists in reality and the metaphor of a machine. The machine that they conceptualize is one that has being in the sense that it is real, not one that merely exists in order to describe something else (e.g., a metaphor). It also implies that the machine is subject to the biases of the observer in that it is not a solid, fixed object, but rather an object of transience that constantly changes with the perspective of the observer. The link between the real and the subjective is important in so far as one may posit subjectivity and objectivity both as aspects of the real, as opposed to creating an analogous relationship between the real and the objective, and the idiosyncratic and the subjective.

The mention of ‘breaks’ is ambiguous in the sense that there are many different ways in which a break can be conceived, but none are sufficient. For example, one may interpret a break to be a stoppage in the linear progression of the machine’s product, for the machine is in a constant state of production, consumption, and recording. One may also interpret a break as something analogous to a lack, but this would clearly be a mistake: “Like all other breaks, the subjective break is not at all an indication of a lack or need (manqué), but on the contrary a share that falls to the subject as a part of a whole, income that comes its way as something left over” (Deleuze and Guattari, 41). A break does not imply that something is missing in the system of the machine, but rather it is a secondary result of the system as such. The system of the machine produces the break, but not as a result of a lack.

Machines produce an objective communication in the form of code, which differentiates itself from common communication in so far as common communication is
subjective in nature. Code is objective and utilitarian—i.e., unlike language, code produces the same signification to all without the need to rely on interpretation. Code does, however, necessitate a decoding process, which restructures the code as a deciphered message. Through the deciphering process, the code is transformed into its meaning. Code does, however, rely on interpretation to a certain extent—code is decoded into language, which is then interpreted. It is not a way of subverting the act of interpretation, but it is a process through which the producer of language maintains a certain amount of control, whether it is real control or imagined control, over the production of the language itself. In other words, code allows for more precision in language production, but not interpretation, which is always dependent on the subjective recipient of the message. It can be said that, in a certain sense, ‘the actor playing Hamlet’ wants to exert control over language by incorporating code.

The machine not only produces code, it is composed of code: “[E]very machine has a sort of code built into it, stored up inside it. This code is inseparable not only from the way in which it is recorded and transmitted to each of the different regions of the body, but also from the way in which the relations of each of the regions with all others are recorded” (Deleuze and Guattari, 38). The very essence of the machine is code—code permeates the being and the production of the machine. It is the basis of the machine’s intrapersonal to aspects of itself—i.e., the body—as well as its interpersonal relationships to other machines. It is interesting that Deleuze and Guattari refer to the relationship between code and machine as ‘built into it’ and “stored up inside it.’ This implies that code is predetermined from some external source of creation—thus, ‘built
into it.’ Also, ‘stored up inside it’ implies a reciprocal relationship between producing and recording of code. When code is produced, it leaves a residue on the machine.

The machine can be thought of as an objective entity in so far as it does not exist as a conscious being. Leaving aside contemporary arguments surrounding artificial intelligence, one is justified in asserting that a machine does not function in the same manner as a human—i.e., it cannot consciously think or use language like a human, but does so through a very different process. The machine, therefore, cannot be thought of as a subject, as it has no essence. The desire to become a machine, then, can be equated to the desire to rid oneself of the ability to consciously think as a human.

The statement, “I want to be a machine” (Mueller, 146) is indicative of a very specific desire. The utterance is not linguistically ornate or complicated, but rather it is straightforward and elementary. It signifies desire in such a way that the reader is left with much clarity concerning the intention of the speaker—he wants, or desires, to be a machine. A statement such as this must imply that metaphor is at work, that the individual does not desire to literally become a machine, but that he desires to take on certain qualities of a machine.

For Deleuze and Guattari, the nature of desire is very different from theories presented by Lacan and Freud, who conceptualize the basis of desire as a lack: “From the moment that we place desire on the side of acquisition, we make desire an idealistic (dialectical, nihilistic) conception, which causes us to look upon it as primarily a lack: a lack of an object, a lack of the real object” (Deleuze and Guattari, 25). Therefore, it can be said that ‘the actor playing Hamlet’ does not desire to become a machine because he lacks a machine-like quality for which he needs to compensate; rather, he may already
possess the qualities of a machine, but desires to situate these qualities within himself in such a way that they are not metaphor. He desires to incorporate the machine into himself, into his own being.

Desire, along with every other aspect of the human, is production: “[P]roduction is immediately consumption and a recording process (enregistrement), without any sort of mediation, and the recording process and consumption directly determine production, though they do so within the production process itself. Hence everything is a production” (Deleuze and Guattari, 4). Thus, production includes both the incorporation of the external—‘consumption’—and the depositing of residue—‘recording,’—which disavows any notion of a lack. Production itself is completely immediate and determined by consumption and recording. It is a process that is entirely infinite; it has neither beginning nor end. “Production is always something ‘grafted onto’ the product; and for that reason desiring-production is production of production, just as every machine is a machine connected to another machine” (Deleuze and Guattari, 6). The process of production can be traced infinitely into the past and future, as production replicates itself diachronically in both directions through interconnectivity to other machines and to the process of its own coming into being.

The product of desire is ambiguous and vague: “Desire produces reality” (Deleuze and Guattari, 30). It can be interpreted from this phrase that desire is at the root of reality; but, at the same time, reality is essentially that which is undefined. It is possible to organize a discourse on reality, to describe what reality is, but it is a different task to elucidate reality in a way that provides clarity on the subject—i.e., one is met with great resistance when attempting to analyze reality with any verisimilitude, as reality can
only be defined within the bounds of reality itself without implying transcendentalism. The problem here, however, is not that the product of desire is the undefined; the problem lies in the difficulty that ‘real desire’ poses to the metaphor of wanting to be a machine.

There is clearly no room for fantasy or metaphor in the conceptualization of desire: “Desiring-machines are not fantasy-machines or dream-machines, which supposedly can be distinguished from technical and social machines. Rather, fantasies are secondary expressions, deriving from the identical nature of the two sorts of machines in any given set of circumstances. Thus fantasy is never individual: it is group fantasy” (Deleuze and Guattari, 30). Therefore, just as production is infinitely connected to its past and future, fantasy is always ‘group fantasy,’ as it is a secondary production of two interrelated machines. Fantasy can never be the essence of desire, as desire is the production of reality. From Deleuze’s and Guattari’s perspective, analysis of the statement made by ‘the actor playing Hamlet’ is confounded by reality of desire. If desire is real, in the sense that it exists in reality, then the statement must be interpreted as ‘the actor playing Hamlet’ professing a genuine desire to literally be a machine. The metaphor of the machine cannot be applicable if reality is the product of desire. How can one interpret such a statement in a literal sense without shattering the bounds of reality? One cannot literally be a machine; one can only be like a machine.

It is evident that the statement made by ‘the actor playing Hamlet’ is not entirely conducive with the theory at hand. It would not be advantageous to conceive of his utterance as a declaration of the real, as it cannot be accomplished within the bounds of reality. Similarly, it cannot be said—at least, according to Deleuze and Guattari—that the inherent desire professed in the statement is metaphor or fantasy in any way. The
analysis, then, is left in a state of abeyance, in which the reader must decide how to resolve this problem of comparison. The solution lies in a compromise between the binary opposites of real and fantasy—specifically, to provide a sufficient attempt at an answer, one must reformulate the question in terms of subject and object.

An analogous relationship can be established between the object, or the machine, and the subject, which Deleuze and Guattari refer to as the ‘body without organs.’ The body without organs is similar to what can be called the opposite of the machine, or the anti-machine: “[The body without organs] is the body without an image. The imageless, organless body, the nonproductive, exists right here where it is produced” (Deleuze and Guattari, 8). Thus, the body without organs is produced but does not produce. It exists in a state of pure presence, lacking any past or future; the machine, on the other hand, exists infinitely in past, present, and future. It is the subject in the here and now, existing only for itself. The body without organs is the antithesis to the objective machine, which is constantly producing in temporal infinity.

Given this, it is possible to conceive of the statement as a profession of the desire to become an object. ‘The actor playing Hamlet,’ in so far as he can be labeled a body without organs, desires to rid himself of subjectivity and become a pure object. Of course, it is problematic to posit any individual as pure subject or pure object; but given that the focus of analysis, *Hamletmachine*, is a text of fiction, one may safely assume that such an interpretation is permissible. The desire to become pure object is evident in the specific naming ‘the actor playing Hamlet’ as opposed to just ‘Hamlet.’ Such a title strips the character of his name and thus his subjectivity; it creates a rift between the real character of Hamlet and his portrayal as fantasy. Focus is shifted from Hamlet to the
actor who plays Hamlet, thus establishing the reality of the actor on stage and the fantasy of the fictional character Hamlet. Also, the title of the play Hamletmachine may be interpreted as a progression from subject to object—‘Hamlet’ being the subject and ‘machine’ being the object. Furthermore, given the impossibility of pure subjectivity or objectivity, one may add that the blending of ‘Hamlet’ and ‘machine’ into one word is indicative of the amalgamation of subject and object into one.

It is necessary at this point to question why ‘the actor playing Hamlet’ desires to attain pure objectivity. The context in which his statement is made provides evidence: “My thoughts are lesions in my brain. My brain is a scar. I want to be a machine. Arms for grabbing. Legs to walk on, no pain no thoughts [sic]” (Mueller, 146). There is a sense of automatism in this passage. It implies that a machine is a system that lacks any insight or idiosyncrasy; the machine-body uses its limbs in a solely pragmatic manner, leading to automatic movement and cognition, which is equated to freedom from pain: ‘no pain no thoughts.’ ‘The actor playing Hamlet’ desires to be a machine to eradicate his thoughts, as they are the source of his despair. In Shakespeare’s Hamlet as well as in Hamletmachine, there is a schism between reality and fantasy, leaving the reader/viewer questioning the authenticity of what Hamlet/ ‘the actor playing Hamlet’ is experiencing—the focus is shifted from the action of the plot and concentrated on the cognitions of the character. Thus, much importance is placed on the subjective interpretation of Hamlet/ ‘the actor playing Hamlet.’ It is this emphasis on subjective cognition that ‘the actor playing Hamlet’ desires to eradicate, leaving himself with a sense of contentment in ignorance and pure objectivity.
Bibliography
