# Félix and Gilles's Tempestuous, Monstrous Machines[1]

"The Krell forgot one thing: monsters from the id."

Warren Stevens (as Doc Ostrow), *Forbidden Planet*.

"What a mistake to have ever said *the* id.  Everywhere *it* is machines—real ones, not figurative ones: machines driving other machines, machines being driven by other machines, with all the necessary couplings and connections."

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*. (1)

In conversation with Michel Foucault in 1972, Gilles Deleuze agreed with the principle of collapsing the distinction between "theory" and "practice," by stating the following:

> A theory is exactly like a box of tools.  It has nothing to do with the signifier.  It must be useful.  It must function.  And not for itself.  If no one uses it, beginning with the theoretician himself [sic] . . . then the theory is worthless or the moment is inappropriate.  We don't revise a theory, but construct new ones; we have no choice but to make others. (*Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, 208)

Reading this, I wonder if Deleuze had in mind his recent collaborative work with Félix Guattari, which was to be published as *L'Anti-Oedipe* in the same year.  In particular, I wonder whether he was using the language of the pragmatist to reflect upon the utility of his own recent theoretical activity—that is, reflecting upon the *theory of the machine* (the cornerstone upon which *Anti-Oedipus* bases its argument) as a "tool."

In this sense, using Deleuze's own words, the theory of the machine as it is mapped out in *Anti-Oedipus* has proven to be "worthless," or at least not of an appropriate moment.  Certainly, Deleuze and Guattari have subsequently constructed other theories (such as those of the "assemblage," the "rhizome," or "nomadology") that the critical community has been more eager to discuss.  Yet Guattari recently revisited the deleuzo-guattarian theory of the machine in *Chaosmosis*, as if he had never wanted to let go of this idea:

> to discern various levels of ontological intensity and envisage machinism in its totality, in its technological, social, semiotic and axiological avatars.  And this will involve a reconstruction of the concept of machine that goes far beyond the technical machine. (34)

The difficulty remains, of course, in trying to gain access to a concept of machine that is beyond the realm of the technical.  How can we *use* a concept of machine that claims to

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go beyond the concept of utility (or *techne*, the function of technical machines)? Part of the problem, as I see it, is that this concept insists that "everything is a machine" (*Anti-Oedipus*, 2) not figuratively or metaphorically, but literally, although this is a claim that cannot be demonstrated without in the first instance having the technical machines as a key frame of reference.

It is thus difficult to demonstrate what a deleuzo-guattarian machine "looks like" unless we refer to mechanical apparatuses. What I hope to do here is provide another frame of reference, which might enable some of this difficulty to be removed. My suggestion is that a "useful" text for demonstrating the deleuzo-guattarian machine is the 1956 MGM film *Forbidden Planet*. Utility will be measured here by the degree in which we use the concept of machine to read this film, and by the degree to which this reading allows us to provide greater clarity to the concept of machine.

For those unfamiliar with *Forbidden Planet*, a brief synopsis: Doctor Morbius (Walter Pidgeon) and his daughter Altaira (Anne Francis) are the only survivors of the human colony on Altair-4; a rescue mission, led by Commander John Adams (Leslie Nielsen), is warned by Morbius to stay away, to avoid the terrible fate that befell the colonists; as romance develops between Adams and Altaira, a monstrous creature menaces the crew, leading to the discovery that this monster is the fantastic creation of the unsuspecting Morbius (a result of experiments with the advanced technology of the Krell, the former inhabitants of Altair-4, who had also succumbed to similar monsters of their own).

The plot is of course inspired by Shakespeare's *Tempest*, yet it differs from its source in some very telling ways—in addition to the obvious differences that arise from a science fictional updating of a Renaissance text, such that spacecraft replace ships, and so on— upon which I shall focus my reading of the film. The first difference is in the "staging," by which I mean that *Forbidden Planet* is spectacular and melodramatic. Stephen Orgel observes in his introduction to the Oxford edition of *The Tempest* that for more than two centuries the most popular productions of Shakespeare's play were those which relied on elaborate stage machinery to create spectacular effects, and which took liberties with the script to produce an operatic extravaganza. Yet he points out that these productions bore little resemblance to Shakespeare's text, which actually contains few direct staging instructions (64-77).

In this sense, *Forbidden Planet* belongs to that tradition of texts which diverge from the original in their reliance on spectacular stage machinery, an example of what Orgel calls the "machine-play *par excellence*" (72). If it is reliant on machinery, however, the film also provides a harsh reflection upon the status of machinic technologies by drawing on familiar moralising science fiction narratives. As Charles Tashiro has noted, in his brief essay on the [Unofficial Forbidden Planet Web Page](#), the story of Morbius owes as much to Mary Shelley's Frankenstein as it does to Shakespeare's Prospero. To this claim, I will add that the monster from Morbius's own "subconscious mind" also seems to owe something to Robert Louis Stephenson's Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde, at least insofar as the monster represents the destructiveness that inheres in being human.

The story of Morbius thus introduces a second way in which *Forbidden Planet* differs from *The Tempest*: whereas Prospero grants his prisoners their freedom, and returns in moral triumph to his homeland (for the magic with which they are imprisoned is within his powers), Morbius refuses to recognise that the destructive force which threatens the

crew is that part of himself which he *cannot* control, and he will ultimately die for this sin of misrecognition.

The most telling difference (at least for my purposes here) relates to the question of why it is that Morbius refuses to recognise that the monster is himself. Missing from the text of Shakespeare's play is any direct parallel to the story of the Krell—that is, the mystery of the sudden disappearance of the former inhabitants of Altair-IV. As Doc Ostrow tells us in his death throes in *Forbidden Planet* (after taking the "brain booster" to double his intelligence), Morbius is "too close to the problem" to solve the riddle of the Krell and is therefore unable to recognise that he is repeating their mistakes by trying to revive the technology that led to their downfall.

These mistakes: after demonstrating the vast technological advances that the Krell had achieved, Morbius states that he suspects they were in the process of developing a way to live in a "civilisation without instrumentalities" (to which Ostrow replies, "but that's impossible!"). This process involved harnessing the power at the core of the planet to enable its inhabitants to produce and project matter in any form, anywhere on the planet, with nothing more than a sheer act of will.

Ostrow learns, of course, that the Krell successfully achieved this civilisation without instrumentalities. Instead of realising a utopian vision, however, they were destroyed by "monsters from the id" which had been instantaneously projected from the minds of the Krell onto the surface of the planet. Having been the only human to use the Krell technology, Morbius is the only current inhabitant whose monster has been unleashed to actualise his unconscious impulses (and we may suspect that his unconscious longing to be the sole benefactor of his discovery had been the catalyst for the deaths of the other humans that had arrived with him).

This brings me to the question of the deleuzo-guattarian concept of the machine. Mark Jancovich suggests that Morbius's mistake is that, like the Krell, he valorises rationality and has "lost touch with the emotional world of the unconscious" (*Rational Fears* 264). Jancovich's reading is a suitably Freudian one, with the Oedipal god-father (Morbius) standing as the agent of repression against primitive emotional states (represented here by the romance between Adams and Altaira) in order to maintain his little kingdom. I suggest that this reading is well suited to Shakespeare's Prospero but is only useful as an explanation of Morbius's motivations to the extent that Morbius parallels Prospero. As I have suggested here, however, the story of the Krell complicates the situation.

In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari map out the development of civilisations, not as the rise of the machine in place of primitive states of subsistence, but as the emergence of the "civilised capitalist machine" out from (and in place of) the "primitive territorial machine" (passim). If we think of the rise (and fall) of the Krell along these lines, we can see that the development of a "civilisation without instrumentalities" is only going to be "impossible" in the degree to which civilisation is understood as the total sum of all technological advances (where *techne* or instrumentality and utility represent a logic of understanding)—which is of course the mechanistic view represented by Ostrow.

What the film demonstrates instead is that stripping a civilisation of its instrumentalities produces something other than *just* a return of the primitive repressed. Yes, we do learn that the stripping away of instrumentalities lays bare the most destructive of forces: *the*

*id*. Yet this is the id *ex machina*, as it were, unleashed upon the stage upon which these characters must otherwise play out their little Oedipal drama. Shakespeare's tempest is replaced here by the "id monster," a force that is everywhere and nowhere at once, as it exists by "continually constituting and reconstituting its molecules from one second to the next" (Ostrow again, explaining why the monster is unaffected by their sophisticated weapons, such as ray guns).

The id *ex machina*, in the instrumental sense, is thus an example of a field of production in which reterritorialisation and deterritorialisation occur simultaneously and constantly. Note, then, that this id monster is not the repressed which props up civilisation; rather, it is what the absence of instrumentalities *produces*. In other words, if we take away *both* the civilised and the primitive (two poles whose axis is normally defined by the logic of a *techne*) we are still being productive, even if what we have produced is a destructive force. The id monster is thus the machine *par excellence*, since it exceeds the rule of instrumentalities even as it maintains a connection to a productive field which stretches across (and beneath) the surface of the planet.

In this world—or, these worlds: the world of Altair IV *and* the world of the film and its relation to its sources—in which instrumentality seems ubiquitous, then, the id monster provides a terrifying glimpse of what it means to *think* beyond instrumentalities. The id monster may thus allow us to glimpse the actualisation of a deleuzo-guattarian machine, which was established conceptually (at least in the opening passage to *Anti-Oedipus*) as a way of reconfiguring Freud's concept of the id (see the second epigraph with which I have framed this essay). Freud's singular term *it/the id* is reconfigured, "everywhere," as machines, but *not* as machinic apparatuses or technical machines.

Here, I have tried to demonstrate that the way to understand this maneouvre away from the technical machine—to understand what a machine that exceeds *techne* might "look like"—is to provide an example of the way in which, in a world where instrumentality (the rule of *techne*) asserts itself everywhere, the id manifests itself (fleetingly, almost invisibly) as excess, that is, as the product of the *absence* of instrumentalities. Whether this example should prove to be "useful" elsewhere is, of course, out of my hands. As I indicated before embarking on this brief reading of *Forbidden Planet* and its relation to its sources, the utility of this exercise could only be measured by the degree to which it allowed us to read the film through the filter of the deleuzo-guattarian machine *and vice versa*. Is this, then, a tool—a model for the application and re-application of a concept of the machine? I think not. Yet I do hope that it provides a template (the instrument, shall we say) for measuring the utility of such exercises. Take it or leave it.

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