

Philosophy of Technology in the Anthropocene *avant la lettre*

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Review of *Ernst Jünger's Philosophy of Technology: Heidegger and the Poetics of the Anthropocene*, by Vincent Blok. New York: Routledge, 2017. 153 pp.

Vincent Blok's erudite and meticulously documented new study deals with the fashionable topic of the Anthropocene in an unfashionable way. While mentioning such authors as Jane Bennett ("vibrant matter"), Timothy Morton ("hyperobjects"), and Bruno Latour ("Anthropocene") as points of reference for having indicated a new turning of being, this book is neither a contribution to any *discourse* on the Anthropocene, nor does the book engage, too explicitly anyway, with contemporary "philosophy of technology" (e.g., Borgmann, Ihde, Feenberg, and Stiegler). Rather, the originality of this study lies in the fact that it tackles the systematic problematics of the Anthropocene through a historical-philological exposition of the encounter between the poetry of Ernst Jünger and the thinking of Martin Heidegger. This originality, to use a cliché-expression, is both its strength and its weakness: Blok's book is methodologically and exegetically thoroughgoing, to such an extent that it comes at the expense of its accessibility; the book may be of interest to scholars in continental philosophy, philosophy of technology, philosophy of language, Heidegger studies, and ecological philosophy, but can only be fully appreciated if readers come equipped with an understanding of Heidegger's early, mid, and late philosophy, and some familiarity with the existing (German) secondary literature.

This does not hold, however, for the main subject of the book, the German novelist, decorated soldier, and entomologist Ernst Jünger (1895–1998), best known to wider audiences for his 1920 First World War memoir *Storm of Steel* (Jünger 1978). While Jünger, *as a philosopher*, has his German commentators such as Günter Figal and Peter Trawny, the publication of Blok's book coincides

fortuitously with the recent English translation of 1932's *The Worker* (Jünger 1981b), and thus serves well as an exhibition of the continuing relevance of Jünger's *thought and method* for coming to terms with the meaning of the technological age and the Anthropocene for the English reader. In order to accomplish this task, Blok proceeds by means of a three-step argument: a summary of Jünger's characterization of the technological age as fulfilled nihilism and the rise of a new turning of being in the category of the gestalt of the worker (Part I); the "eduring stimulus" (54) of Jünger's work for that of Heidegger, and Heidegger's underestimation of Jünger's ability to go beyond traditional metaphysics/nihilism (Part II); and, finally, a reassessment of Jünger's *poetics* in the light of Heidegger's critique, culminating in an interpretation of Jünger as a thinker of the Anthropocene *avant la lettre* (Part III). "How can we access the inaccessible?" is the underlying philosophical question that binds the parts together.

Part I, *The Age of Technicity and the Gestalt of the Worker*, mainly deals with Jünger's *The Worker* and the 1930 essay *Total Mobilization* (Jünger 1980a). Blok's goal is to show how Jünger can have access to the mysterious category of the gestalt of the worker which "is not there and still has to come" (6), that is to say the gestalt *is not* (29), in the ontic sense, and is *absent* in our time (39). Nevertheless, Jünger surmises in the gestalt of the worker a new turning of being and restoration of meaning by reference to the law of the conservation of energy (12), here understood metaphysically, i.e., in face of the *vanishing* of meaning in the *nihilistic meaningless* of the technological age, meaning may re-emerge from somewhere else, from the gestalt of the worker. Jünger experienced this meaninglessness of the world during the First World War, most emphatically at the Battle of Langemarck. *Total mobilization* refers to the condition in which the world and human being appear in a technological way, i.e., in terms of functionality and efficiency, the condition in which life is transformed into potential energy, which "can consist of the manufacture of perfume just as easily as the production of poisonous gasses" (11), or in the words of *The Worker*, beings appear *as work*. Total mobilization encompasses the shattering of the ideals of the Enlightenment, the liberal bourgeois order, the conception of man as *animale rationale*, or at large, the destruction of the transcendental horizon of the Platonic idea: "Our *ontologically indifferent* world [total mobilization, m.b.r.] is incommensurable with the *animale rationale's* world that is interspersed with an *ontological difference*" (11). At Langemarck, however, Jünger sees the emergence of a new warrior type that is completely adapted and responsive to the totally mobilized world. From this experience, Jünger surmises a *gestalt-switch*, away from that of Enlightenment,

through the ontological indifference of total mobilization, towards the gestalt of the worker that can guarantee a new security and rank order of life and an “ontologically different unity or the standard in whose light the world shows itself as ordered (work) and man finds his determination (worker)” (13). Blok explains gestalt here in terms of metaphor: a gestalt is adumbrated in the world, leaves its imprints, and stamps the world in the manner in which a coin punch mints coins of a particular type and individual coins of a type, be it that the gestalt does not belong to the world of things. The type of the worker, the successor to the warrior type, is the presentation of the gestalt as *representative of the gestalt of the worker*.

The book briefly pauses during an intermezzo on Nietzsche’s philosophy of the will to power and his views on nihilism. Nihilism is understood here in the incomplete sense of Platonism (as the denial of the world of becoming) and in the complete sense of the rejection of the transcendental essence of things as the measure of earthly existence (akin to the warrior type’s responsiveness). Blok chooses not to engage with contemporary theorists of nihilism such as Ray Brassier (2007), for whom nihilism is the only tenable philosophical position in the light of the natural sciences, and more importantly, Brassier’s argument that any philosophy that still sees the elucidation of *meaning* (even within a meaningless world) as its proper object (Heidegger, Wittgenstein) remains indebted to the Platonic tradition, regardless of its rejection of the metaphysics of presence. In the light of this study, Blok’s choice makes sense, but I do wonder how Jünger’s treatment of nihilism would hold up against more contemporary interpretations. The will to power is understood in a fairly uncontroversial way as life-preservation and life-enhancement, and is connected to Jünger’s method by means of the will to power as art, where art “does not primarily indicate works of fine art, but the creative or founding character that is the origin of each and every perspectival estimation of values” (25). In the will to power as art Jünger finds a way of transitioning from total mobilization to the type of the worker as representative of the gestalt, “that is, the will to power is led as a *magnet* by the gestalt as ‘original capital’” (34). Blok here sees the writing of *The Worker* itself as being led by the gestalt. Since the gestalt *is* not and thus cannot be described or thought, Blok interprets Jünger’s writings not as “*thought* but [as] *poetry*” (36). The philosophically most interesting chapter of Part I is Chapter 4 in which Blok sketches an outline of Jünger’s method as given in his 1930 *Sicilian Letter to the Man in the Moon* (Jünger 1981c). This method consists in a new way of *seeing*, an optics attuned to the unity of the gestalt. Jünger finds this optics in the method of the stereoscopic view and in trigonometry (in which an imperceptible angle is calculated on the basis of two given angles). A stereoscope

is a device in which each eye of the beholder looks at a different picture so as to build a stereo-photo. Its effect is not only that we perceive unity in multiplicity, but also depth (dimensionality). Jünger explains this method by means of the two ways in which the moon can appear. On the one hand the moon appears to us as the astronomical moon of our calculating scientific worldview (the world of the *animale rationale*). In view of the collapse of the Platonic idea (the sun as the transcendental idea in the light of which things appear as ordered), Jünger draws attention to the way the moon provides *indirect* light in which things appear as frozen and motionless, as foreign and mysterious, or as what Jünger calls in light of the *man in the moon* (41). Blok notes how Jünger experienced, stereoscopically, the moon *as* astronomical body and *as* man in the moon. This is not to say that Jünger is a dialectician in either the Platonic or Hegelian sense. As Blok writes: “The merging of the moon *as* heavenly body and *as* man thus does not extend so far that both are identified. Only when we hold onto their principle difference does the stereoscopic view have access in an *indirect* manner to the dimension of depth revealed therein” (48). Only at the very end of the book does Blok take up this interesting thematic again.

Part II, *Heidegger’s Reception of Jünger: Work, Gestalt and Poetry* can be read as a long excursus, or as the main contribution of the book, depending on the reader’s interest. Jünger and Heidegger corresponded on their respective sixtieth birthdays, published as Jünger’s 1949 essay *Across the Line* (Jünger 1980b) and Heidegger’s 1955 essay *On the Question of Being* (Heidegger 1976a). Finally, Heidegger’s *Gesamtausgabe 90* bears the title *Zu Ernst Jünger*, which makes clear that Jünger exercised *some* influence on Heidegger’s work, even though Heidegger proved to be highly critical of Jünger’s work (Heidegger 2004). *What* this influence consisted in and to what extent Heidegger’s critique of Jünger hit the mark, is the task that Blok takes upon him to elucidate in this second part of the book. Blok deems the affinity between *The Worker* and enframing as too obvious to comment on, and the *political* influence of Jünger on Heidegger’s embrace of National Socialism as philosophically uninteresting. So instead he focuses on Heidegger’s ambiguous relation towards the concepts of work and gestalt, and a hypothetical convergence in Jünger’s and Heidegger’s views on *poetic naming*.

Blok discerns three periods in Heidegger’s thinking about work and the meaning of being: in the period of *Being and Time*, where the concepts of the ready-to-hand and the worldhood of the world come to the fore (Heidegger 1977a), Heidegger is both close and far away from Jünger. While it is clear that in *Being and Time* the ready-to-hand world (which includes nature), though not *Dasein*,

comes into presence in terms of usability and serviceability, i.e., as work, it is exactly when Dasein is *falling* that it is cut off from the meaning of being. Between 1930 and 1934 Jünger's influence, according to Blok, was at its height: care, the fundamental category of human being, is understood in terms of work, thus not preventing access to meaning of being, but providing doorway to the experience of being (70–71), a hypothesis Blok buttresses by marshalling a quotation from 1933's *The German Student* (Heidegger 2000) (72). Finally, from 1934–1935 on, Heidegger would no longer entertain a positive relation to Jünger's concept of work. According to Heidegger, when Jünger wants to *cross* the line of nihilism he uses the same language: "Both the *description* of the work-world of the total mobilization on this side of line and the *description* of the worker type that is able to overcome the total mobilization (nihilism) on the other side of the zero line, have work-character" (78). Jünger thus stands together with Nietzsche *around* the line as the last metaphysician. For Heidegger, in the end, nihilism cannot be overcome but must be brought back to the question of being. According to Blok, Heidegger learned from Jünger that the metaphysics of the will to power (fulfilled nihilism) cannot be overcome by work and will (81). Contrary to his Nazi days, Heidegger would no longer have the *will* to break with the will to power, but would embrace a non-willing, *gelassen*, way of philosophizing in his later work. Blok goes on to highlight a similar ambiguity in Heidegger's thinking with regard to the concept of the *gestalt*. While Heidegger's critique of Jünger's concept of the *gestalt*, and the worker as its representative, is predictable (Platonism/being-as-presence, Cartesianism in the type of the worker as the indubitable fundament), Blok argues that Jünger's *gestalt* was nevertheless the impetus for Heidegger's development of a non-metaphysical conception of *gestalt* in *The Origin of the Work of Art* (Heidegger 2002), although Blok has some trouble in textually demonstrating this influence directly. Blok goes through a long discussion of Heidegger's conception of truth as *a-lethia*, i.e., of unconcealment as the *alpha private* of concealment (a brokenness of concealment as opposed to its negation, unconcealing-concealing), which should be familiar territory to Heideggerians. Blok's Heidegger here is decidedly Jüngerian: our access to unconcealing-concealing is always indirect, for example, through our experience of the word *aletheia* as indicative of the essence of truth as unconcealing-concealing (95). This reading of Heidegger is defensible, but not entirely consonant with Husserlian or Kantian readings. In passing Blok gives an apt description of the essence of Heideggerian questioning: "[O]ur questioning is only *really* philosophical when this questioning *recoils back* from what is asked, back upon itself" (88). *Gestalt* in the *Work of Art* is not understood metaphysi-

cally, but rather as the *event* of unconcealing-concealing that brings beings forth into openness. *Poetry*, as bringing-forth, is the locus of unconcealing-concealing: “Heidegger sees that the poetry of the gestalt is originally marked by the poetry of naming and ultimately by the poetry of language” (97). Blok’s hypothesis is that Heidegger, in his *Contributions to Philosophy* (1936–1938, published in 1989), rejects any notion of gestalt *tout court* on the grounds that it tries to understand being out of beings, whereas Heidegger wants to think the truth of being out of being itself (98–99). This hypothesis is not unconvincing, but as it stands, it remains a *hypothesis*.

Part II ends by pointing to a paradox in Jünger’s philosophy of language. On the one hand Jünger understands his own writings *as work* (77), i.e., instrumentally, but on the other hand he understands his terms, such as total mobilization, as poetic naming. Blok concludes that Heidegger’s examination of Jünger is one-sided: Perhaps Jünger is the true heir to Nietzsche as the last metaphysician, but perhaps he is also on his way to a non-metaphysical conception of language not so different from that of Heidegger in the *Work of Art*. The fact that Blok’s book is compiled of previously published articles, quite common in our day and age, is most tangible in this second part: It forwards a number of hypotheses, which are interesting and very well-informed as such, but it is more difficult to read them as a linear argument.

Part III, *The Essence of Language and the Poetics of the Anthropocene*, is the most ambitious but also the most inchoate and short of Blok’s book. It attempts to resolve the paradox of Jünger’s philosophy of language by reference to his later works, such as *Type, Name, Gestalt* (1963) and *At the Time Wall* (1959) (Jünger 1981a; 1981d), link *The Worker* to these later works, reintroduce the stereoscopic and trigonometric method as tools for indirectly accessing a new epoch man has entered in, and interpret the Anthropocene as indicative for the coming of the epoch of the worker, and how this involves a “transformation of saying toward a non-metaphysical language” (109).

Blok begins by claiming that Jünger’s later work, in which total mobilization is replaced by such novel terms as “the workshop landscape” and “the perfection of technology” (111–12), is continuous with *The Worker*, be it with the difference that Jünger is more interested in *resistance* and *freedom* (embodied here by the figure of the forest rebel). The other major difference resides in the fact that Jünger no longer reserves the word “type” solely for a human race, but the word is interpreted more broadly so as to indicate different categories that can emerge from nature and intuited by man, called here the “unseparated.” Blok’s main aim

is to show that the relation between name and type is in the end conventional, and thus metaphysical, but that this does not hold for the relation between name and gestalt, which has a *poetic* character. Gestalts can be seen as relating to types in the manner of genus and species, but they are also more: “The unity of the gestalt is therefore called system-forming or light-giving” (124). While gestalts, like types, arise from the unseparated, they are not intuited but take possession of man, a possession which coincides with its very naming: “The gestalt erupts from the unseparated, but needs the human naming in order to emerge from its a-nonymous character” (125). However, in the age of the perfection of technology both types and gestalts dwindle, making the poetic naming of the gestalt impossible, at least in our time *at* the time wall. This leads Blok to return to Jünger’s method in *At the Time Wall*. Instead of the juxtaposition of the moon as astronomical body and as man in the moon, Jünger, stereoscopically, looks for the unity of clock time and astrological time, and finds this third time in the time of the worker. The book ends by interpreting Jünger as a thinker of the Anthropocene *avant la lettre*; Jünger sees in man’s technological ability to create a new geological layer an indication for the coming of the epoch of the worker, a new phase in earth history: “Jünger experiments with the time of the worker as layer-forming species in order to fathom from there the emergence of the gestalt of the worker” (139). The main problem with this last part of the book is that Blok perhaps needed a fourth part; Heidegger recedes mainly into the background and Blok seems to want to do philosophy of language and ecological philosophy at the same time, in addition to his highly original methodological approach to the meaning of the Anthropocene.

Instead of focusing on the exegetical details of this book, I would like to assess what Blok’s reconstruction of the Heidegger-Jünger controversy contributes systematically. As mentioned, Blok’s book does not aspire to be a contribution to any discourse on “philosophy of technology,” but this does not delegitimize the question as to whether Jünger has, or if we can distill from his work, a *philosophy* of technology, as the title of the book suggests. Put differently, there is a difference between showing that Jünger’s characterization of the technological age still has currency in the present day, and answering the more basic question *what* technology is, as undertaken by the likes of Simondon (concretization), Stiegler (external memory/tertiary retentions), and indeed, Heidegger (enframing). Blok comes closest to this theme when he discusses Jünger’s portrait of how time comes into presence in elemental clocks and mechanical ones, but he does not challenge Jünger’s contention that the “invention of the mechanical watch is an ‘external sign’ of the gestalt” (15).

Furthermore, Blok's book relies on a somewhat old-fashioned distinction between disciplines: when Blok discusses language, technology disappears, and vice versa. For example, both Agamben's (2009) Foucault-inspired notion of the *dispositif* and Stiegler's (1998) Derrida-inspired *tertiary retentions* blur the distinction between language and technologies in the hard sense, or rather, interpret language as technology, thus bringing philosophy of language and philosophy of technology into dialogue. This is not to say that we are in need of another repetition of the "agency of things," but I suspect that Jünger's differentiation between language-as-work (technology) and language-as-poetry (naming) does not necessarily need to be couched in terms of the distinction between metaphysics and post-metaphysics, but may be interpreted as more in line with each other than Blok is willing to admit.

On a minor note: Blok identifies the starting date of the Anthropocene, the geological period in which man becomes the dominant geological (f)actor, with the 1945 Trinity Test (142), but does not mention several other proposed timings, e.g., the moment man started practicing agriculture, the sixteenth century onwards period of primitive accumulation described by Marx, and the Industrial Revolution, to name a few. It remains an open question whether *Anthropocene* will prove to be the right poetic naming of our current epoch, but in the meantime Blok's untimely-timely meditations deserve to be read by anyone with a continental interest in philosophical thinking about technology.

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