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**Jeremy Stolow (ed.), *Deus in Machina:
Religion, Technology and the Things in Between***

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“*Deus ex machina*” is a phrase that many will recognize. Although the term is Latin, it is usually traced back to the Greeks. It refers to a common practice in Greek drama whereby the characters of gods would be brought onto the stage via a crane or a similar device. However, *deus ex machina* more recently signifies bad writing, specifically in the realm of plot development. In literary studies, a *deus ex machina* is a hasty resolution. The connection between the old and new definitions lies in what the ancient device did with respect to the plots of some Greek tragedies. The existence of the device symbolized an ending wherein a god or gods miraculously appear to end the story. As editor Jeremy Stolow explains in his introduction, “Such a miraculous apparition would interrupt the dramatic events taking place on stage, typically for the purpose of rescuing characters from an impending doom.”¹ It is because of this association with a quick shortcut to conclusion that the term developed negative connotations.

As Stolow goes on to show, the relative disdain for *deus ex machina* says a great deal about modern culture at large. “Apparently, authentic divine presence, if it is to remain authentic, is not supposed to manifest itself as an instrument in the service of the

¹ Stolow, p. 1.

human hand,” he writes rather sardonically.² *Deus ex machina*, then, not only demonstrates a stylistic failure but also one of misattribution. The apparent presence of the divine in technology is actually the projection of the wonderment produced by human labor that the human mind cannot necessarily grasp. Thus, to think that there is something magical, divine or spiritual in technology is, like the *deus ex machina*, all-too-easy.

However, as the contributions to this anthology demonstrate, the modern separation between religion and technology is hardly fixed. As Stolow pointedly states:

Rather than foreclosing discussion about whether and how one must choose between human-built machines and the authentic presence of gods, spirits and other transcendent forces and things, this book seeks *to revisit and revise the very supposition that religion and technology exist as two ontologically distinct arenas of experience, knowledge, and action.*³

The construction of religion and technology as two separate ontological entities is a product of what Bruno Latour, from whom Stolow draws, calls “purification”. Purification is fundamental to the project of modernity. Like Weber’s “disenchantment,” purification, in Latour’s vocabulary, deals with the disappearance of “magic” in modern times. For Latour, magic is the “third term” that was annihilated from the spheres of religion, on the one hand, and technoscience on the other, in order to “preserve the integrity” of each. Put differently, in order to clear the space for modern religion and modern technoscience, and for each to know their place, there needed to be a clear division in “each other’s performative and epistemological prerogatives.”⁴ This becomes necessary in modernity especially, with its announcement of humanism, science and secularization as foundational “desacralizing” forces.⁵ What the edited volume *Deus in Machina* does is precisely to place a product of one of these desacralizing forces of modernity, technology, *back* on the side of religion whereas in so many accounts it was responsible for disenchantment and the cold logic of insidious mastery (such as in Heidegger).

² Stolow, p. 2.

³ Stolow, p. 2. Emphasis added.

⁴ Stolow, p. 9.

⁵ Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, p. 33.

Stolow's introduction, which explores the theoretical basis of the study of religion, media and technology, is well worth the price of admission. Very few scholars working in this field have explored the relationship between religion, media and technology as he has. His knack for providing a much-needed philosophical injection and scaffolding to a field of study that has yet to develop theoretical or methodological cohesion (which is not a bad thing necessarily) is present here as it was in "Religion and/as Media," which, although being a review article, is cited quite frequently in the literature. Most valuable, in my estimation, is his command of the literature in the philosophy of technology and media studies. It could be argued that missing from studies of religion and technology is a conceptual dialogue with media studies as well as the philosophy of technology. In this regard, Stolow's taking up of Heidegger in order to revisit the definition of technology is necessary.

However, in spite of Stolow's own contributions to the volume, there is some unevenness in the chapters and a bit of confusion in their framing. Some are indeed excellent. Specifically, the chapters by John Durham Peters and John Lardas Modern are standouts. Peters explores time-measuring media such as clocks and calendars, which were originally used in religious settings in order to form rituals. This is especially evident in the case of the clock, which is crucial to the ringing of bells. His chapter makes the case not only for the importance of time in the history of religious media but also in highlighting the importance of what he calls "organizational" or "logistical" media in the history of religion. Modern delves into territory already trodden by Leo Marx regarding the pastoral nature of technology in America but with special attention paid to literature, in particular Melville's *Moby-Dick*. What is novel about Modern's chapter is that he focuses not only on the text itself in the vein of literary criticism but also analyzes a literary revival in the interest in Melville and its significance for dealing with an increasingly technologized, or de-natured, America.

These are just two that I mention. Strong contributions abound in this collection. If there can be any criticism, it would be in how the contributions are sequenced and thematically organized. The three sections—"Equipment," "Bio-Power," (Re)Locating Religion in a Technological Age—are, on their own, incredibly compelling. In fact, the

way in which Stolorow presents the relevance of each theme to the study of religion and technology in his introductory chapter does the leave the reader a lot to ponder. However, some of the chapters themselves do not match the theoretical framing he offers. Further, the theme of “Bio-Power,” which, as an aside, would be a fruitful analytic for the study of religion and technology in the future, seems very out of place as the second section, especially as veers away from many of the extant themes in the field of religion and technology, and thus needs greater scaffolding and contextualization.

Nevertheless, *Deus in Machina* serves as an important collection in the field. Its insistence on maintaining the murkiness of the terms “religion” and “technology” is its greatest asset. The diversity of the contributions along with the strong editorial direction makes this book a necessary read for students and scholars alike interested in the dynamics of religion, technology and media.