

Dismantling the Biomechanical Leviathan

If Pavlov's dogs can decondition from obedience to authority, so can we!

Jason Rodgers

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In Raoul Vaneigem's 1967 Situationist treatise, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, he recounts what resulted from the flooding of the basement of Ivan Pavlov's laboratory where the Russian physiologist kept his famous salivating dogs as experiments in classical conditioning.

It was a traumatic event for the dogs that had to struggle to live in the rising water. The ones who survived completely shed the conditioning Pavlov had worked so diligently to place in them.

This suggests there is hope for humans as well to rid ourselves of our deeply ingrained social conditioning of submission to authority within a cauldron of revolutionary upsurge or environmental catastrophe. Vaneigem writes: "Could the tidal wave of great social upheavals have less effect on men than a burst water pipe on dogs?"

Another telling of the same theme is in Grant Morrison's three-issue American comic book mini-series, *WE3*, featuring a tale of cybernetically augmented animals used by the military to engage in black operations, such as assassination. There is a dog, a cat, and a rabbit. When the program is shut down, the doctor who created the animals is ordered to euthanize them. Instead, she decides to set them free. Morrison tells the story of their escape from the confines of the military laboratory.

The animals are all powerful and weaponized. The dog, Bandit, has a rocket launcher built into his biomechanical body suit. This is reminiscent of one of the large-scale machine performance art pieces created by Mark Pauline of the San Francisco-based Survival Research Laboratory that featured heavily armed, automated robots that were let loose on each other.

The result was an orgy of destruction, complete with flame throwers and chainsaws. It was a critique of the intersection between technology and militarism, and a meditation on how these are monopolized and whether we should make military technology widely available to anyone.

Another piece Pauline built was a spider shaped robot designed to be driven by a guinea pig named Stu. He placed this within the context of empowerment. He stated, "The whole problem of animals being subjugated by humans had to be addressed." He dealt with this by "confer[ing] on them far greater power than they have in their meager, four-legged lives."

In Morrison's story, the weaponized robotic bodies placed on the animals make them powerful in combat, enables them to be killing machines. This is reminiscent of the phrase used on all the Rollins Band sweatshirts: "Part Animal, Part Machine." This is what lead singer, Henry Rollins, says we need to become to survive in this society, but it's also partly wishful thinking, what Rollins wanted to become.

As long as Morrison's animals are weaponized they are hunted. To escape they must remove the cybernetic components. This is difficult since it is giving up power. But the military hunt against them will be never ending. To win, tactics that are significantly different from those of the military must be used. Wearing Leviathan's armor transforms one into Leviathan, or at least a component. This isn't an argument for a strange morality like nonviolence, but instead against working in ways that maintain the logic and hegemony of civilization or totality.

Fredy Perlman warned in *Against His-Story! Against Leviathan!*, “The tragedy of it is that the longer he wears the armor, the less able he is to remove it. The armor sticks to his body. The mask becomes glued to his face. Attempts to remove the mask become increasingly painful, for the skin tends to come off with it.”

Undoing character armor (Wilhelm Reich’s phrase), deconditioning one’s self, is not an easy task; not something done on a Saturday in a New Age workshop. It is painful since we associate ourselves with, and define ourselves by, our authoritarian social conditioning. We believe our face is the Leviathan mask.

After an incident of combat in Morrison’s comic, Bandit the dog’s cyborg body is damaged he says, “Broken is leg coat. Bad Coat. Coat is Coat not ‘Bandit’...is coat not we.” It is through catastrophe and collapse that Bandit is able to realize that he is not his mechanized suit.

Vaneigem sums it up well: “The shock of freedom works miracles. Nothing can resist it, neither mental illness, remorse, guilt, the feeling of powerlessness, nor the brutalization created by the environment of power.”

Jason Rodgers’ zine, “Transgression or Affirmation,” and other publications are available from POB 10894, Albany NY 12201.



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