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# The Romantic Machine: Utopian Science And Technology After Napoleon



## Synopsis

In the years immediately following Napoleon's defeat, French thinkers in all fields set their minds to the problem of how to recover from the long upheavals that had been set into motion by the French Revolution. Many challenged the Enlightenment's emphasis on mechanics and questioned the rising power of machines, seeking a return to the organic unity of an earlier age and triggering the artistic and philosophical movement of romanticism. Previous scholars have viewed romanticism and industrialization in opposition, but in this groundbreaking volume John Tresch reveals how thoroughly entwined science and the arts were in early nineteenth-century France and how they worked together to unite a fractured society. Focusing on a set of celebrated technologies, including steam engines, electromagnetic and geophysical instruments, early photography, and mass-scale printing, Tresch looks at how new conceptions of energy, instrumentality, and association fueled such diverse developments as fantastic literature, popular astronomy, grand opera, positivism, utopian socialism, and the Revolution of 1848. He shows that those who attempted to fuse organicism and mechanism in various ways, including Alexander von Humboldt and Auguste Comte, charted a road not taken that resonates today. Essential reading for historians of science, intellectual and cultural historians of Europe, and literary and art historians, *The Romantic Machine* is poised to profoundly alter our understanding of the scientific and cultural landscape of the early nineteenth century.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“A work which brings into glittering relief the materials of scientific exploration in the early nineteenth century and reveals how scientists were, beyond the ostensible field of enquiry, profoundly engaged with the emotive, social and spiritual dimensions of their discoveries. . . . Of certain appeal to historians of science and scholars in popular culture *The Romantic Machine* . . . makes a distinct contribution to the study of technological thought, and gestures frequently towards the work of figures as diverse as Bergson, Deleuze, and Simondon.” (Greg Kerr, University of Glasgow Nineteenth-Century French Studies)

“Recommended.” (P. D. Skiff, Bard College Choice)

“Tresch’s work contains many interesting and provocative insights. . . . [It] belongs in every research library.” (Jeff Horn, Manhattan College American Historical Review)

“Tresch offers something new and exciting to historians of nineteenth-century France. His effort will hopefully encourage other innovative perspectives on the relationship between the arts and sciences.” (Robert D. Priest, Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge Reviews in History)

“Illuminating a spectrum of heterodox approaches grouped under the umbrella term ‘mechanical romanticism,’ Tresch makes an insistent and compelling case for why the current cultural impasse between science- and creative-types is far from inevitable. In this vision, sound science need not transpire without a lyrical core, while efficiency need not obviate moments of effusive, ecstatic connection.” (Courtney Fiske Brooklyn Rail)

“Tresch’s book restores to machines the dignity of wonder, of experimentation, openness, and beauty. It does so without neglecting the inexorable logic of material components, of thermodynamic laws, and of scientific axioms, and without blindness for the social and economic forces to which industrial machines will be subjected. *The Romantic Machine* not only describes utopian science and technology, but is itself a messenger from a utopia where technical objects regain their language and become agents in the complex history of nineteenth-century culture.” (Helmut Muller-Sievers *Centaurus*)

“John Tresch, in this beautifully written and masterfully researched book, tackles the age-old gap between romanticism and science, and succeeds in bridging a divide that is so long-established that it has become the basic template for many researchers in the field. . . . [A] major tour de force.” (Benjamin BÃf French Studies)

“Erudite and engaging. . . . Tresch’s study has the potential to transform how we understand the nineteenth century. The wide range of ‘machines’ at work in this study as well as the cultural arguments it makes also means that this study reaches far beyond any narrow definition of the history of science and technology.” (*Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*)

“This is one of the rare products of our field that can be recommended with confidence to readers yet to be persuaded of the centrality of science and its applications in the

fashioning of Western literate culture. It is a fascinating book and a must for anyone seeking to get to grips with the complex, knotty roots of modernity. (Robert Fox Metascience)

“Tresch’s focus on specific material objects is immensely rewarding; through them, he is able to uncover an entire world that rejected the binary of living/mechanical that we have come to see as inevitable. (Theresa Levitt *Technology and Culture*)

“The Romantic Machine is a boldly original and riotously interdisciplinary essay in the history of science that reinterprets romanticism for our own era. Situated within a dense fabric of political, moral, aesthetic, and epistemological concerns, Tresch’s early nineteenth-century mechanical romantics reject human mastery over nature as the goal of science, opting instead for limited regulation and sustainable coexistence. (Jan Goldstein, University of Chicago)

“In this fascinating and philosophically rich tale, Tresch re-invokes a world in which machines are not unnatural, dead mechanisms but vessels, affordances, organs even, of nature’s expansive self-expression. These romantic machines and charismatic technologies could and still do draw forth invisible powers within materialities human and not. Tresch’s account of the alchemical conjunction of romanticism and mechanism is itself a brilliant admixture of the history of science, nature-philosophy, and political theory. A wonderful and rewarding book. (Jane Bennett, Johns Hopkins University)

“With *The Romantic Machine*, John Tresch fulfills the goal of most recent history of science: to show that when you follow scientific achievements you end up describing a whole culture, including its literature and arts. By proposing a new interpretation of post-Napoleonic Paris’s material culture, Tresch shows the fecundity of his notion of cosmogram as the foundation of a different historical anthropology, one that includes science and technology and is not led by any teleology toward modernity. On the contrary, by reinterpreting romanticism, he shows how much we could learn from this early nineteenth century period for understanding our own contradictory cosmograms today. (Bruno Latour, Sciences Po Paris)

John Tresch is associate professor in the Department of History and Sociology of Science at the University of Pennsylvania.

Is romanticism inherently opposed to science and technology and intrinsically linked to fascism? For a few brief decades at the start of the nineteenth century, at least in Paris, the answer was no. Human, machine, and nature were seen as integral parts of a more rational, egalitarian, and

harmonious future. *„Romantic Machines“* brings that historical moment to vivid life and projects an appealing alternative to currently popular dystopian views. A must-read for policy makers and concerned citizens alike.

There's a great deal to say about this book--much more than should appear in one of these little reviews, but I'm so knocked out by this book I needed to express my esteem right away. I should say first that this is really the best looking university press book I've ever seen. It's worth springing for the hardcover over the kindle. Also, with the hardcover version it is easier to see the illustrations that have been meticulously culled and presented here. That might be my own prejudice. So in this space I'll just also say that the book covers so much ground that it really can be used in a wide array of contexts--history/science/ and literary courses. But it also strikes me that this book can appeal to a general reader since by crossing so many methods and disciplines, the author never gets bogged down in jargon. At every turn it is rigorous and learned, as well, and clearly it will leave a lasting mark in how we think about the ways that technology and ideas of self, culture, history are all intertwined. In fact what Tresch most brilliantly shows is that all things are much more intertwined than we usually can see. The writing is clear and illuminating and the scholarship meticulous and provocative. Would that all researches this careful about the material and as committed to the prose.

Overall, an interesting, if sometimes quite selective and procrustean study. For example, Bonald's ideological take on "science" is best understood from the perspective of medieval and early-modern Catholic philosophy not in the context of early 19th c. Romanticism, even Romantic biology. Moreover, Bonald's first name was not "Joseph," but "Louis"!

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