Journal of Ethics and Emerging Technologies

IEET

*Book Review*

# Review of *A Will for the Machine* by Mark Sanders

**Mark Sanders, A Will for the Machine. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2026).**

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Mark Sanders's *A Will for the Machine* is a book about machines that never forgets people. It is historical, literary, philosophical, and quietly political, but never loud. Its central claim is disarmingly simple, machines do not have stable meanings. What a machine "is" depends on who uses it, who is excluded from it, how labour is divided around it, and what cultural forms are available to interpret it. In South Africa, where labour was rigidly racialised under apartheid, these meanings were especially charged. Yet, Sanders never treats South Africa as an exception. Instead, he shows how it makes visible, in intensified form, dynamics that operate everywhere.

This is not a book that asks whether machines are good or bad. It asks how machines become meaningful and how those meanings shape, and are shaped by, human lives.

**Citation:** Botes, Marietjie. 2026. Review of *A Will for the Machine* by Mark Sanders. *Journal of Ethics and Emerging Technologies* 36: 1. https://doi.org/10.55613/jeet.v36i1.211

Received: 13/01/2026
Accepted: 14/01/2026
Published: 15/01/2026

**Publisher's Note:** IEET stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



## 1. Labour, meaning, and the machine

The book opens with mechanisation and automation in apartheid South Africa. Here, automation is not imagined as social progress but as a political technology, a way to preserve white labour supremacy while modernising industry. Machines were meant to substitute for scarce white workers, not to empower black ones. Yet, this vision failed, not only morally but economically. The expanding economy of the 1960s and early 1970s demanded more skilled labour than the white population could supply. As a result, black women entered clerical and semi-skilled work in growing numbers, often using the very machines apartheid ideology had imagined as white tools.

Against the familiar story of automation as threat, Sanders uncovers a counter-history: for many black women workers, machines were not symbols of dispossession but of possibility. They promised relief from bodily exhaustion, entry into less physically punishing work, and sometimes even a path toward independence. This argument is anchored in Sanders's reading of Miriam Tlali, especially *Muriel at Metropolitan*. Tlali's workers do not fear machines, they desire them. The machine becomes not the enemy of humanity but a way of making life more liveable.

Ethically, this is one of the book's most important interventions. It destabilises a universal narrative of technological harm by showing that what counts as harm or benefit depends on social position. Machines cannot be judged apart from the histories of those who use them or are denied access to them.

This insistence on embedding technology within social structures resonates with broader historical work on how states mobilise technical systems as technologies of governance. For example, Keith Breckenridge's *Biometric State*[1] shows how South African identification systems were deeply entwined with racialised state power and social classification throughout the twentieth century, revealing how systems that appear neutral can be shaped by historical projects of control and exclusion.

**2. Writing, work, and automation**

From clerical labour, Sanders moves to writing, through J. M. Coetzee's early experiments in computer poetry. These experiments are often treated as curiosities, but Sanders reads them as ethically charged. For a white South African writer in the 1960s, automating writing risked appearing as an evasion of labour in a society built on others' labour. Where Tlali's interviewees welcomed machines as tools of survival, Coetzee experienced them as morally troubling shortcuts.

This tension allows Sanders to rethink authorship, labour, and fairness. Automation does not simply replace jobs, it unsettles what counts as work, merit, and deservingness. Coetzee's computer poems expose what writing normally hides: that it always relies on procedures, constraints, and transformations. Even the most "human" writing depends on mechanisms of grammar, form, and repetition that we usually prefer not to notice.

Here Sanders begins to develop a theme that runs through the rest of the book, what matters ethically is not whether machines exist in human practices, but who controls the systems of transformation through which meaning and value are produced.

**3. Inner workings: Bodies, wires, and visibility**

In his discussion of William Kentridge's work and the history of telephony, Sanders turns from workers as social figures to workers as bodies embedded in technical systems. Telephone operators, mostly women, became part of semi-automatic networks, human switches in electrical circuits. Electricity emerges as a point of convergence between human nerves and machine function. Kentridge's art, with its wires, telephones, and anxious figures, is read not simply as political memory but as an exploration of inner workings, the shared logics of human and machine systems. This chapter deepens the book's ethical concern with invisibility. As systems become more efficient and seamless, the labour and strain that sustain them become harder to see. The smoother the system appears, the more likely its costs have been displaced onto someone else's body.

This focus on visibility and invisibility intersects with work in infrastructure studies showing how technical systems shape everyday experience precisely through their background routineness.[2] When systems function smoothly, they disappear, taking with them the labour that sustains them.

**4. Puppetry, anamorphosis, and human–machine interaction**

The conceptual center of the book lies in Sanders's analysis of puppetry, especially Handspring Puppet Company's *Woyzeck on the Highveld*. Puppetry becomes a way of thinking what "automatic" means without reducing it to either self-moving machines or passive humans. The puppet cannot move by itself, but the puppeteer must learn to move in highly regulated, predictable ways to create the illusion of life. Human and object adapt to each other.

Drawing on Paul de Man's reading of Kleist, Sanders introduces anamorphosis, a regulated system of transformation in which one order becomes another, line becomes curve, input becomes expressive form. The aesthetic power lies not in puppet or puppeteer alone, but in the system between them.

This becomes Sanders's most original way of thinking about computers. When we type, swipe, or click, what appears on the screen does not resemble what we do. Keystrokes become electrical impulses, memory addresses, patterns of light. The conversion is automatic, regulated, and largely invisible. Anamorphosis thus becomes a phenomenological shorthand for human–computer interaction: what we experience is not continuity but fluent transformation.

Ethically, this matters because control lies in the system of transformation. To ask who designs, owns, and governs these systems is to ask who shapes how meaning, labour, and agency are produced.

**5. After the factory: Machines as background**

In the conclusion, Sanders notes that smartphones (miniature computers) are everywhere, yet few users think of them as machines that once displaced workers. The labour they replaced, telephone operators, clerks, human "computers", has faded from memory. Machines now operate as background infrastructure.

This prompts a crucial question: what does it mean to represent automation when work is no longer the main site of human–machine interaction? Turning to speculative fiction from the Global South, Namwali Serpell, Willem Anker, and Liu Cixin, Sanders shows worlds in which machines are tied not to factories but to surveillance, hacking, art, play, and control. Yet, labour still exists, often elsewhere, in export zones, garment factories, and e-waste dumps. The global division of labour becomes invisible to users, and art becomes one of the few places where it can still be imagined.

Sanders ends by proposing a method rather than a doctrine, namely, to understand technology, one must study labour, culture, language, history, and art together. Machines do not arrive with fixed meanings. They take shape through conditions of possibility that can be traced, even if their futures cannot be predicted.

**6. Assessment**

A *Will for the Machine* is a demanding but rewarding book. Its strength lies in its method: moving between archives, statistics, novels, artworks, and philosophy without treating any as merely illustrative. Each object is chosen because it reveals something about how machines become meaningful.

What distinguishes the book is not only its range but its interpretive discipline. Sanders does not treat technology as an abstract force, nor as a mere reflection of social structures. Instead, he insists on reading machines through cultural form, through novels, poems, artworks, and performances where their meanings are negotiated rather than declared. In doing so, he offers a model for ethical inquiry that is neither technocratic nor moralising, but interpretive. Ethics becomes a practice of careful reading.

The book's ethical power lies in its restraint. Sanders does not preach about technology. He shows how difficult it is to think machines at all, how easily their histories, their labour, and their transformations disappear from view. In doing so, he makes responsibility possible, not by telling us what to believe, but by teaching us how to ask better questions.

The book's ambition is also its risk. Its conceptual density, especially in the chapter on anamorphosis, will reward slow and trained readers, but may challenge those without a background in literary or philosophical theory. At times, one wishes for more explicit bridges between this conceptual work and contemporary policy or governance debates. Yet, this is less a flaw than a consequence of Sanders's wager, that the deepest questions about technology cannot be answered at the level of policy alone, but require sustained cultural interpretation.

*A Will for the Machine* will be indispensable for scholars of ethics and emerging technologies, but it also speaks powerfully to historians of labour, scholars of African studies, literary and cultural theorists, and researchers in science and technology studies. It is a book for readers willing to think slowly about fast machines and to ask not only what technologies do, but what they mean. A *Will for the Machine* does not make machines friend or enemy. It makes them intelligible and in doing so, makes us newly responsible for how we live with them.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding

**Acknowledgments:** None

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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