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The Machine in the Garden
The Conflict Between Technology and The North American Pastoral Ideal

In the movie, Castaway, Tom Hanks has all the advantages of modern technology going for him in the FedEx jet plane—until the plane crashes and he is thrown back upon his own native resources in a return to raw nature on a deserted island. This contrast in relying on a primitive existence, as compared to a ready-made life-style, is displayed in the Castaway's growing frustration at trying to start a fire with wood-sticks and tinder, when later after his rescue and return to civilization, he is amazed at how he can “flick his Bic” and have instantaneous flame.

The treatise by Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden,” places the aspirations of the new American continent as arising from a notion of the “pastoral ideal” and how it comes to resonate within a growing technological “machine” culture. Quoting from the Eighteenth Century poet Thomas Carlyle, “the machine represents a change in our whole way of life ... because ‘the same habits regulate not our modes of action alone, but our modes of thought and feeling. Men are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand.’” (p. 174) In this distinction between the machine “hardware” and its cultural “software” process, the transition from the early North American pastoral farm life to the machine-age of modern technology reflects the movement from a rural life-style to a city-living existence. The very notion of “civilization” connotes “city” from “civis,” and the question remains: what kinds of pastoral trade-offs are given up in order to achieve technological progress? Thomas Jefferson commented on the contradiction between

wanting to live the simple life on a farm surrounded by nature, and the necessity of existing in a “civilized” society filled with machinery, industrialism and technology. The early colonial experiment in moving from the primitive forest to cultivated pasture-land is coined as the “pastoral ideal,” and it carries within itself the double-edged sword of taming the wildness out of nature, but at the same time not over-developing or exploiting the natural resources to the point of sterility and alienation of the farmer from his environment. In essence, the goal of enjoying the “garden” is a harmony or balance of man-as-part-of nature versus man-as-dominator and separate-from-nature. In this movement from nature to nurture, the machine or technology is not “bad,” so long as we use it in a balanced manner in accordance with our own enlightened self-interest.

While nature is beautiful, the harmony with man’s existence is not realized until the field is cultivated for food crop use—but it need not be over-developed to the point of ecological destruction, as this ultimately alienates man from his surroundings and separates him from the pastoral ideal of peaceful co-existence with planet earth. While man strives for “control” over his environment, both in the external storm and in his own internal impulses, he does not want to become victimized by the devices that his own intelligence has produced. Henry David Thoreau has aptly said, “There can be no redemption from a system that makes men the tools of their tools.”(p. 355). One example is the extreme exploitation of men, women and children in round the clock factory “sweat shop” operation during the Industrial Revolution in the late Eighteenth Century and early Nineteenth Century.

As Jean Jacques Rousseau wrote about our early American pastoral life, “man in the garden,” is not necessarily the “noble savage” in the Garden of Eden, but an early

example of native existence in which life was “mindless, brutish and short.” (p. 102). This Seventeenth Century clarion of the age of enlightenment opines that “mankind must depart from the state of nature—but not too far” (p. 102). Because man is part of nature we must not lose our connection with nature in order to live out fully what our innate being means to our existence. Think, for example, whenever we city-slickers want to “get away from it all,” we vacation back-to-nature by going camping, mountain hiking, and tide-pooling on the seashore.

The contrast of the machine and the technological processes which it represent may on the one hand be viewed as the economic imperative to which the early American political system so mightily strove, but on the other hand the consequences of unbridled industrialism, public exploitation, and private alienation are all too well known. Even such a paragon of Twentieth Century middle-class Republican values as Dwight Eisenhower warned of the “dangerous accretion of power, unsought or unwarranted, in the industrial-military complex.”

One very interesting point made by the “Machine” passages stated that although there may be guarded progress to the technological process, the freeing of work time from human drudgery and the growing self-sufficiency of individual control with the machine age are in themselves valuable commodities. The values of human equality and egalitarianism which have accompanied technological advance have also promoted a self-awareness of the fragile balance between eco-exploitation and harmony with nature, which mirror the early Native American experience up to the contemporary Greenpeace movement. It is as though Chief Red Cloud wrote a book on Marx (Karl, not Leo) long before it was politically correct to do so, and his latter day disciples now address such

issues as global warming, the ozone layer, deforestation in third world rain jungles, and protection of arctic tundra from cowboy oil barons.

In speaking of the Age of Machine, it is perhaps the alternate or “inward” sense of the meaning of “machine” that concerns the author the most: “mechanical genius ... has diffused itself into quite other provinces – not the external and physical alone is now managed by machinery, but the internal and spiritual also.” (p. 171) The key to our developing sense of inner self may lie in the thought that our modern age is beset with a tentative living with the unsure dangers of our own intellect. As thinking beings, we can be easily infatuated with our technology whose ends are not always clear to us. Rather we should stand back and take the long view and look into the social contract between the garden and the machine. It is like at the creation of the atomic bomb during WWII, we accepted that challenge as a mountain to be climbed, but did not initially question the ultimate uses to which that technology would be put. Now, we have arrived at place where nuclear proliferation with mutual assured destruction is a “m.a.d.” proposition and a too bitter pill to swallow.

In the end, although one is tempted to disparage the “wild lands” out of which the purported progress of machine industrialization has emerged, we should not overlook the dictum that the goal of modern high-tech society is to promote the “good life,” whether it be the verdantly coiffed lawnscape of Scotts fertilizers or the exotic beachfront excursion of the Corona beer commercial. As the author himself reflects, “men everywhere are like plants, deriving their ‘flavor’ from the soil in which they grow.” (pp. 109-110) And the soil of the pastoral ideal which has germinated the plant of North American men and women has as their accoutrements not merely the ornamentation of machine technology

but of the very intellectual and spiritual processes that typify “genius”—whether that genius will be for well or ill is left to the determination of each individual generation to decipher for themselves. And it is left for this generation to decide how to reconcile the Pastoral Ideal with Machine Technology, to promote the idea that if we don’t balance the two then the garden will no longer be green, but chromium-gray metallic, the sky no longer blue but tinged with hazy yellow-brown smoke. Joseph Campbell, the modern story-teller of the pastoral archetype, gives us a glimpse of how a “new beginning” may be made of the primal myth of humanity in the midst of nature. Campbell alludes to a fusion of nature with art, when he writes of the trilogy of man’s “separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return” to a community in the midst of a garden. (p. 228) Akin to Milton’s Paradise Lost, and also perhaps regained, the question for our generation is: where are we now, and what is the proper balance between nature and civilization – or, is this after all, a divine comedy performed before an audience that is too afraid to laugh? The hope for those of us who see the glass as “half-full” yet awaiting the fulfillment of the empty portion, is that when destiny closes a doorway of one view upon nature’s garden, she always opens a window of opportunity to further explore “where no one has gone before” in placing the creative machinery of the one -- myself -- at the service of the needs of the many.*

* Star Trek, The Search for Spock (AMC Movie, 5/14/2004)

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