

The Machine in the Garden

Many nineteenth-century American observers greeted what Ralph Waldo Emerson called "the whistle of the locomotive in the woods" with a mixture of awe and anxiety. When Nathaniel Hawthorne heard a train's "startling shriek" shatter the stillness of Concord Woods on the morning of July 27, 1844, he worried it would usher "the noisy world into the midst of our slumbrous peace." Painter George Catlin feared it would destroy "the grace and beauty of Nature"; and Thoreau regarded it as "a fate" that "never turns aside" (Nash, 13, 100).

Theirs was both a lament and a prophecy. The locomotive was just one of the new forces invading and despoiling the American Garden. For transplanted Europeans and hardy settlers, the New World had held out the hope of a New Eden, of fresh beginnings, of the promise of the regenerative power of bountiful, natural terrain. Here especially, between the raw wilderness of the remote western frontier and the industrialized cities of the eastern seaboard, was a "garden," a "great interior valley," as cultural historian Henry Nash Smith described it in his classic *Virgin Land* (123). Smith and other cultural commentators, including Roderick Nash, Leo Marx, and Charles L. Sanford, regard this middle region as "one of the dominant symbols of nineteenth century American Life," a significant metaphor of American cultural mythology—a delicately poised equilibrium between innocence and experience, chaos and order, hope and disillusionment (Smith, 123).

The "Machine in the Garden" myth defines an essentially American ambivalence toward

the contradictory conditions of pastoral promise and material experience. The myth has become a pervasive theme in American film; moreover, the apparatus and effects of the film medium—in a larger sense, media technology in general—constitute a new Machine in the Garden of American art, society, and sensibility whose effects are still being gauged.

The Machine in the Garden in American Society and Literature

The locomotive that invaded Hawthorne's garden is a convenient index of the new "forces," as Henry Adams catalogued them from the vantage point of the early twentieth century in his *The Education of Henry Adams* (privately published in 1907)—forces that (in his view at least) threatened to dehumanize the New American. Within his lifetime, Adams saw an agricultural America become a predominantly urban industrial society. Steam power, electrical energy, radium, and photographic technologies were only a few technological spin-offs of scientific discovery. The rise of monopolies, mass communications, mechanical reproduction of art forms, as well as the proliferation of evolutionary theory, phenomenology, naturalism, and feminism were among their inevitable consequences. Man had "maundered among the magnets," wrote Adams wittily, and "had translated himself into a new universe which had no common scale of measurement with the old" (381).

Novelists in the late nineteenth century seized on the "Machine in the Garden" myth as a useful paradigm to understand contem-

porary anxieties and uncertainties. For example, Frank Norris's *The Octopus* (1899), probably influenced by the railroad-related imagery and themes of Zola's *La Bête Humaine*, written a decade earlier, portrayed the Pacific and Southwestern railway as a monopoly, an "octopus" that was dispossessing farmers of their lands in the San Joaquin Valley. Early in the story, the character of Presley, a poet, watches in horror as a locomotive—"filling the air with the reek of hot oil, vomiting smoke and sparks"—smashes through a herd of sheep grazing on the tracks: "It was a slaughter, a massacre of innocents. The iron monster had charged full into the midst, merciless, inexorable." Not only were bleeding, mutilated bodies left in its wake, but a sense of irrecoverable loss: "The sweetness was gone from the evening, the sense of peace, of security, and placid contentment was stricken from the landscape" (50).

The Motion Picture: A New Machine in the Garden?

In the mid-1890s, just as historian Frederick Jackson Turner was proclaiming the end of the frontier, another technology was disrupting the peace and harmony of the American Garden. Like the locomotive, it moved on gears and wheels and penetrated the darkness with its cyclopean eye. Audiences who had gathered in theaters in New York City and Boston in late December 1896 and early 1897 to witness Thomas Edison's "Vitascope" motion-picture projection device scattered in panic at the sight on the screen of a locomotive steaming down the track straight toward them. "It seemed as if the train were dashing down upon the audience," one observer reported, "the rushing of steam, the ringing of bells and the roar of the wheels making the scene a startlingly realistic one" (Musser, 178).

No sooner did viewers adjust to these crude black-and-white illusions flickering on the big screen, than their perceptual—read "pastoral"—complacency was disturbed again by a

succession of new shocks and effects—"attractions," as historian Tom Gunning describes them. In the late 1920s, sudden, unnerving bleats and blaats of sound from the early talkies assailed the ears; in the early 1930s, Technicolor hues bloomed like hothouse flowers; in the early 1950s, 3-D and widescreen processes shattered the proscenium; and today's "virtual reality" and holographic projections surround and engulf the senses in a totality of synesthetic experience.

Each successive technological innovation has stripped away a protective veil of illusion. As long as a picture image's illusion was "partial," as Rudolph Arnheim has argued—that is, delimited by fixed boundaries and deprived of color, sound, and dimension—the viewer could exist in a happy state of complicity with the screen, suspended between belief and doubt, his imagination commingling with the illusion. He was, in effect, the shepherd happy in his Arcadia. But when filmmakers kept upping the ante with increasingly realistic effects, they upset that harmonious equipoise, subjecting the viewer to the insistent, multisensory proddings of those new mechanical gods of the screen, Showscan and IMAX. In sum, asserts Gunning, the film medium's unprecedented potential for *realism* has always been its primary power—"its ability to convince spectators that the moving image was, in fact, palpable and dangerous . . . swallowing, in its relentless force, any consideration of representation—the imaginary perceived as real" (819).

Meanwhile, as early as 1906, borne on the rails of the Southern Pacific Railroad, filmmakers were invading the Garden of the San Fernando Valley and the northwest sector of the city of Los Angeles. The sounds of their bulldozers, hammers, and clattering cameras shattered the bucolic stillness of the fig orchards and orange groves. They re-created the area in their own image. They invaded Hollywood Boulevard and brought in New York-style shops and delicatessens. They appropriated the once-quiet streets for staged car chases

and train wrecks. They established their own cities (like Carl Laemmle's Universal City) and built their own railroad lines. And in the heart of Hollywood, on Wilton Place, they erected the area's first synagogue. The solid, conservative denizens of Los Angeles recoiled in shock. Their placid existence would never be the same again.

The Machine in the Garden in Hollywood Films

Hollywood films have represented the "Garden" in many ways, as a rural farm, a small town, an innocent childhood, a baseball game, the hopeful vision of a newly arrived immigrant—that is, any state of order and harmony that is disrupted or threatened in some way by the "Machine," which may be, by turns, a polluting factory, a "forbidden" science, warfare, an extraterrestrial space ship, or an atomic bomb.

To recount even a fair sampling of these titles from all the popular genres is quite beyond the scope of this essay. A few will have to suffice. Issues of ecology and land reclamation surface in John Ford's epic of the dust bowl migrations, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), and the cautionary tales of John Boorman's *The Emerald Forest* (1985), John McTiernan's *Medicine Man* (1992), and Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* (1993). In the Ford film, Caterpillar tractors come hard on the heels of dust storms and drought to uproot the "Okies" from their farms. "They come, they come and pushed me off," wails Muley (John Qualen) to his neighbor, Tom Joad (Henry Fonda), his voice counterpointing images of formations of tractors, their mechanical throats chuckling while their iron paws stamp and flatten his farm house; "they come with the 'cats, the caterpillar tractors. . . . And for every one of them there was ten-to-fifteen families thrown right of their homes . . . thrown right out into the road." In the Boorman and McTiernan films, bulldozers present a threat to the ecological balance of the Brazilian rainforests. Environmental pollution is the overriding theme of the

Altman picture—the helicopters' spread of Malathion insecticide over Los Angeles creates a fogbank that poisons and corrupts everything and everybody in the multiterred story.

Many westerns, such as David Miller's *Lonely Are the Brave* (1962), Ford's *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964), and Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990), deal with the demise of those archetypal figures of western myth, the cowboy and the Indian (both shepherds of their own Arcadia, if you will). In the first, a ruggedly individualist cowboy (Kirk Douglas) flees on horseback from pursuing helicopters, jeeps, and diesel trucks. Crushed under the wheels of the truck, he lies dying while a moving epitaph—an elegy to the departed romance of the West—is spoken over his body. The latter two films indict the greed and corruption of "Manifest Destiny" that has appropriated and despoiled the Garden of the Native American, expelling its peoples from their lands.

On a lighter note, many musicals thrive on the spectacle of con men, rock stars, and devils invading the Gardens of old-fashioned Americana—Mr. Applegate (Ray Walston) wields his infernal powers to corrupt the institution of baseball in *Damn Yankees* (1958); rock 'n' roll idol Conrad Birdie (Jesse Pearson) introduces the teenagers of the sleepy town of Sweet Apple to sexually suggestive music in *Bye, Bye Birdie* (1963); Harold Hill (Robert Preston) hatches a plot to swindle the gullible yokels of River City, Iowa, in *The Music Man*.

In a spate of science fiction, fantasy, and horror films beginning in the Cold War era, many Machines of both earthly and extraterrestrial origin have invaded America's Garden of complacency and conformity. The atomic bomb is either an impending threat to planetary survival (Sidney Lumet's *Fail-Safe*, 1964) or a global destroyer (Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*, 1964). Weird extraterrestrials, armed with deadly weapons, threaten the planet in popular classics such as Robert Wise's *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) and George Pal's *The War of the Worlds* (1953).

Literal replays of the Machine in the Garden metaphor include Jack Clayton's *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1983), wherein an infernal locomotive brings death and damnation into the idyllic hamlet of Green Town, Illinois; and Douglas Trumbull's *Silent Running* (1972), which chronicles the threats to earth's last remaining garden, a dome floating in deep space and superintended by a latter-day version of Virgil's pastoral shepherd, Freeman Lowell (Bruce Dern). But perhaps no science fiction film better exemplifies the Machine in the Garden myth than Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1969). The black monolith that periodically appears and astonishes protohominid and astronaut alike is nothing less than a cosmic intruder into the Garden of Man, whose every appearance precipitates yet another stage in human evolution.

Last, among the many pertinent comedies is that nifty little cartoon by Chuck Jones called "Duck Amuck." For most of its length, Daffy Duck—a maniacal Virgilian shepherd if there ever were one—is persecuted by an unknown outside force that invades his space with a giant pencil and almost erases him out of existence. In this case, it turns out that the sadistic agency of his confusion is none other than that embodiment of the urban slickster and con man, Bugs Bunny! "Ain't I a stinker?" smiles the Wabbit.

Television and Video in the Garden

Many motion pictures have depicted proliferating media and communications technologies as latter-day Machines in the American Garden. This reflects, in the words of Jonathan Romney, "the mindset of a society still beginning to come to terms with the implications of media and political manipulation" (39).

The mere presence of a television set is enough to disrupt the family idyll in Barry Levinson's *Avalon* (1990) and Albert Brooks's *Reel Life* (1973). *Avalon* is an affecting elegy to the blasted hopes of an immigrant family come to America. The saga of the Krichinsky family

(based on Levinson's mother's family) begins with the arrival of Sam Krichinsky (Armin Mueller-Stahl) in Baltimore in 1914 as he looks ahead to a new start in this Paradise he calls, appropriately, Avalon ("It was the most beautiful place you've ever seen in your life!"). By the story's end, however, America's urban push has despoiled the Krichinsky garden, and the family members have fled to the suburbs. "I keep getting farther and farther away from Avalon," Sam laments. The film concludes with a reprise of Sam's initial vision of Avalon, but now we know it to be no longer a shining hope but a failed dream.

More to the point of this discussion, *Avalon* is a critique of the invasion of the American Garden by that one-eyed monster—television. From the very moment a television set invades the Krichinsky home in the early 1950s, family relationships begin to deteriorate. It is amusing, at first, to see everybody grouped before the set, attracted to the sheer novelty of the test patterns. Later, however, they become so preoccupied with sitcoms, quiz shows, and movies that they spend more and more time each other. Family gatherings begin to resemble wakes, whose participants sit, stunned, before the flickering set. The Thanksgiving dinner tradition, where hitherto people talked and laughed together around the big table, is replaced by a silent cluster of TV trays around the tube. Finally, old Sam Krichinsky sits alone in his room in the nursing home, the television set his only companion.

Reel Life is a satiric take on the 1972 PBS documentary series *An American Family*. The twelve-hour series documented a seven-month period in the life of the William C. Loud family of Santa Barbara, California. During that time, the family, generally regarded as a "candy box" ideal of the American home, underwent severe disruptions, resulting in revelations of, among other things, ongoing marital infidelity (the parents ultimately divorced) and the homosexuality of

one of the family members. Brooks's *Reel Life* mercilessly indicts the cinema-verité filmmaking practices of *An American Family* as a calculating, meddlesome, and disruptive intrusion of privacy. Brooks portrays himself as the opportunistic director who not only has no compunction about invading the homes of his subjects, but who does not scruple to engage in a disastrous affair with one of the family members.

The New Technological Garden

Recent motion pictures reverse the Machine in the Garden paradigm. In Alex Proyas's *Dark City* (1998) and Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998), the Machine now is the Garden, a new kind of media-driven pastoral space of

technological perfection and urban anonymity. The peaceful tranquility of Hawthorne's Concord Woods has been replicated by the artificially controlled and/or computer-generated wraparound environments of television studios, malls, theme parks, and bubble-dome cities.

In these films the disruptive force that now invades the Garden and shatters its illusions is not the intrusive Machine, but, ironically, the *hand of man*. The protagonists of *Dark City* and *The Truman Show*, John Murdoch (Rufus Sewell) and Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey), respectively, beat their fists against the machine-tooled facades of their bubble cities and dream of a counter Arcadia, a tropical paradise—for Murdoch it is a place called "Shell Beach," and for Truman it is the Fiji Islands.

References

Filmography

An American Family (1972, D)
Angels with Dirty Faces (1938, F)
Avalon (1990, F)
Bad Company (1971, F)
Black Diamond Express (1896, SF)
Bye, Bye Birdie (1963, F)
Cheyenne Autumn (1964)
Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977, F)
The Conversation (1974, F)
Crash (1997, F)
Damn Yankees (1958, F)
Dances with Wolves (1990, F)
Dark City (1998, F)
The Day the Earth Stood Still (1951, F)
Dead End (1936, F)
Demon Seed (1977, F)
Dr. Strangelove, or: How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Bomb (1964, F)
EdTV (1999, F)
The Emerald Forest (1985, F)
Enemy of the State (1998, F)
Fail-Safe (1964, F)
Full Metal Jacket (1987, F)
Gattaca (1997, F)
The General (1926, F)
The Grapes of Wrath (1940, F)
Lonely Are the Brave (1962, F)
The Magnificent Ambersons (1942, F)
Medicine Man (1992, F)
Millennium Man (1999, F)
The Music Man (1962, F)

1984 (1955, F; 1984, F)
Paths of Glory (1957, F)
The Red Badge of Courage (1951, F)
Reel Life (1973, F)
Robocop (1987, F)
Sex, Lies, and Videotape (1989, F)
Short Cuts (1993, F)
Silent Running (1972, F)
Something Wicked This Way Comes (1983, F)
Star Trek: First Contact (1996, F)
Terminator 2 (1991, F)
THX 1138 (1970, F)
To Kill a Mockingbird (1962, F)
The Truman Show (1998, F)
2001: A Space Odyssey (1969, F)
Videodrome (1982, F)
War of the Worlds (1953, F)

Bibliography

Adams, Henry. *The Education of Henry Adams*. 1907. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974.
 Arnheim, Rudolph. "The Two Authenticities of the Photographic Media." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51.4 (1993): 537-540.
 Brosnan, John. *Future Tense: The Cinema of Science Fiction*. New York: St. Martin's, 1978.
 Davis, Keith F. *An American Century of Photography: From Dry-Plate to Digital*. New York: Abrams, 1990.
 Fielding, Raymond. *A Technological History of Motion Pictures and Television*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

Gunning, Tom. "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator." In Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism*, 818-832. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
 Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1964.
 Minnis, Stuart. "Digitalization and the Instrumentalist Approach to the Photographic Image." *Iris* 25 (1998): 1-11.
 Mitchell, William. *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992.
 Musser, Charles. *The Emergence of Cinema*. New York: Scribner's, 1993.

Nash, Roderick. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982.
 Romney, Jonathan. "The New Paranoia: Games Pixels Play." *Film Comment* 34.6 (1998): 39-43.
 Sanford, Charles I. *The Quest for Paradise: Europe and the American Moral Imagination*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961.
 Schivelbusch, Wolfgang. *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century*. New York: Urizen, 1979.
 Smith, Henry Nash. *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950.
 Susman, Warren I. *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Pantheon, 1984.