



**THE
GREAT
BRAIN
SUCK**

**AND OTHER
AMERICAN EPIPHANIES**

EUGENE HALTON

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EUGENE HALTON is professor of sociology and American studies at the University of Notre Dame and the author of *Meaning and Modernity: Social Theory in the Pragmatic Attitude* and *Bereft of Reason: On the Decline of Social Thought and Prospects for Its Renewal*, both published by the University of Chicago Press.

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CONTENTS

Preface

ix

1. The Great Brain Suck

1

2. Out of the Fifties

43

3. Interlude: Go Man Go

67

4. The Hunter-Gatherers' World's Fair

70

5. Life, Literature, and Sociology in Turn-of-the Century Chicago

86

6. Communicating Democracy: Or Shine, Perishing Republic

112

7. Lem's Master's Voice	139
8. An American Epiphany in Nashville	168
9. The House on Mount Misery	177
10. The Art and Craft of Home	206
11. Europiphanies	229
12. The Last Days of Lewis Mumford	241
13. Teleparodies	268
14. His One Leg	283
Notes	297
Acknowledgments	309
Index	311

Color plates follow p. 194

PREFACE

These diverse essays consider the ways a variety of ideas, works, and practices reveal uniquely American themes. They delve into American life in all the varied senses the term *epiphanies* might suggest: bodyings forth of ideas, showings, manifestations, even visionary appearances. I harvest ideas from familiar settings and more obscure and unexpected terrain – including my own epiphanies – to expose neglected masters, narratives, and artifacts, and to reveal central motifs of American life in a new light.

The “quintessential American” can be found in exemplary people or their works, to be sure – a number are portrayed here. But that person can also be found in the Joneses next door, or in your own back yard or living room – or mine, or in your local tavern, the nearest mall, nuclear bombs, or even in The Parthenon in Nashville, as I discovered to my amazement on a couple of occasions.

The essays range freely in style as well as content over a broad, varied territory and are not intended to develop a single story line. I am not attempting a linear tour of American culture, but rather what Kenneth Burke called “perspective by incongruity,” of lateral and nonlinear developments both in the ordering of chapters and the organizing within them. Feel free to roam the book, nonsequentially. The term *epiphany* (Greek *epiphaino*, “to appear upon, manifest,” from the prefix *epi-*, “upon,” and the verb *phaino*, “appear”)

connotes “perspective by incongruity,” wherein an unexpected illumination or manifestation brings a new way of seeing, kaleidoscopically.

Moving, for example, from considering nuclear America of the 1950s in chapters 2 and 3 to early twentieth-century St. Louis and Chicago in chapters 4 and 5, backtracks how the power structure that emerged in the fifties was already prefigured in the dynamos and cultural energies Henry Adams presciently described. It is a peeling away of historical materials rather than a chronological narrative of them, in order to provide, as Lewis Mumford once put it, a “useable history” through which to consider contemporary American culture.

Chapter 4, “The Hunter-Gatherers’ World’s Fair,” juxtaposes Geronimo and Ota Benga at the St. Louis World’s Fair with Max Weber and Henry Adams at the same fair: quite an unlikely quartet! Yet incongruity through juxtaposition provides a way to develop the story of Ota Benga and to contrast the hunter-gatherers with the civilized power structure that confronted them. One of the major points of the chapter is to view America and modern civilization through the very different eyes of the hunter-gatherers assembled at that world’s fair.

Epiphanies are not only subjects for describing; they also constitute a varied form of expression. James Joyce’s free-associative writing from the inner life of some of his characters in *Ulysses* and other works is but one example of the boundless possibilities of epiphany as form. Joyce’s narrator in *Stephen Hero* offers Stephen’s view: “By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself. He believed that it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments.” Joyce manifests one perspective here, but there are many others, some not so sudden, some not so spiritual — all radiant, perhaps, but some radioactive as well.

I use the form of epiphany as a means of being free, free in the sense in which Ralph Waldo Emerson described the American scholar: “The world, — this shadow of the soul, *or other me*, lies wide around. Its attractions are the keys which unlock my thoughts and make me acquainted with myself. I run eagerly into this resounding tumult. I grasp the hands of those next [to] me, and take my place in the ring to suffer and to work, taught by an instinct, that so shall the dumb abyss be vocal with speech.” The American scholar of today, sadly, has become a quite different creature from the one envisioned by Emerson. Ingrown with expertise, hidebound by “peer-reviewed” juggernauts and university standards designed to insure bureaucratic conformity, intellectuals too easily shrink from the “resounding tumult” in which free

thinking thrives. Reader be warned: I prefer to take the “life” part of “intellectual life” seriously, wherever it takes me.

In the rise of technological and acquisitive materialism in twentieth- and twenty-first-century America, one recurrent theme is the tension produced between the ideals of technicalism and consumerism versus that of a democratic public life. Early chapters focus on some key symbols of materialism in post-World War II America, including the automobile and its transformative effects on social life; radioactivity as master symbol for the materialization of the transcendent in the twentieth century; and on the increasing influence of mechanical and electronic domestic devices of all sorts in the home (particularly relating to the mass media and entertainment industries).

I view America since World War II as problematically guided by a power-oriented culture, which, in the names of national security and convenience, has tended to reshape America toward a hierarchical machine model of society—toward *megatechnic America*—and against the requirements of democratic community. The history of nuclear power alone, from the increasingly lethal and expensive development of weapons in the cold war and the ways in which they dictated American foreign policy, to the promises of virtually cost-free energy, suggest that radioactivity has functioned as the invisible specter of the old American dream of the New Jerusalem.

Radioactivity, which perhaps defines twentieth-century materialism as bronze, silver, and stone did for earlier ages (and which silicon may do for the twenty-first century), proved to be a seemingly immaterial but deadly power that we have yet to harness. Yet both public and domestic life in a democratic society demand that technical products and the technical way of thinking serve as means to the good life, and not usurp their place as means to become the intended or unintended goals of life. Hence a crucial question dealt with throughout the book, despite a wide range of content, is how American culture—and indeed world culture—can regain human autonomy in the face of a seemingly irresistible automatic culture.

Conservative Republican president Dwight D. Eisenhower, former general and allied military forces commander in World War II, used the term *the military-industrial complex* in his farewell speech as president on January 17, 1961, to describe the dangerous expansion of bureaucratic purposes taking on a profit-making life of their own. The Left later used the term to criticize the United States as an out-of-control imperial power during the Vietnam War. Despite the criticisms, the power complex has continued to expand its reach both globally and especially in America, outwardly and inwardly, so I have updated the term to *the postdemocratic military-industrial-academic-entertainment-sport-food complex*. I like the way it rolls off the tongue.

Currently, American culture — and global culture more generally — seems bent on extending machine ways of living without limit. The epiphany of the robot as *deus ex machina* — the god out of the machine — is a delusion that may prove our final undoing, as life becomes ever more dominated by electronic devices. Although techno-mania is a defining feature of American life, there is another America, rooted in the vision of the organic, that has inspired Americans since long before there were Americans or America, and that continues to animate the American vision today.

The same American culture that has promoted “automatic” ways of living also provides alternatives, ranging across the possibilities for meaning found in the artifacts and activities of domestic and public life, the problematic quest for spontaneity in a range of postwar arts and in relation to earlier American artists and thinkers, and unlikely connections between American themes and non-American artists and thinkers.

One sees this, for example, in the uniquely American visions of Lewis Mumford (1895–1990) and Wharton Esherick (1883–1970), both of whom could be regarded as exemplars and nodal points of American culture. Esherick, who has been called “the dean of modern American furniture design,” was a twentieth-century Thoreau in wood and a friend of writers Sherwood Anderson and Theodore Dreiser and of architect Louis Kahn, among others. Although central to the emergence of the “art furniture” movement in America, and a major influence on his younger contemporaries such as Sam Maloof and Wendell Castle, Esherick has only recently begun to be recognized. Heavily illustrated “coffee table” books on furniture are now mentioning him as a central figure, but are only beginning to show photographs of his work. His life and place in American culture has languished in obscurity. Of particular interest to me is Esherick’s vision of domestic life, realized in the structure and life-history of his own home.

Similarly, the actual home of Lewis Mumford in Amenia, New York, where I visited with him and his wife Sophia over a few years before his death, provides a take-off point for recollections of and reflections on his life and work as a public intellectual. Here I am primarily interested in Mumford as a manifestation of American culture as well as a thinker now strangely neglected. His work extended far beyond his better-known writings on cities and architecture, and included a general philosophy of life. Mumford has been criticized by some as a Luddite, by others as excessively pessimistic and moralistic. Yet a number of his dark observations resonate with those of Herman Melville and philosopher Charles Peirce, two other Americans who seemed to break with American optimism. Chapter 12 explores why such

views can be seen as distinctively American, and what the limitations and possibilities of such visions are.

Early chapters deal with embodiments of public and domestic life in America and of the tensions in maintaining each in the face of a culture oriented toward mass consumption and automatic convenience. These chapters include discussions of a number of public symbols, such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the International Airstream Travel Trailer convention, of how the artifacts and activities of the domestic environment symbolize "home-life," and of the dual public and private place of electronic media in what I am terming *pax electronica*, the "peace" induced by the matrix of electronic devices that increasingly permeate everyday life and consciousness in America and globally. *Pax electronica* as a *pax electronica*.

The theme of a *pax electronica* also appears in later chapters that consider manifestations of invisibility, immaterial materialism, and secrecy. Radio-activity again emerges as a master symbol in American culture since World War II, as the invisible specter of the New Jerusalem, along with the cult of celebrity and consumption culture. To give one example, a critical analysis of the novel *His Master's Voice*, by Polish writer Stanislaw Lem, which deals with a fictional secret research project modeled after the old Manhattan Project, provides a take-off point for my discussions of the place of secrecy in science and public life, and of the American victims of nuclear testing, whose numbers by most estimates are greater than the American dead of the Korean, Vietnam, and Iraq wars combined.

Epiphanies, as incandescent manifestations, also include the visionary, and I have included, to be true to this aspect of the form, some of my own American epiphanies. Our age tends to denigrate the inner life as "merely" subjective, as though "insight," in the literal sense, cannot also be insightful, opening felt portals to self and world. In my case, visions of a world's fair, of The Parthenon in Nashville, and of hurricanes, made manifest sensings of things of which I was not consciously aware, and ideas worth weaving. But are they objective knowledge, the modern rational reader might well ask. Why do you think the subjective is cleanly separated from the objective, I might reply, for all that is now known was first imagined, sensed, and felt, however darkly. Read them as openings, not closures, as invitations to run eagerly into the resounding tumult.

1

Excerpt

THE GREAT BRAIN SUCK

ignition

The 1990s ushered in a new phase of postmodern decay in America: virtuality as virtue. The year 1990 is a convenient decade marker for the change, when superstores begin to blitz already mall-crazed America, when cheap imitation ethnic restaurants give way to high quality virtual “local” ethnic restaurant franchises – and gluttony spawns an obesity epidemic – when high quality superbookstore and supercafe franchises colonize city and mall alike, when Americans finally and voluntarily surrender those chunks of time not already owned by television to their newly purchased smart typewriter contraptions. Could anyone imagine just twenty-five years ago the extent to which mass quantities of the leisure classes of the advanced industrial nations would spend significant leisure time “typing?” Or “mousing?”

The great fear of “y2k” was that computers would not function after the new millennium began. But that was a minor problem in comparison with the absorption of people by machine-system activities. The old vision of the human of the future was a spindly creature with an enormous brain. Now we know that vision was wrong, because we are making the human of the future right now, “it” is already well underway – that pathetic genderless creature – and we know in what remains of our Internetted souls that it will eventually be an

obese, pinheaded creature with huge, thick typing fingers. Evolution has selected carpal tunnel syndrome as the means of weeding out the mechanically weak stock, and the Internet as the means of brain sucking the populace, of increasing its dependency on externally derived information that bypasses the need for actual thinking, feeling, and experiencing. We've already witnessed the brain suck of checkout attendants, who formerly possessed the ability for common arithmetic, by calculating machines.

More and more information is pumped into the world every minute of every day and yet America dumbs down: more and more information about the world, and yet people know less and less about it; more and more sources of history available and less and less knowledge of history; more and more information about the cultures of the world and yet less and less awareness.

Do people accumulate this information by day, and have it removed, like night soil, by dark? There is a vast brain suck occurring. But from where? How can you flood brains with information, and by doing so, precisely in the act of doing so, suck them dry?

How is it that we can look at and listen to so much information bombarding our eyes and ears, yet apparently see not and hear not? It is not simply a physiological problem but a cultural and moral one, which involves all the fibers of our being, including the physical. It is the same problem, I suppose, that causes me misgivings when I see those people in health clubs reading on bicycle machines, iPods engaged, abstracted from the pure being of their bodies. You know when you look at them that they cycle away more miles on those indoor machines than the ones they passed while driving in their automobiles to get to the health club. But these are physiologically measurable and paid-for miles.

My technical term for this neuro-metaphysical disorder is *brain suck*. It derives from a techno-culture bent on replacing self-originated experience with rationally derived commodity forms, and on colonizing the inner life with substitute emotions, embedded to function like Internet "cookies," linked to the system. The result is what might be called, only half-fancifully, "brain-oid tissue," surrogate synapses all linked to and ultimately produced by the Great and Powerful Machine. This is not the same as "brain drain," which means the flight of intelligence to other countries. A drain is a leak, but brain suck is a kind of vacuuming effect, sucking awareness from one's life into the void of the undead zombie-zone. One might think that this process occurs by brainwashing, and in a sense it does. But the chief means by which brain suck operates is what I prefer to call *brain rinsing*, a seemingly kinder, gentler approach that is no less effective. Brainwashing is usually through forcible punishing torture, aiming at a total conversion. But brain rinsing achieves

brain suck piecemeal, usually through repetitive, pleasurable miniactivities, none of which alone may be compromising, but all of which together add up to a compromised self running on automatic.

In contrast, by *self-originated experience*, I mean that the self, though conditionable and though developed through habits of conduct, involves a spontaneous, sensing reasonableness not reducible to its habits and conditioning, one whose purport is self-determination. This self requires bodily involvement in the moment and the availability of feelings, needs, desires, and goals to make sense of that moment. It requires the awareness needed to continue to be itself in the moment, that is, to determine itself in its environment as a socially autonomous being. I want to explore now some of the varieties of brain suck with reference to the colonization of the human self by consumption culture – mostly in its American version – with some gear shifts.

gear shift

Let us imagine a day in the life of “techno-colonized person,” who, in the spirit of H. L. Mencken’s term “boob-oisie,” I will call BIG Zombie. In the American version, BIG Zombie moves by machine, spending an average of sixty-seven minutes a day for males and forty-four minutes for females a day driving an automobile, according to a study by the U.S. Department of Transportation.¹ BIG Zombie enjoys this time in the auto, and perceives hurtling speedily down the road as his or her “time to think and enjoy being alone.” This auto-meditative attitude is more pronounced among the young, declines with age, and also increases with wealth.²

Far from the view of modern culture as a purely rationalizing system, there is this other side to it, its need to make connection to the human soul. American consumer culture, for example, represents a fully techno-totemic system in place. Do you need to make up a personal name for your automobile when it’s already a Mustang, a Stingray, a Cobra, a Jaguar? If you want to display your luxus, what better way than through a Lexus?

The American car system functions as a crucial part of this consumer techno-totemic system. It is a pure example of a technical system at work, and yet it needs to attach irrational symbols of desire, either predatory or sexual, to itself, to a machine. Driving becomes a technical form of hunting or eroticism or luxury or musical emotion or even meditation, and the auto experience is supposed to confer those qualities onto the owner or the driver.

The word *automobile* means self-moving, and that is an important part of the symbolism of cars. You can not only move in a solitary place, seemingly

away from the rat race even while you are driving in it, but it is also supposed to give you the freedom to move within the social system.

American culture today highlights the more general battle between autonomy and the automaton. The great dream of the modern era has been to provide for and enlarge the autonomy of humankind through technical invention and control over the necessities of life. As that dream has been realized it has all too frequently revealed itself in diabolical reversal. The vast technical culture and wealth of America have not led the way toward the good life, but instead toward the goods life, toward a reified culture centered in commodities rather than citizens, toward an ultimate goal of automatic things and away from human autonomy. This is not the necessary outcome of the development of technology but the consequence of the withering of human purpose in the face of the “magic” of technique. The 1980s signified the new phase of the electronics revolution underway, but I would suggest something more sinister. It was as if the long-held human tension between fear of and fascination for the robotic finally dissolved, as if the fascination for the magic of the automaton overwhelmed the understandable fears for its power to alienate the human and left only the ideal of a fusion of humans with the powerful instruments of the automatic: humanoids, terminators, carbon-based units.

Perhaps the small child playing with “transformer” robots or video games, the larger child mall cruising or earlocked in an iPod or similar audio device, the adult in a health club exercising on an electronic bicycle while watching a video display of a route or a large screen television set, are all symbols of an emergent creature that willingly would prefer to live in “virtual reality” rather than the real thing. Yet who can deny the conveniences the machines launched in the 1980s and 1990s afford? Still, the question is whether they truly enhance autonomy or automatism, and clearly both outcomes are possible.

Probably you, dear reader, and surely I, would defend the word-processing computer as providing greater autonomy. But talk to an office worker whose keystrokes are being monitored or who has suffered repetitive-motion damage. Talk to the marketer or secret police person who may be monitoring which Web sites you have visited. What books are the video-game-expert child not reading? Consider Morgan Pozgar, the thirteen-year-old girl who won the LG National Texting Championship and its \$25,000 cash reward in April, 2007, by typing the following lines from a *Mary Poppins* tune on her cell phone in a mere fifteen seconds: “Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious! Even though the sound of it is something quite atrocious. If you say it loud enough you’ll always sound precocious.” The technical information she had absorbed and technical facility she had developed to achieve this feat by sending an average of over eight thousand text messages a month resulted in a girl with a lot of money and a

typical 'tween's dream of consuming. When asked what she wanted to do with the money, she said, "I'm going to go shopping and buy lots of clothes." She wants to go into fashion when she grows up.

Or consider what a woman college student said after breaking up with a boyfriend and fellow student who played video games four hours a day, and said he was trying to reduce to fifteen hours a week: "He said he was thinking of trying to cut back to fifteen hours a week. I said, 'Fifteen hours is what I spend on my internship, and I get paid \$1,300 a month.' That's my litmus test now: I won't date anyone who plays video games. It means they're choosing to do something that wastes their time and sucks the life out of them."³

What drain does each additional device put on time spent together in the home? The fact that the family meal has been increasingly fragmented through individualized microwaved meals, through the intrusion of television, through increased dependence on fast-food restaurants ought to be taken as a sign of how increasingly difficult it is to do simple activities together, relatively unintruded upon by high tech. It is now a dietary commonplace that meals made at home from scratch are healthier than processed foods, and the shared family meal is good for the soul as well as for the body. Yet Americans have been shrinking away from homemade meals. This is not simply a class issue, as though the poor can only afford unhealthy foods, for the best diets in the world tend to be "peasant" diets. It is not cheap rice, beans, and greens that are causing massive obesity, but high-fat, high-fructose unhealthy diets leveraged by the heavily subsidized industrial-food complex, manifest in processed foods and especially in fast food, which still remains more expensive than home cooking.

The presumed purpose of the high-tech household is to transfer everyday necessities — heating, cooking, cleaning, and so forth — to machines, in order to increase "leisure time." Yet leisure is largely a machine activity in America. Consider that the average American spent three thousand hours consuming media in 1988, of which 1,550 hours were devoted to television, and 1,160 to radio. Yet the average American household has steadily increased television time over the decades, most recently going from an average of seven hours and seventeen minutes in 1995 to just under eight hours (seven hours and fifty-eight minutes) in 2003 according to Nielson surveys. And this occurred in the decade when the epiphany of the computer screen materialized throughout America, compounding "screen time." Exposure to advertising has also expanded drastically in the past twenty years, as has sexual content of programming.

These numbing numbers suggest that Americans devote an enormous amount of time to the daily habit of listening and watching. Americans seemed to enter the 1980s as "joggers" and to exit as quasi-stationary "couch

potatoes,” going on to computer jockey status in the 1990s. Perhaps the great tendency to sit—in autos and in front of televisions—was perhaps offset somewhat by a reported rise in the “standing breakfast,” eaten next to a kitchen counter, or by stand-up eating in fast food restaurants. But these standing and sitting patterns only testify to overly mechanized life.

As part of the larger dynamics of the modern era, American culture has transformed technique from a means to the good life to a virtual goal unto itself, with the result that Americans have increasingly seemed to be willing to sacrifice the art and practice and struggles of concrete life to the conveniences of abstract technique: to give up the active cultivation of home life to the passive consumption of TV, TV dinners, take-out and fast road food; to give up multipurpose centers for civic life and local commerce to self-enclosed, privatized, behavior-monitoring shopping malls; to surrender the pursuit of autonomy to the accumulation of dollars and the identity-confirming rituals of consumption.

In real life, as the expression goes, shit happens. Virtual automatic consumption culture is designed, in stark contrast, to habituate us to an idealized techno-kitsch realm immunized from the necessary baggage of human life. To the extent that it does, it sucks from us the anchors of everyday life, those problematic face-to-face relations with family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers that are anything but ideal, and that, precisely in their limitations, force us to find our way in a common world. And for people living on the edges of sanity, those social anchors may be all that is keeping them from plunging, lemminglike, into the abyss.

gear shift

The Triumph of Pottersville

In the 1946 Hollywood Christmas film, *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey (played by Jimmy Stewart), depressed and suicidal, experiences a vision of what it would be like if he had never been born. His small town becomes a glittery sin city, Pottersville, named after the heartless town millionaire. Bailey sees that his job as town banker has been crucial in keeping the community spirit alive, and not only the economic welfare of his neighbors and fellow citizens. He returns from his hopelessness, renewed as the solid-guy-who-holds-the-town-together, and succeeds in the end in staving off Pottersville. Decency overcomes unbounded capitalistic greed and human baseness.

Moving from the image of late Depression and wartime America to 1950s postwar prosperity America, something far worse happens to the small town

myth. In the sci-fi classic *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), Dr. Miles J. Bennell, the lead character played by Kevin McCarthy, cannot hold the center together and loses everything, his town, his patients, his neighbors and friends, and even the object of his love, Becky.

Worse, the town is not lost to the tyrant, but to the postpersonality system of emotionless, conforming drones. Just as Vaclav Havel depicted the ascendance of the *posttotalitarian system* in communist countries after Stalin's death, we have the coming to being of what could be termed the *postdemocratic system* in America. By posttotalitarian he meant that totalitarianism, far from being over, had entered a new phase, shifting from the cult of personality characterizing the first generation of totalitarianism — with its Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, and Attaturk — to a system running on virtual automatic pilot. Similarly, by postdemocratic system I mean a society that has lost its grounded democratic processes — ranging from vital neighborhood institutions to national political culture — in favor of the “automatic pilot” of media, commercial, and celebrity system requirements.

Like its posttotalitarian counterpart, the postdemocratic system that was under assembly in the fifties, and that shifted into higher gear by the nineties, selects for an elite of cool-thinking functionaries, expanding their vegetative ways. Perhaps Microsoft Man would be a good term for this being, though the suggestion of a gender — male or female — however diminished, still seems beyond the capacities of this neutered creature. If the fifties had its “organization man,” who pledged allegiance to his company, perhaps we have seen since the nineties the emergence of postorganization person, whose only allegiance is to the system in general, regardless of the particular company or country.

The upper middle class and up has been becoming increasingly independent of both locale and public services through its money. Consider that 1 percent of American households own one-third of the private wealth, and the top 20 percent a full 84 percent of it; that if one moves to general financial wealth, 10 percent own about 80 percent of general financial wealth; and that average CEO pay (adjusted for inflation) between 1990 and 2005 skyrocketed almost 300 percent. During the same period, production workers' salaries increased a mere 4 percent, and, with inflation factored in, the federal minimum wage actually declined by 9 percent.⁴ Maximum wages soared, minimum wages suffered: the stairway to heaven got a lot longer.

The advantaged class can claim it got there by its own rugged individual effort, and that it is not racist, and in individual cases perhaps this can sometimes be the case. But the American elite are living increasingly in class-segregated enclaves, and their “public” school districts become means for class segregation, and class segregation largely overlaps with race segregation. Hence the

ideology of rugged individualism can become blindness, not only to how class structure imposes advantages and disadvantages unequally, but also to how much more than individual merit goes into living in a democracy. The basis of democracy is an inclusive common life, the opposite of exclusive distinction.

As Christopher Lasch said in his book *The Revolt of the Elites*, “meritocracy is a parody of democracy. It offers opportunities for advancement, in theory at least, to anyone with the talent to seize them, but ‘opportunities to rise,’ as R. H. Tawney points out in *Equality*, ‘are no substitute for a general diffusion of the means of civilization,’ of the ‘dignity and culture’ that are needed by all ‘whether they rise or not.’”⁵

Lasch was not criticizing individual effort, the means by which many in America found ways to prosperity. His point was that meritocracy has become both a way for Americans to deny realities of class and one of the names for a deformation of democracy that gives up the local rootedness of life for the greater cosmopolitan Ladder of Success. “The meritocrat” also used to be called yuppie (though perhaps now, no longer “young,” the new acronym should be “uppie?”). I prefer BIG Zombie.

Surveys on materialism, such as the Roper Center’s study of what people think constitute the good life, reveal material indicators, such as swimming pools, “a lot of money,” and “a job that pays more than average,” have increased while “quality of life” indicators, such as “happy marriage” or “interesting job,” have declined. In the same time period between 1975 and 1991 when dreams of material bounty increased, the percentage of people who think they can actually attain the good life declined from 35 to 23 percent.⁶ It seems that as people’s expectations for indicators of material wealth ballooned, that process was crowding out their expectations for actually living the good life. “Living large” has been replacing living well, and living large is proving to be a way of living unwell.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers got it right, for alien vegetating forces were stalking Americans. Yet the aliens were neither McCarthy-era paranoia-induced communists nor vegetable pods from outer space, but literally vegetable stalks from the mind of megatech America, which were en route in the second half of the twentieth century to absorb the American body. Through the progressive industrialization of corn products, and especially high fructose corn syrup from 1980 on, Americans began to overconsume ever-greater amounts of corn-based products, from soda pop to corn-fed meats, so that, as Michael Pollan points out, the American body today incorporates more corn than the Mexican body (which has a more varied diet on average). As Berkeley biologist Todd Dawson told Pollan, “When you look at the isotope ratios, we North Americans look like corn chips with legs.”⁷

Corn, considered a traditional staple of the American diet, of healthy corn flakes, of traditional Native Americans who originally developed maize in Central America, was a key ingredient in the transformation to megatechnic America, in the sugar-opiating of kids and adults through high fructose corn syrup and other corn-based sweeteners, and in the obesity and diabetes epidemics underway. Key to the expansion of corn culture was the decision to transform ammonium nitrate from the postwar munitions industry to fertilizer in 1947, setting the stage for radical increase in yield.⁸ Industrial corn culture is in this sense a direct product of the military-industrial complex.

Corn has colonized the American body through corn-sugaring, corn-fed cowburgers, and through pervasive industrial corn-based food, producing an overweight population numbed by food. The invasion of the body snatchers, in short, has actually happened; only it was corn fused to the megatechnic complex that ripped open a new niche: the industrial eater, BIG Zombie, capable of eating more and more. Consider that one-quarter of Americans eat fast food on any given day, that one in eight Americans are estimated to have worked for McDonald's, or that, as Eric Schlosser reports in his book *Fast Food Nation*: "In 1970, Americans spent about \$6 billion on fast food; in 2001, they spent more than \$110 billion. Americans now spend more money on fast food than on higher education, personal computers, computer software, or new cars. They spend more on fast food than on movies, books, magazines, newspapers, videos, and recorded music — combined."⁹

BIG Zombie can live in the fantasies of the BIG McMansion in the gated surveillance community, the BIG SUV, the BIG amounts of mall-gotten gains, the BIG obese body from believing the "merit" system of overconsumption, and feel no responsibility to anything more than his or her BIG butt plunking down in all of this excess, increasingly insulated from the common life. Meanwhile BIG Zombie Jr. is learning how to conform to the system properly, so that, clothed in the exquisite brands of success, Jr. will know how to press the merit buttons of the cage, and feel that he or she deserves all of these merit badges, and that those less privileged do not.

One could take the various *Star Trek* TV series and movies as personifying this rootless elite, alienated from family, friends, and neighborhood, living in a purely artificial convenience enclosure, militaristic, progress oriented, and propelled by extreme, bewildering mobility. These are precisely the elites Lasch spoke of in *The Revolt of the Elites and The Betrayal of Democracy*: "Those who covet membership in the new aristocracy of brains tend to congregate on the coasts, turning their back on the heartland and cultivating ties with the international market in fast-moving money, glamour, fashion, and popular culture. It is a question of whether they think of themselves as Americans

at all. The new elites are at home only in transit, en route to a high-level conference, to the grand opening of a new franchise, to an international film festival, or to an undiscovered resort. Theirs is essentially a tourist's view of the world — not a perspective likely to encourage a passionate devotion to democracy."¹⁰

Although the elite pictured by *Star Trek* grew more gender-equal and multicultural over the years, not much changed regarding their alienation from their home planet or their colonizing — while appearing not to interfere — “prime directive.” What is their real prime directive? To extend the federation of machines.

gear shift

From Metropolis to Dark City: The Triumph of Post-Pottersville

Metropolis: “Rotwang, give your robot this girl's (Maria) likeness.”

Fritz Lang's classic silent film *Metropolis* was a remarkably prescient insight into the brain suck that characterizes our time, as well as the megamachine of modern life. Released in 1927, the story traces the path young Freder — son of the master of Metropolis Joh Fredersen — takes after seeing poor worker children. They are brought to the leisure gardens of the elite by Maria, who Freder falls for. He sets off to find out more and enters the undercity of factories, literally set below the surface, where he ends up changing places with a hapless worker. The city is a haunting class structure literalized, with the workers' city deep below factories, and cryptlike ruins below it. There, Maria counsels the workers in their suffering: “Between the brain that plans and the hands that build there must be a mediator.” Cut to Freder, hands beating on chest.

Lang's *Metropolis* can be viewed through numerous lenses. From a Marxist view Freder looks a lot like Freder-ick (Friedrich) Engels, who similarly came from the wealth of a Manchester factory his father co-owned to a passionate commitment to relieve the plight of workers. Engels moved from Germany in 1842 as a twenty-two-year-old radical to work at a cotton mill his father co-owned, and which his father hoped would steer him away from his radicalism. While there Engels met Mary Burns, who introduced him to Manchester and to the plight of the English working class. He lived with her until her death in 1862.

Yet despite a revolt of the workers, resolution occurs through mediation, not Marxist overthrow. The hands of the workers and the head that is literally the word “capital” meet in a final handshake between the foreman and