

1

Modern Times: From Chaplin to Godard

When Aldous Huxley described a “brave new world” inspired by “his” modern times, he created a universe where nothing escaped the industrial machine. Serial production dictates its law to everything, including humans. Children and love stories are both produced on the assembly line. The new era has a new calendar in which the first year was 1909, the year the Model T was invented, and the heroes of the book curse the name of Ford when they are angry.¹

Indeed, nothing better illustrates the expectations and the disillusion of the twentieth century than the phenomenon called Fordism, whose two essentials are standardized products (all cars are black) and mass production (to minimize unit costs). Although children never quite came to be produced on the assembly line, love stories did. What was to become the Hollywood motion picture industry took its cue from the automobile industry. Using this example, which is as good as any other, to look behind the scene for a moment, we will find

an explanation for the tragic utopianism and naiveté that characterized the twentieth century.

The Stars

In order to join the world of serial production, a movie actor had to transform himself, becoming, as Edgar Morin said, a sort of mixed animal in which actors impose their personalities on their characters, who in turn impose their personalities on the actors.² The “star” thus created would be in demand, awaited at times with such fervor as Ava Gardner in *The Barefoot Contessa*, a character who first remains unseen and whom we see only through the perspective of others. The whole process of direction is actually constructed around the resolution of this contradiction: highlighting the renowned image of the star while conserving an essential portion of mystery. This allows actors to carry over the investment achieved through their earlier work as they proceed from film to film. Studios can thereby manufacture stars like new car models, and these investments are returned, thanks to iron-clad contracts, n as long a film career as possible.

The star constitutes the *design* of the product. Their mass production is subsequently accomplished through various genres of film. Gangster movies, westerns, costume epics, musicals, and comedies enable the consumers to identify ahead of time with the product they are going to consume. Thanks to this system, we generally “go to the movies” much more than we go to see a particular

movie. The idea of the genre in film enables two imperatives to be reconciled: product standardization proceeding from manufacture and product differentiation proceeding from consumption. From the production perspective, genre divisions also permit the repeated use of the same sets and the same extras, and the hiring of specialized scriptwriters and directors.

Film writing must obey mass-production's imperatives. The head of EMI said that the goal of that company's filmmaking was to be comprehensible to a half-literate Uruguayan. The quest for a good story, for which numerous scriptwriters can be sacrificed, is the system's supreme virtue. He explained that writers, when lured by sums that are colossal in comparison to book or theater revenues, must fall into step, writing on demand and at fixed hours. Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Dos Passos, Chandler, West, Huxley, Parker, Cain, Saroyan, Bukowski, and others joined the system. Hollywood thus invented a new class of writer: salaried, unpublished, rewritten, and at times even erased or reduced to writing anonymously.³

Twentieth-Century Jobs

The flamboyant, tragic destinies of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Marilyn Monroe, who both drowned the sorrow of their newfound status as "artist" in alcohol and depression, show us the other side of paradise: the calamities of a system that wanted to "standardize" the world in order to make it better. In *Où va le travail humain?* (first published in

1950),⁴ Georges Friedmann answered his own question by citing Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, author of *The Little Prince*, who asked, “Where are the United States going, and where are we ourselves going? . . . Man-robot, man-termite, man wavering between the assembly line and the pinocle table. Man expurgated of all his creative power and who no longer even knows, from the heart of his village, how to make up a dance or a song.” In the twentieth century, making workers more efficient seemed to consist of doing the utmost to separate them as radically as possible from their humanity. “One principal advantage of (well-) conceived division of labor is that it makes a task less conscious while reducing the strain on nerve centers accordingly.” These remarks from a corporate sociologist speak volumes about the idea of production’s being organized by assembly-line practices. The entire history of the twentieth century could thus be retold as the dehumanization of the world. The obsession with using standardization to augment production volume ever further was the source of the twentieth century’s pathologies in the most widely varied realms.

How could a century in which humans were largely free of the oppression of famine and in which they received education and universal health care have conceived of such a dehumanizing environment as the assembly line? The simplest way to answer this question is to acknowledge that there always exists a considerable disparity between productive and social spheres, i.e., between economy and society. Take the evolution of capitalism during the nineteenth century. One could say that the nineteenth

century was a feudal world that was “exported” to the cities.⁵ In the early days of factory work, schedules and customs remained the same as in the country: people got up early and went to bed late, and children worked. In part, the great misery of the life of a nineteenth-century worker was the transfer from the former peasant condition, easily illustrated by comparing statements about each of these two realities. The first of these is from Marx:

“That boy of mine,” spoke one woman, “when he was 7 years old I used to carry him on my back to and through the snow, and he used to have 16 hours a day. . . . I have often knelt down to feed him as he stood by the machine, for he could not leave it or stop.”⁶

The second, attributed to Vauban, describes rural life at the beginning of the eighteenth century:

To pull their plow, the peasants have to toil stooped almost to the ground like beasts. They have only small donkeys to pull it and some have been known to harness their scarcely clad wife alongside. They nourish themselves with rye bread without removing the bran which is heavy and as black as pitch. Indeed the children eat this bread as well; consequently a four-year-old girl has a belly as large as a pregnant woman’s.⁷

Dante would find the tortures of his inferno far surpassed by these two descriptions: the poverty is the same; only the context has changed.

From a managerial point of view, the internal organization of the early factory system remained largely modeled on medieval production. Reminiscent of the world of the trade guild, groups of workers passed their expertise from

generation to generation. An excellent illustration of the (first) industrial revolution is the iron and steel industry, the workings of which Yves Lequin summarizes as follows: "Empiricism still reigns with authority. It is a business of the eye when the glassworker or the founder opens the furnace because the smelt is ready to be extracted, the ear carefully listening to the sounds of machines or of the steel yard, the nose or the skin when one must distance oneself from the furnace."⁸ In fact the skilled worker remained the heir to guilds' "secrets" until the end of the nineteenth century. Witness how in its early days, in a completely elitist reading of its function, the principal American union, the AFL (American Federation of Labor), restricted its membership to skilled worker, excluding unqualified laborers, who most often were immigrants.⁹

With the advent of the assembly line, the landscape changed radically. Taylor's book *The Principles of Scientific Management* (1911) became the standard of the new industrial world. It brought the clock into the workshop, tracking the average time for each task and transforming the worker into an automaton who ever after would be powerless over his or her own job. Workers saw their contributions reduced to one identical movement, repeated indefinitely; they were expropriated of their own "know-how." Why did industry deprive itself of the wisdom of the worker, accumulated in the course of centuries of work? Simply because Taylor's system didn't want the same workers as before. Fordism supported itself with the illiterate masses and opened the door for the nineteenth-

century world to become a part of twentieth-century industrial capitalism. To simplify the comparison with what has been said of the early days of capitalism, we could say that the nineteenth-century society was exported to the factories of the twentieth century. Georges Friedmann notes in the American context that “the blacks, many of whom have recently come from the South, view as a promotion their massive entrance into large factories, their participation in imposing modern techniques in clean and well-paying jobs.”¹⁰ The assembly line was a pathway to integration that enabled blacks to escape the misery of the South. Benjamin Coriat recalls also that “the USA, more than any other country, had to pay for the absence of a sufficient number of skilled workers; and, even, until the 1960s, for the absence of workers, period.” Between 1880 and 1915, no less than 15 million new immigrants were recorded in the United States. The balance between skilled and unskilled workers was completely shattered. Taylorism enabled unskilled laborers to enter the production world en masse.

The price to be paid for this “integration” would be high. One could say that Taylorism was characterized by excluding the worker from the very production process in which he or she was intended to be the main character. Workers were excluded in relation to the work: all the necessary conditions for the task are taken care of by the company. They were excluded in relation to knowledge: the worker was not there to think. They were excluded in relation to time: the schedules and the breaks were fixed.

They were excluded in relation to speaking: lateral communication was forbidden. And finally, summing up all the other exclusions, they were excluded from the sphere of cooperation: the worker was alone at his post, making his remuneration strictly private. Taylor was not unaware of the human dramas that his system would generate: he admitted seeing the anger in his worker friends' eyes. But he also thought that workers becoming richer thanks to this new productivity would enjoy the fruits of this new prosperity outside of work, that there would be a time for suffering and a time for pleasure. As Henri Weber said, parodying Daniel Bell's work *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, "one must be conscientious by day and a reveler by night."¹¹

May 1968

But this schizophrenia had only one moment. The disparity between the economy and society made itself felt more and more. The time for "rectification" became inescapable. May 1968 can be interpreted as the time when the social bough supporting the modern industrial world finally broke. The baby boomers who instigated these uprisings refused to endure what they denounced as the hypocrisies of bourgeois society. "Never has a civilization reached such contempt for life, drowning in disgust; never has a generation exhibited such an enraged taste for living," the May '68 prophets wrote.¹² This passion for life was thrown up against the dehumanized world of the parents. In this

regard, it is symptomatic that the book often referenced in premonitory literature of the day should be *Les Choses*, in which Georges Perec ridicules possession as the only way of life. Provoked (or perhaps sincerely), Michel Foucault concludes the great 1960s work *The Order of Things* with this line: "As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end."¹³ As Jean-Pierre LeGoff reiterated, the goal of May 1968 was to find out if men could still hope to find "a purpose that carries them, a word and actions in which they can be truly engaged."

The May 1968 protests were important for their universal impact upon the entire industrialized world. In the United States, in Western Europe, and in Japan, the movement at work was one and the same. And the red line that divided the revolution was simply a matter of generations. Youth rejected the world of their parents, which for that matter explained why the countries where this period was the most tumultuous were also those where the most serious matters in dispute were those concerning parents: Germany, Italy, and Japan.¹⁴

Curiously, the "humanistic" values behind May 1968 have not always been apparent to the people involved. This misunderstanding was most tragic for all those who came to establish themselves as workers in factories. They discovered that the workers resented their young bourgeois freedom. For the workers themselves, the uprisings were a question of rejecting factory work and the general situation of the worker. The best proof of this is a film

from June 1968 showing the desperation of the young woman at the Wonder factory who refused to go back to work.¹⁵ We can even say that our “modern times” are born of these tears.

The cinema, which showed what assembly-line tactics could do for industry, had the best view of these implications. At the beginning of the 1960s, Hollywood was already experiencing the preliminary blows of May 1968. The style it had invented was exhausted. The public no longer accepted films lacking, as François Truffaut would later say, even the least bit of truth, where “the actors’ clothes, for example, are never wrinkled, their hair never undone.”¹⁶ The cinematic “new wave,” modeled in the image of the French May 1968 uprisings, perfectly embodied the new questioning of the Hollywood-style film. “For my part,” Truffaut wrote, “after having seen three thousand films in ten years, I can no longer stand the false, insipidly pretty love scenes of Hollywood cinema, as well as those rude, licentious, and no less contrived examples in French films.” And Jean-Luc Godard chimed in: “We cannot pardon you for never filming girls as we know and love them, boys as we see them every day, parents as we scorn or admire them, children as they astonish us or as they only spark indifference, in short, things as they really are.”¹⁷

This “refusal of convention, this burden of parody that distanced spectators to the point where they could no longer find their naive adherence to the codes of genre”¹⁸ would hit Hollywood head-on, but the industry would

not really die from these criticisms. Its economic strength would remain intact, and it would make the utmost use of that strength in epic productions, where its principal advantages continue to lie. However, Jacqueline Nacache concludes, not without some nostalgia, that “today the Hollywood-style cinema is like an orphan who would have inherited a huge fortune only to squander it in the hope of finding its parents.”

Computers and Freedom

The evolution experienced by the industrial world since the beginning of the 1970s is difficult to understand without seeing that its pioneers are those same baby boomers who led the charge in 1968. Manuel Castells summarizes this evolution: “Universities were the principal agents of diffusion and social innovation. The young people who frequent them discover and adopt new ways of thinking, of direction, of acting, and of communicating.”¹⁹ By various detours, it was through computer science that students raised in the anti-establishment culture of the 1960s American campus would find a way to shatter the world of standardization created by their parents. Taking the same metaphor we used in relation to the preceding revolutions, we can say that baby boomers coming from the universities would be exported to the new world of production via the computer revolution.

The computer saga²⁰ unfolded between 1960 and the 1980, but the fact that such a short period of time could

generate such an upheaval is anything but astonishing. Joseph Schumpeter explained that innovations ordinarily come in clusters. The first industrial revolution, associated with the steam engine, took shape in scarcely a decade (the 1770s); the second, associated with electricity, gave birth to a plethora of innovations between 1880 and 1890. "Our" industrial revolution, that associated with computers, "began" in 1971, when Intel invented the microprocessor, whose power, according to "Moore's Law," would double every 18 months. In 1976, Steve Wozniak and Steve Jobs launched the first personal computer, the Apple II. IBM countered in 1981 with the commercialization of its own version of the micro-computer. In 1984 Apple counterattacked with the Macintosh, which opened the era of the user-friendly computer. This competition (in which a third opportunist, Microsoft, would be the winner) allowed computers to become accessible to everyone and to break out of the cumbersome guardianship of the computer "professionals" who had reigned supreme in the 1970s.

It is possible to measure the "sociology" of these discoveries by following the events that give birth to the Internet. In 1969 the US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) set up a revolutionary communication network whose aim was to protect American military communications from disruption by nuclear strikes. This system was used more and more by academics who were under contract to the Pentagon. It entered into the public domain thanks to the invention of the modem in

1978 by two University of Chicago students who wanted to communicate free of charge, outside of the Department of Defense's server. A year later, three students from Duke University and the University of North Carolina fine-tuned a modified version of Unix that permitted connection of different computers via a normal phone line.²¹ Thanks to advances in fiber optics, the technology of transmitting messages in numerical bundles took flight. The Internet was born of these developments.

Today, computer science bears the same utopian hopes as electricity did when it was young. Computers are expected to make work autonomous in relation to the huge industrial structures born of the second industrial revolution. The question for the future will be the same as before: What is the utopian hope or the naiveté carried by this expectation?