

CHAPTER THREE

# Dystopia and Apocalypse

## *The Emergence of Critical Consciousness*

### CRITIQUE AS MASS CULTURE

The twentieth century has been a time of growing doubts about the viability of the modern project. So long as the pessimistic mood was confined to a few literary humanists, it had little impact. But since World War II, prophecies of doom have become clichés on everyone's lips. Social critical themes hitherto reserved for an intellectual elite are now mass political culture.

This chapter concerns one of these themes: the secularized myth of the end of the world, eschatology that no longer needs religion now that it has become a distinct technical possibility. The myth takes two forms, corresponding to the material and spiritual destruction of humanity by its own technology. Nuclear and environmental disaster promise the death of the human species, while future technologies of mind control are extrapolated from contemporary propaganda, advertising, and computers. In this chapter, I describe three significant moments in the process by which these apocalyptic and dystopian themes entered popular consciousness in the 1950s and 1960s.

I begin by tracing the rise of new doomsday myths inspired by the invention of the atom bomb. Scientists frightened by their own achievements were among the first to awaken to the posthistoric implications of technological advance. They tried to communicate their insight to the general public by writing both serious essays on public policy and science fiction. Although their hopes for nuclear disarmament were

quickly dashed, they did manage to provoke increasingly worried reflection on the likelihood of nuclear war.

That worry left its mark on the popular imagination through a genre of science fiction that depicts natural disasters of planetary scope: the cooling of the sun, the awakening of long-frozen monsters from another era, collision with another planet (Sontag 1969). Like the threat of nuclear war, such catastrophic events suspend the day-to-day conflicts of human history; energies must suddenly be mobilized beyond mere political rivalries in the interests of species survival. Written up as science fiction, the making of the bomb would be just another example of the disaster genre, with the conclusion left up to the reader's imagination.

While one type of postwar science fiction spread apocalyptic fears, another played on emerging dystopian anxieties. Literary projections of totally administered societies offered an ever more believable description of America in the 1950s. Television and generalized bureaucratization, while perhaps not quite as efficient as the techniques imagined by Huxley and Orwell, applied intense conformist pressures. Dystopian fiction reflects a new society in which the principal social cleavage divides the masters of the modern technical system from those who work and live within it.

These early responses to the new society were soon overshadowed by anti-Communist hysteria. The dominant culture repressed open hostility to the technocratic trend in America and projected dystopian imagery onto the Soviet rival. Dystopianism became a mass phenomenon for the first time in this twisted form, replacing New Deal liberalism as a popular interpretation of history.

In the 1960s an attempt was made to cast the Vietnam War in the cold war mold, with disastrous results. Films provide a good index of the growing crisis, although surprisingly, few were made about Vietnam at the time. Instead, the real war films of the period were light-hearted spy adventures that enjoyed enormous popularity at the height of the conflict. The second part of this chapter analyzes the emergence of popular dystopianism in these films.

Their strangest feature is their vision of the Enemy: in most of them an underdeveloped society exemplifies technocratic dictatorship. The Enemy never employs the guerrilla tactics of the Viet Cong; instead, it possesses an antlike army supplied with technologically advanced weapons, helicopters, and nuclear devices. The hero—a Westerner—is captured and, working from within, destroys the Enemy's technology

with his bare hands. Here underdevelopment represents the power of machines over men, while the West is the haven of humanism. The viewers are encouraged to identify with James Bond in a guerrilla war against Third World technocracy.

The absurdity of this projection and the war in Vietnam it justified soon became too obvious to deny. Other strands in the popular culture of the period focused on the technocratic threat in the advanced societies themselves. Dystopianism shifted targets and found a new focus at home. The rejection of conformity and expertise grew hand in hand in this period as more and more Americans began to see themselves as rebels against a rationalized order. Advertising capitalized on these confused feelings of revolt to market products identified with the new individualism. Meanwhile real revolt stirred in the rapidly expanding youth culture. The third part of this chapter traces these developments.

The concept of dystopia implies the impossibility of escape; in this period, social critique actually foresaw its own disappearance in the face of the mounting success of modern technology. Yet paradoxically, the notion of the disappearance of critique was a powerful stimulus to critique, and more than that, to action. Radical protest, banished along with communism as the cold war got going, returned in a new guise as the New Left was born from the mood of antidystopian resistance.

## AN END TO HISTORY

I suppose there's no way of putting the mushroom cloud back into that nice shiny uranium sphere.

—Isaac Asimov 1972b: 236.

## SCIENCE FICTION IN THE NUCLEAR AGE

Science fiction, at least a significant fraction of it, is the literature of the "other" culture, the culture of science and technology. Its double audience has always included not only scientists and technicians but also the general public in search of diversion. It communicates the experience and speculations of the former to the latter, representing the scientists' worldview to those who participate only passively in an increasingly mechanized society (Bainbridge 1986: chap. 3). This was particularly true after World War II. With the invention of the atom bomb, the dilemmas confronting scientists and technicians became universal concerns.

The late forties and early fifties were times of unusual literary activity by scientists and engineers. John Campbell, editor of *Astounding*, began to encourage scientists to write science fiction prior to World War II. In the wake of World War II this participation increased dramatically, both in quantity and quality (Stover 1973). The war and its aftermath apparently struck some resonant chord that drew serious scientists and engineers like Fred Hoyle, Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, and Leo Szilard into the world of the imagination. Indeed, many of the themes still treated in science fiction by nonscientists acquired their current forms in the postwar scientific community.

In the immediate postwar period American scientists were caught in a contradictory situation about which they had ambivalent feelings. American society was experiencing a quantum leap in the concentration of capital and the size of government. The trend toward "big science" organized on the corporate-bureaucratic model was greatly accelerated by the war; its ultimate implications had become visible to all at Los Alamos (Greenberg 1967: chap. 6).

The individualism of little science, in some ways comparable with artisanal status, gave way to mild forms of the corporate collectivism, conformity, and alienation already typical of the world of big business and government. The old ideal of the wise and gentle mathematical poet, incarnated for many by Albert Einstein, was replaced by the reality of the academic entrepreneur, the middleman between a more bureaucratically organized scientific community and the government that funded it.

Thus the creation of the atom bomb traumatized the scientific community by shattering its traditional self-image once and for all. Suddenly the detached and obsessive wise man of little science became the sorcerer's apprentice in thermonuclear power politics. As Robert Oppenheimer (1955: 88) put it, "In some sort of crude sense which no vulgarity, no humour, no overstatement can quite extinguish, the physicists have known sin; and this is a knowledge which they cannot lose."

Of course, some scientists gained an immensely increased power and sense of power from this change, while most others found their material situation dramatically improved. On the whole the new era was well received, and scientists felt their usefulness was recognized at last. But even so, increased influence implied increased dependency and top-down control, and traditional value systems and role models were subverted by the new organization of scientific labor. A widespread sense of "wrongness" in the scientific community was expressed in hostility

to government control, the new security systems, worry over the bomb, the fate of Oppenheimer, and related issues. These concerns appeared metaphorically in the science fiction of the period, which can thus be viewed as a reflection of the problems confronting this social group (Kevles 1979: chap. 23).

The physicist Arthur Roberts captured the contradictory spirit of the times in satirical songs which were widely circulated among scientists in the late forties. The lyrics of one of them, quoted here, may take the place of volumes of sociological analysis.

How nice to be a physicist in 1947,  
 To hold finance in less esteem than Molotov or Bevin,  
 To shun the importuning men with treasure who would lend it,  
 To think of money only when you wonder how to spend it.  
 Research is long and time is short!  
 Fill the shelves with new equipment,  
 Order it by carload shipment,  
 Never give a second thought:  
 You can have whatever can be bought.  
 How nice to be a physicist in this our year of grace,  
 To see the scornful world at last admit your rightful place,  
 To see the senators defer to every wise pronouncement,  
 To fascinate the women's clubs and star at each commencement.  
 Research is long and time is short!  
 Drink your fill of adulation,  
 Glory in the new sensation.  
 Never give a second thought:  
 Sinatra holds a place that many sought.  
 But have you sought a physicist and place for him to dwell,  
 And searched the town in vain to find a vacant dungeon cell,  
 Or tried to teach a thousand students who can't do a sum,  
 The girls who'd like to be Greer Garson finding radium?  
 Research is long and time is short!  
 Board the thesis, drive the student,  
 Physics was his choice imprudent.  
 Never give a second thought:  
 Brains are still a thing that can't be bought.  
 Oh did you write a book on fission that you tried to sell,  
 Or wonder while you lectured what you could or could not tell,  
 Or try to get declassified some nuclear equations,  
 Or wonder if the work you do was done at secret stations?  
 Research is long and time is short!  
 If you find a fact essential,  
 Classify it confidential.  
 Never give a second thought:  
 The FBI's approval must be sought.

How nice to be a physicist in 1947 . . .  
 How nice?  
 How long do you think it would take to learn something about,  
 uh, butterflies?

Like Roberts's song, much science fiction of this period expresses ambivalence, moral doubt, and anxiety in the face of the nuclear age. Of course, the new "scientific statesmanship" also addressed the issues of the day in articles and lectures on public policy. But the political leaders of the scientific community were willing to make major concessions to get what they wanted—increased funding, disarmament negotiations, and so on. Science fiction was freer to express the full depth of scientists' anxiety and even opposition. Judith Merrill (1971: 74) exaggerates only slightly when she says that in the McCarthy era, "science fiction became, for a time, virtually the only vehicle of political dissent."

Viewed in this light, science fiction resembles the positivist philosophies of Saint-Simon and Comte, which, at a much earlier date, also attempted to universalize the worldview of the new technical strata generated by nineteenth-century capitalism in opposition to the dominant values and institutions. The popular form of this new expression of science is clearly a ruse, like the borrowed voices of Szilard's dolphins through which alone scientists can convince others to listen to their views on world problems.

Leo Szilard's story "The Voice of the Dolphins" (1961) is in fact a metaphor for science fiction itself. It is a charming summa of the rationalistic approach to world problems that fascinated many scientists in the fifties. But the "voice" of science is ignored until a group of researchers pretend to have understood the language of the dolphins, from whom they obtain the solutions to all outstanding world problems, from hunger to disarmament. Szilard's dolphins are presented to the public—and accepted—as alien and superior intelligences, but there is irony in the fact that these intelligences walk among us incognito in the person of scientists. In science fiction too, science borrows a "voice" from literature in order to make itself heard and understood.

#### MONSTERS FROM THE ID

The building of the bomb was the most blatant transformation of knowledge into power in human history. Those who accomplished this technical feat believed themselves uniquely qualified to govern its applications. They, at least, could understand that a turning point in the

human adventure had been reached. A "scientists' movement" arose from the bomb builders' realization that they had provided humanity with the means to destroy itself despite their personal dedication to the humanitarian mission of research.

In the postwar years a constant theme recurs both in serious essays on public policy by scientists and in science fiction: knowledge of man has lagged behind knowledge of nature, and the rift between the two explains the apocalyptic results of natural scientific inquiry. Man has the power; now he needs the wisdom to use it, even if he must surpass Newton in the discovery of new sciences and Socrates in the control of his own destructive impulses. The moment of truth has arrived in which humankind will fulfill its highest potentialities or disappear like the dinosaurs.

Soon after the destruction of Hiroshima, these sentiments motivated scientists to call for the transcendence of national rivalries. In 1946 Oppenheimer (1955: 12) spoke for the scientific community in arguing: "Many have said that without world government there could be no permanent peace, and that without peace there would be atomic warfare. I think one must agree with this."

This view achieved popular expression in Robert Wise's 1951 film *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. For once, Hollywood became the mouthpiece of the scientific community, reflecting its fears, regrets, and ideology. But even so, there is something ominous and inhuman about the story. This film was based on Harry Bates's novella "Farewell to the Master" (1940). In the original story, Gnut the robot and Klaatu, a man, arrive in Washington on a "space-time traveler" from a more advanced civilization than that of earth. As they step from their ship, Klaatu is immediately killed by a madman before he can explain their mission. He is later reconstructed by the robot from a recording of his voice. As Klaatu prepares to leave, the narrator, Cliff, asks Gnut to "tell your master" that humanity regrets his rude reception. "You misunderstand," the robot says. "I am the master" (Bates 1975: 815). With these words, the space-time traveler departs, leaving Cliff in awe and bewilderment at what is evidently the future fate of humanity in a world ruled by robots.

The film based on this story gives a specific historical content to the image of machines taking over. Klaatu now represents a galactic empire which demands a halt in weapons development on earth. The earth he visits is depicted in constant tension, mobilized without respite by technology and national rivalries. Klaatu briefly brings all

engines on earth to a standstill in a "demonstration" of his power, following a policy many scientists recommended to the U.S. government as an alternative to dropping the atom bomb on Japan. After rejecting world political leaders and their "petty squabbles," Klaatu delivers his message to an international assembly of scientists and writers. His robot, renamed "Gort," is left behind, empowered by the empire to destroy aggressors. Gort represents the sort of "international control," exercised by a purely logical mind, which scientists see as the only alternative to war in the nuclear age.

But even Hollywood could not get through with Klaatu's message. A suspicious and hostile public saw the scientific community as a demonic force, untrustworthy and menacing. Frankenstein's experiments were child's play compared with this: Gothic romance now became mass consciousness. Scientists were, as Szilard (1961: 20) complains at the beginning of "The Voice of the Dolphins," "on tap but not on top." Their political ambitions were suspect. They were perceived in terms of the dominant metaphors of science fiction itself as "aliens" whose intervention had interrupted the continuity of history.

These conflicts of image resulted in the polarization of science fiction. The "mad scientist" of the movies reaches his classic peak in the "philologist" of *Forbidden Planet* (1956) who wants to make mankind too wise and powerful for its own good and dies of hubris. Scientists felt attacked by such caricatures that seemed to blame them not only for the discovery but also its misuse, not only for the light of knowledge but also for the "monsters from the id" that, in *Forbidden Planet*, govern its applications. The general public, however, was reassured by the film's moral that some things man was not meant to know—that our ignorance and weakness, our finitude, is safely guarded by our inherent limits as a species.

Although science fiction representative of scientists' own views rejected this condensation of knowledge, power, and evil in their person, it remained within the sorcerer's apprentice problematic of these movies. As scientists' hopes for disarmament and world government were disappointed, they too identified the source of the problem as "monsters from the id," the id of the crowd, of dictators, of politicians, in short, the irrationality of a species too powerful for its own good.

Eugene Rabinowitch (1960: 608), editor of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, wrote that "human consciousness needs time to adjust itself to this new state of affairs in which no security exists." Jack



Williamson's *The Humanoids* (1949: 168) sounds like a *Bulletin* editorial when it finally gets to the point: "Technology had got out of step with mentality, the craggy man insisted. Don't you see? Technicians too busy to see the tragic consequences were putting such toys as rhodometric detonators in the hands of mental savages. I made the humanoids, to put an end to that. Such technicians as yourself—with the highest possible intentions—had wrecked the balance of civilization, so that it was breaking up like an off-center flywheel. The humanoids simply made them take a holiday until the philosophers could restore a better equilibrium."

Isaac Asimov's most famous novel is built around this same theme. In the *Foundation* trilogy (1951-1953), Hari Seldon builds two planetary foundations to save something from the ruins of a dying galactic empire. The first is devoted to natural science but is destroyed by a mutant with a hypnotic power to mobilize irrational emotions. Then the second foundation, devoted to "psychohistory," intervenes and saves the day by taming the irrational forces which escaped the grasp of natural science.

In several novels by Arthur Clarke the problem is posed in terms of the ability of the human species to take its place in a universe of rational or even superrational minds. In *The City and the Stars* (1956) humans no longer seek to go among the stars where formerly they were at home. Somewhat as in the *Foundation* trilogy, civilization is divided into two mutually indifferent cultures, one based on a perfect mechanical technology, the other on the mastery of psychic powers. Only through the union of these two cultures can mankind discover the truth of its past, overcome its fears, and again participate in the great galactic adventure of Minds beyond imagining.

In these novels, the real-life extrapolation of nuclear power to the limit calls forth a desperate reflection on the possibilities and need for a similar moral and mental extrapolation. Intelligence, as a hierarchy of forms that may well extend beyond our present limits, is a key theme to which corresponds the projection of psychic capacities to the thermonuclear last degree.

#### DREAMS OF TRANSMUTATION

The bomb stimulated science fiction writers to new speculations about the destiny of the human species and indeed of the universe itself. Jean Giraudoux (1935: 13) calls destiny "the accelerated force

of time." Nothing has ever accelerated time like the atom bomb. In the bunker awaiting the explosion of the first nuclear device, Edward Teller recalculated the probability of the bomb fusing atmospheric hydrogen in a planetary holocaust. In the early days there was a strong conviction that nuclear war was coming and with it the end of history. The clock on the cover of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* moved ever nearer to the midnight hour of nuclear pandestruction. And *this* science has wrought. . .

At the end of the road to Bacon's New Atlantis lies not utopia but an insane world, heir to atavisms and social structures that drive human beings to produce and fight without respite in the midst of abundance. Modern technology has completed the work of history, has raised social labor to such high levels of productivity, has intertwined the fates of all peoples so thoroughly that the continued thralldom of mankind to the struggle for existence has become an obvious absurdity. In this context the question of the meaning of life is posed with new urgency. Surely several billion years of evolution and tens of thousands of years of human history are not for naught. There must be a point to it all, even if it is nothing more than the production of a spare part for an alien spaceship as in Kurt Vonnegut's *Sirens of Titan*. In any case, the end of history provokes new reflections on its meaning and especially on the place of science in its terrifying course.

Many contemporary stories approach this question through space travel considered as a symbol of the transcendence of human limits. The symbol is well chosen: space travel can be made to serve a literary function similar to that of nuclear war. Both are thought experiments become real, striking imitations of art by life.

The prospect of a galactic destiny gives a sense to the ideal oneness of the human species, as does the atom bomb. (Recall Tom Lehrer's song "We'll All Go Together When We Go.") Both devalue the traditional notions of historical victory and political power in the face of vaster goals. As Arthur Clarke (1956: 157) put it, "The illusions of our day cannot survive the fierce, hard light that beats down from the stars." The same could be said of the "fierce, hard light" that first shone in the deserts of New Mexico. The planetary perspective is that of a viewer who knows the truth about the bomb, that it abolishes human history as such. So too, rockets bring man face-to-face with destiny, which is beyond politics and national rivalries, essentially human and eternal, in a way that is structurally similar to the bomb.

Of course, space travel had been treated before in science fiction.

But the excitement lay in the conquest of space itself, the technical procedures, the astonishing discoveries of the first explorers. It was the adventure of lonely intelligence in the infinite spaces that so frightened poor Pascal. Stories like this continue to be written, but now they are old hat. The demystified space of the nuclear era requires new fantasies of exploration. As André Benedetto (1966: 58) has written, "Il y a longtemps qu'on a cassé / A double bang le silence éternel / De ces espaces infinis" (The eternal silence of these infinite spaces was shattered long ago by a double bang).

After World War II, with the first rocket to the moon less than a generation away, the technical difficulties were all dismissed with a cursory mention of "atom drive" or "hyperspace." By force of repetition technological exoticism has since acquired the everydayness of the electric toaster. The interesting problems concern the moral fitness of the human race for space travel.

Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination* (1956) describes a future in which teleportation has been extended to astronomical distances. At the climax of the book the hero selects people at random all over the world to receive a new fissionable material that can be detonated directly by human thought: not the politicians but ordinary people must choose between life and death, the stars and nuclear self-destruction. The dialectic of nuclear war and space travel could not be more clearly presented. The race to the stars is the moral equivalent for nuclear war, a domain in which to sublimate the will to earthly power.

In many other stories space travel is similarly treated as a test of human courage and wisdom, often in the face of irrational fears or prohibitions imposed by past generations or alien species. In Isaac Asimov's *The Caves of Steel* (1953) the population problem is solved by emigration to the stars, once fear of open space and hatred of robots is conquered. Arthur Clarke's *The City and the Stars* is also about overcoming the fear of space. Theodore Sturgeon's *More Than Human* (1953) is another novel that concerns the conquest not of technical obstacles to space travel but moral obstacles. In all these stories the question is less one of technical mastery in the service of a Promethean destiny than of space flight as a symbol of human self-mastery or self-transcendence. In several stories space travel forms the background to a veritable apotheosis of the species. The "Iopers" of Clifford Simak's *City*, the Overmind of Clarke's *Childhood's End*, are images of its total transfiguration beyond the realm of history.

In *City* (1952) the explorers of Jupiter employ a device that converts

them into "lopers" capable of surviving on the surface of the planet. As it turns out, it is much more fun being a loper than a man. "He had found something greater than Man had ever known. A swifter, surer body. A sense of exhilaration, a deeper sense of life. A sharper mind. A world of beauty that even the dreamers of Earth had not yet imagined" (Simak 1952: 117). Humanity deserts earth for Jupiter, leaving its old home to a race of intelligent dogs who narrate Simak's tale. The human form is cast off altogether and with it reason, mortality, and responsibility. In this novel the destiny of the human race is to become a sort of cosmic beatnik in flight from the intolerable burden of historical and individual existence. Here the human species does not transcend its limits; rather, the species itself is transcended.

*Childhood's End* (1953) reaches a similar conclusion. It begins with the United States and Russia about to conquer space: another step in the long march toward mutual conquest and destruction. Suddenly alien spaceships appear over every major city. The "Overlords" have arrived to save mankind from its own folly. Humanity is forbidden war and space travel ("The stars are not for man" [Clarke 1972: 137]) and united in prosperity under a world government. A golden age of peace, leisure, and creativity begins.

But all human hopes are cut short by a startling change in the children. More and more of them withdraw from reality into a dream world. The Overlords explain that above them all in the hierarchy of cosmic intelligence stands a being of pure mind which the children of humanity will soon join. The history of the species is over. The Overlords have served not as masters but as midwives for the birth of a higher form of purely mental life. The last surviving man witnesses the final transfiguration of what once were human children: "There lay the Overmind, whatever it might be, bearing the same relation to man as man bore to amoeba. Potentially infinite, beyond mortality, how long had it been absorbing race after race as it spread across the stars? Did it too have desires, did it have goals it sensed dimly yet might never attain? Now it had drawn into its being all that the human race had ever achieved. This was not tragedy, but fulfillment" (Clarke 1972: 205).

The concept of transfiguration in these novels revives some of the wildest dreams of nineteenth-century utopianism: Charles Fourier's reconciliation of man and nature; the young Marx's liberation of the senses; Kirilov's resurrection of nature in Dostoevsky's *The Devils*. Beyond the mere pacification of existence in an enlightened and rational

social order—the goal of scientific enlightenment—appears a further horizon of joy and purposeless power, a Nietzschean transcendence of "the vermin man" and his humiliating divinities.

Why this recrudescence of romantic antirationalism in the very mainstream of a literature that always sought to rationalize the fantastic in the dreams of science? It is as though the failure of enlightenment as a social project also revealed the limits of scientific knowledge of nature. The modern concept of nature as an object of investigation and control is subordinated to an older idea of nature as a miraculous living thing of which the human race is merely a part. It is the return of *Naturphilosophie*, an outlook that could hardly be more alien to the mainstream tradition of science fiction up to this point.

#### TOTALITARIAN ENLIGHTENMENT

The social goal of science is ostensibly human liberation through progress in power over nature, and early science fiction often responded to these ideological pretensions of scientific rationalism with images of a world wisely governed by scientists and technicians. This was the literature of positivism in the nineteenth-century sense of the term.

After the bomb, however, this theme rang false for many writers and readers. The old fantasy of scientists and technicians in power became less attractive once science and technique were mobilized in the race for the ultimate weapon. Science was already, if not in power, near enough to the centers of control that its further participation in history no longer promised liberation. Following the reorganization of science, the white knight of reason turned out to be a cultured bureaucrat in Washington or Moscow.

The cold war intensified the moral pathos of such structural changes, for a tighter organization of science was not only efficient but a matter of loyalty as well. The security problems to which Arthur Roberts jokingly referred were deadly serious. Freedom was the watchword of the suppression of those who exercised it too carelessly: the defense of tolerance required measured intolerance. This situation complicated the political prose of scientists as well as the metaphors of science fiction. Scientists were suspect; only the expression of unconditional loyalty and obedience to Western ideals could allay public fears. Yet the Enemy was hated and feared precisely because it demanded unconditional loyalty and obedience. Thus in this period every image of a society of total administration was simultaneously a denunciation of the Soviet

Union and a more or less conscious expression of anxiety about trends in the West itself.

As a result, images of nonconformity and individualism were also ambiguous. On the one hand, the scientists wished to defend their freedom of thought, which necessarily made them nonconformists with respect to the increasingly repressive society around them.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, most scientists accepted the ideological framework of a cold war that rationalized the demand for conformity and institutionalized it in the new bureaucratic administration of science with its secrecy and security systems.

The bureaucratization of science was a mild form of a much more thorough bureaucratization of economic life in this period. It raised the specter of the technological obsolescence of humankind in a world of machines and mechanistic social organizations. Thematic material of this type is treated repeatedly from Karel Capek's *R.U.R.* in 1920 down to the present. After World War II, as Western democracies were increasingly recast in the bureaucratic mold, the theme became more and more popular. Novels like Orwell's *1984* took up the prewar elegy for humanistic values in a world of total administration.

A whole genre was based on the thesis that progress in the power of the human species over nature goes hand in hand with ever more effective domination of some human beings by others. These dystopias of totalitarian enlightenment represent reactions in the name of a humanism which admits its defeat in practice. To the triumphant positivist utopia thus corresponds a humanistic dystopia which is its spiritual *point d'honneur*. In both genres history is portrayed as the destiny of reason: which of its two sides will prevail, that which is dedicated to wisdom, to the intelligent choice of goals, or that which is dedicated to mere domination, to the ruthless control of means, including a robotized humanity?

In the late forties and fifties a number of science fiction novels attempted to revise the increasingly popular dystopian genre. These novels did not ignore or minimize the threatening character of modern social trends as did positivist utopias. Yet reason for hope is always found in spite of the apparently successful dissolution of the old forms of individuality. It is as though the pressures of cold war conformism

1. As P. W. Bridgman (1948: 70) wrote in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, "The assumption of the right of society to impose a responsibility on the scientist which he does not desire obviously involves the acceptance of . . . the right of the stupid to exploit the bright."

and the bureaucratic reorganization of the scientific community forced it to ponder the possibility that technology will indeed reduce human beings to mere tools of a mechanical system. And yet to accept this conclusion would be to abandon the ideology of science, the whole notion of progress through power over nature. The solution would have to take humanism's nightmare into account while saving the dreams of enlightenment.

Asimov's *The Caves of Steel* depicts an overpopulated world compressed by fear of open space into crowded cities. As robots replace workers, the mass of "declassified" laborers grows, and hostility between men and machines reaches a violent peak. But in the end the problems are all solved, and the policeman hero is even reconciled to his forced partnership with a robot. The cyborg destiny of humans and robots is to live in "a culture that combines the best of the two on an equal but parallel basis" (Asimov 1972a: 48).

Fred Hoyle's *Ossian's Ride* (1959) pits a scientist hero against a technoscientific enterprise suspected of evil intentions in spite of the useful products it has developed. The hero goes through harrowing adventures spying on the corporation but finally learns that its owners are benevolent visitors from another star system, come to earth to preserve the last remnants of their doomed culture. They will contribute through the corporation to the upward struggle of humanity and indeed of all intelligent life.

Novels like these can be understood as expressions of ambivalence within the scientific community about its own transformation and that of society at large. They are studied exercises in "generic discontinuities" (Jameson 1973). The reader is already familiar with novels of totalitarian enlightenment such as *1984* and *Brave New World*. Asimov, Hoyle, and writers of similar tales plunge the reader into a conflict typical of the genre. But the conflict is finally dissolved in a surprise happy ending, contrary to all the pessimistic expectations awakened by the clichéd "man versus machine" narration. The fruits of enlightenment are saved from the critique by the optimistic conclusion, but not until the "misunderstanding" on which the critique is based has been lived, suffered, and transcended.

Beneath the endless litany of praise to science in the late forties and early fifties, praise designed to justify the expensive integration of research and government, lay seeds of self-doubt. All the changes in scientific life and self-consciousness described above prepared a critique of the ideology of enlightenment on which scientific activity

has traditionally been based. The pursuit of power over nature has reached an impasse. In popularizing the scientific community's increasingly troubled vision, these novels and stories contributed to the development of a new dystopian consciousness of history that gradually overshadowed traditional politics in the postwar period.

## THE LAST HUMANIST

The longing to be primitive is a disease of culture.

—George Santayana 1926: 19

## THE BREAKDOWN OF LIBERAL TECHNOCRACY

The period from 1964 to 1968 was one of the most remarkable in recent American history. Thirty-five years of American liberalism were tried and found wanting. Opposition movements were born, first on the Left, then on the Right, strong enough to shake the established political patterns. The spread of ill humor, intolerance, and personal cruelty spoiled the last traces of freshness and innocence in the American character. The temper of a nation was changed.

These changes corresponded with the apotheosis of liberalism, its transformation from a vaguely populist movement, at least apparently opposed to established power, into a technocratic ideology of total social integration under the auspices of "scientific" expertise. The War on Poverty and the war in Vietnam were just two aspects of the final struggle to end the history of social conflict. Never was America stronger and more self-confident. Never was it engaged in a more hopeless task. Soon the failure in Vietnam became the prelude to the collapse of liberal technocracy in every sphere.

What went wrong? Herbert Marcuse's article "The Individual in the Great Society" offered a prescient explanation that demonstrated the significance of Vietnam for the technocratic project of pacifying human existence through total administration. Marcuse (1966: 15) saw in the advanced capitalist societies a "progressive transfer of power from the human individual to the technical or bureaucratic apparatus, from living to dead labor, from personal to remote control, from a machine or group of machines to a whole mechanized system." Personal life is now planned and orchestrated with the lives of others, from above, by the machine itself. The individuals "live in a society where



they are . . . subjected to an apparatus which, comprising production, distribution, and consumption, material and intellectual life, work and leisure, politics and fun, determines their daily existence, their needs and aspirations" (Marcuse 1966: 15).

In this society, labor is still "alienated," that is, it is still production for an Other, and not for the individual's own needs or for those of his or her fellows. Although the society is rich enough to provide for all its members, "the individuals must go on spending physical and mental energy in the struggle for existence, status, advantage. They must suffer, service, and enjoy the apparatus which imposes on them this necessity. The new slavery in the work world is not compensated by a new autonomy over the work world" (Marcuse 1966: 15).

The individuals are bound ever more tightly to their society by what Marcuse calls a "libidinal attachment" to the goods and services it delivers. The very consciousness of alienation tends to be repressed as "individuals identify themselves with their being-for-others, their image" (Marcuse 1966: 15). "Under these circumstances, society calls for an Enemy against whom the aggressive energy can be released which cannot be channeled into the normal, daily struggle for existence. The individuals live in a society which wages war or is prepared to wage war all over the world. . . . The enemy is not one factor among others, not a contingency which the evaluation of the chances of the Great Society can ignore or to which it can refer to in passing. The Enemy is a determining factor at home and abroad, in business and education, in science and relaxation" (Marcuse 1966: 15).

These dystopian trends were reflected in and propagated by the mass media in the 1960s. This section discusses two popular expressions of the new consciousness. Spy mania swept the country after John Kennedy named Ian Fleming among his favorite authors. The first James Bond films had millions of viewers, and a new film genre was born in the instant. At about the same time, French and Italian films became quite popular among sophisticated audiences in America. Films like Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960) reflected discontents that found no voice in the usual Hollywood product. These films were more or less openly dystopian. They gained larger and larger audiences as cultural opposition spread.

These two types of films seem to represent diametrically opposed social attitudes. The Europeans rejected modern society and waxed nostalgic over the death of traditional humanistic culture, while the spies celebrated the pleasures of technological society and gloried in its

triumph over malicious Third World peoples and criminal conspiracies. But close examination of these films casts doubt on this conventional contrast. As I will show, both genres depict resistance to an oppressive social machinery. In different ways, they exemplify a new popular dystopianism.

#### THE STRUGGLE AGAINST DYSTOPIA

Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville* (1966) is an ironic comment on the spy film. Godard's hero, Lemmy Caution, visits a city controlled by a computer called Alpha 60. In *Alphaville* "men have become the slaves of probability." The spy from the "outerlands" has come on behalf of "those who weep" to save *Alphaville* for human values which have been rooted out of the hearts and even the very dictionaries of the inhabitants. Caution eventually destroys the computer and escapes with the daughter of *Alphaville*'s chief scientist, who is named, significantly, von Braun.

*Alphaville* is set in the Paris of the future, photographed in the most Americanized sections of contemporary Paris. The hero of the film represents values that are on the decline in modern technological civilization. That civilization includes not only the West but also its Soviet rival: Caution's alias in *Alphaville* is "Ivan Johnson, correspondent for *Figaro-Pravda*."

For Godard, evidently, the last surviving humanist is the spy, the detective, the newspaperman. As Caution says, "Journalism begins with the same letter as Justice." His credentials as a representative of Western culture are established through constant quotations from French poetry and philosophy. Paul Eluard's *Capital de la Douleur*, Ferdinand Celine's *Voyage au Bout de la Nuit*, Blaise Pascal's famous epigram about the eternal silences of the infinite spaces, lines from Jean Racine, and much else get into the act (Benedikt 1968).

Caution is the hero of a struggle against "technological time," the enemy of life and love, which Alpha 60 describes in the following terms: "No one has lived in the past; no one will live in the future. The present is the form of all life. Time is like a circle which turns ceaselessly, the descending arc, the past; the rising arc, the future." In a society of total administration, the individual has no need of past and future, both of which are taken care of by the computer. In such a society, only a Lemmy Caution can invalidate the apparent technological obsolescence of time. Only a man of action can follow the advice

of the unfortunate criminal, executed for weeping at his wife's funeral: "It suffices to go forward to live, forward towards all that one loves."

A great many European films of the 1960s have a humanist hero of some sort, although none can compete with Lemmy Caution. In films of despair, like Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* and Michelangelo Antonioni's *The Red Desert* (1964), characters who represent resistance to society are doomed. In the former film, the aristocratic Steiner studies Bach and Sanskrit, entertains artists and poets, and eventually commits suicide. In the latter film, a similar function is filled by a neurotic woman lost in the industrial wasteland around Ravenna. In François Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* (1966), the humanist hero escapes from a world dominated by television to a region where a small fringe group conserves literary traditions.

In *Alphaville*, as in many spy films, the hero establishes his humanity and gains his victory through love, long since abolished in Alphaville as illogical and functionless. The girl is brought over from the enemy by being taught to love in a scene of extraordinary asceticism: there is practically no physical contact but only a sort of poetic interplay between the protagonists. Once obtained, the heroine's love serves to confirm the hero's humanity, to distinguish him from the cold, unlovable, and unloving computer.

But Godard goes even further and offers us a sadistic Lemmy Caution as well in order to sharpen the contrast with the benevolent computer, all of whose actions "serve the final good." Thus in one scene Caution purposely drives his car over an enemy agent's face. Godard grasps at any shred of evidence that human instincts of whatever sort still survive the reign of logic.

As the pure embodiment of what Marcuse called the "repressive rationality" of technological society, the computer exemplifies the System. It states, "In the capitalist and the communist world, there is no evil desire to subjugate men by indoctrination or money, but simply the natural desire to organize, to plan, to reduce the unforeseen." But the pursuit of total efficiency debases humanity itself. As Marshall McLuhan (1964: 46) put it, "Man becomes . . . the sex organs of the machine world." The threat of dehumanization dominates all these dystopian films, from *La Dolce Vita*, where it takes the form of mass culture, to *The Red Desert*, where the characters are sickened by the mere physical presence of factories.

The masses are portrayed in three different ways in this genre. The population of *Alphaville* is organized fascistically into an atomized and

robotized collectivity. In *Fahrenheit 451* the population forms a large friendly family with a childlike wish to belong. This image appears to derive from a disparaging view of adolescent neotribalism in America. In *La Dolce Vita*, the portrayal of the masses is fractured along the lines dividing tradition from modernity in a society in transition. Marcello's fiancée, who longs for religion and family, stands for a dying way of life that still holds its attraction for the lower classes. But the truth of the present is represented by the swinging life of the Via Veneto, where advertising agents and their hangers-on manufacture new conformisms for an ever more modern society.

Correlated with the horror of these various collectivisms is a yearning for the simple country life of technological underdevelopment where spirit is not yet submitted to mechanism. But this alternative is never clearly localized. Lemmy Caution and his girlfriend escape Alphaville in a shiny Mustang to a destination unknown. A beautiful beach symbolizes an alternative in *The Red Desert*, while the smile of a simple country girl at the end of *La Dolce Vita* bears the same message. In *Fahrenheit 451*, the land of the "book people," a country retreat populated by refugees who have each memorized a favorite book, offers the most fanciful interpretation of the remaining possibilities of freedom. The restoration of human values is presented as an unrealistic utopia, and even, in *The Red Desert*, as a neurotic daydream.

#### THE HELICOPTER AND THE GUERRILLA

The contrast between these films and the spy films of the same period could not be more obvious. James Bond glories in the worst aspects of Western society, aspects which are unequivocally rejected by the social critique of a Godard or a Fellini. Rationalized collectivism in the Bond saga is exemplified in Dr. No's (1962) island full of evil Orientals; nothing like it threatens back in good old England. Lemmy Caution takes no pleasure in the life of Alphaville, the joys of which are summed up by a vending machine that exchanges a "thank you" note for a coin. Bond is a vain and elegant hedonist.

Yet, despite the obvious differences, the two types of film have remarkably similar structures. Bond may not quote Racine, but he establishes his nonmechanical humanity in other ways. He always begins a film well provisioned with technical devices and weapons, the most spectacular of which is his car in *Goldfinger* (1964). And just as regularly he is stripped of these defenses by his enemies, captured, and ex-

posed to their weapons. From then on Bond must depend on his courage, luck, and seductive powers to see him through. We are easily won over: his fumbling incompetence at disarming an atom bomb, his sheer physical strength, his search for pleasure in a world gone mad, the love of an enemy girl, all prove his humanity. Strength without machines and the test of love seem to be universal traits of the spy hero. These traits alert us to an underlying dystopian imagery.

Although constantly threatened, the spy hero is immune from harm, a characteristic that gives a black comic twist to the most frightening scenes. Under a laser beam or in a shark-filled pool, fleeing the guns of his opponents, or in bed with a beautiful counterspy, the hero always survives triumphant and unruffled. Not only is he immune from death, but, even more important, he is immune from fear, injury, and all the things which would cause him to lose his self-possession.

*The Spy Who Came In from the Cold* (1966), which refuses this pattern for the sake of "realism," ends up confirming it after all. The hero chooses death gratuitously as a protest against reality. He is thus *essentially* immune, but lets himself be killed at the last minute for the sake of human values sacrificed by a hateful world. But this film does not play by the rules; that in fact is what made it so interesting to viewers whose expectations were formed on the Bond films.

A good spy cannot have ideals or human attachments. He knows what to expect from life and never worries about politics. He is precisely not like the hero of *The Spy Who Came In from the Cold*, a normal mature adult capable of personal commitment and sentimental involvement. Instead he is a "cool" superadolescent, able to assert his humanity and individuality in a crazy world without assuming a tragic role. Scaled down, this "cool" is something like a *model response* to the threats present in the daily life of the audience. This trivialization of the problems of modern life was a constant refrain in the contemporary television series *I Spy* that gave Bill Cosby his start.

As in the dystopian film, the enemy in the spy film is collectivized and technologically sophisticated. There is an amusing scene in *Goldfinger* which points up the contrast between this new villainy and old-fashioned crime. Goldfinger has invited a number of gangsters to his house for a payoff and proceeds to execute them with poison gas. Chemical warfare rather than gangland heroics greets the "Little Caesars" of the films of the thirties and forties.

The original Bond novels are characterized by a rather old-fashioned imperialist demonization of Central Europeans, Russians, Orientals, and

blacks, indeed, just about anyone who is not English. But, as many critics point out, Fleming's racism is not entirely sincere; his Manichaeanism takes on targets of convenience rather than reflecting a consistent ideology (Eco 1984: 161). The case is somewhat different with the Bond films. In them too, and in the many films they inspired, a Third World country or non-Caucasian race is cast in the role of villain. But the Vietnam era gives new meaning to the spy film's racism.

One might assume, given actual events in Southeast Asia, that the villains would employ the guerrilla tactics of the Viet Cong; instead, they usually possess a disciplined army generously supplied with high-tech weapons. The hero is always captured by his enemies, and working from within defeats their advanced technology practically unaided. Sometimes he gets a bit of last-minute help from his own side, armed with its advanced weapons, as at the end of *Goldfinger*, but the basic work has to be done by a lone man in enemy territory. Thus the real relation between Western imperialism and the underdeveloped world is reversed, the former basing itself on men and the latter on machines, the former on the principles of Mao Tse-tung and the latter on those of Lyndon Baines Johnson.

The struggle between man and machine is carried to the point of self-caricature in a film called *Arabesque* (1966). The story concerns a Middle Eastern prime minister who must be saved from the clutches of a group of evil Arab conspirators. At one point, the villains pursue the "good guys" across a field, riding a combine and a thresher. Just as *Goldfinger* attempts to have Bond crushed in a car by a scrap-metal machine, a picturesque image of the fate of the average American caught in a head-on freeway collision, so here the enemy catches the representatives of Western society in the situation of pedestrians in city traffic. The absurdities continue in the succeeding scene as the heroes find horses waiting to carry them away and are chased by a tank and helicopter. The West has somehow become the nineteenth century to the East's twentieth.

Here the technocratic threat present in our own society is projected onto the underdeveloped world. That threat is often represented by a helicopter, an image drawn from the Vietnam struggle. In *Fahrenheit 451* the hero is also chased by a helicopter, and in *La Dolce Vita* the triumph of technocracy over tradition is symbolized in the grimly ironic opening scene by a huge statue of Jesus dangling from a helicopter. In every case, we are asked to identify not with the helicopter but with its earthbound victims.

The concept of "underdevelopment" has a different significance for European and American audiences. The dystopian films were deeply anti-American, nostalgic for the European past prior to the invasion of American technology. The force of this ideology was such that a French cartoon strip, *Asterix*, became as popular as *Mickey Mouse*, at least in France, by glorifying the triumphs of primitive Gaul over sophisticated Rome.

In Europe dystopian imagery can be expressed through opposition to the great powers ("Ivan Johnson"). This theme forms the background to the amusing spy movie *You Only Live Twice* (1967). This film, made at a time of grave economic difficulties for Britain, reflects an unusual "third force" concept. Here James Bond takes a plunge into the ranks of the secondary powers. Although weak, they are justified by their humanity against the quadruple menace of the great powers, Russia and America, China and SPECTRE, the first two embodying blind mechanical automatism, and the latter two diabolical evil.

In this film Bond "dies," to be resurrected later in another identity. Bond's sacrifice for Little England corresponds with the decline of Great Britain itself, and the dream of its renewed appearance on the world scene. The film announces this death and transfiguration as the supposedly executed Bond is reborn in the torpedo tube of a submarine, from which he is launched to shore for his final mission. The new Bond, Sean Connery with fat cheeks and the paunch of a middle-aged businessman, is not yet the perfect expression of England's postimperial and overripe maturity. He must also ally himself with a non-Anglo-Saxon power, Japan, in order to save the world from the madness and stupidity of the great powers. To seal this alliance Bond's transformation must be total: he must become Japanese and even marry a Japanese girl.

Bond then learns *ninja*, the traditional Japanese art of stealth and violence, and goes to work for the Japanese secret service. In the final scenes, Bond's small helicopter outmaneuvers the great helicopters of SPECTRE, representing big-power high technology. How unromantic! Bond is no longer flesh and blood against mechanism; he has his own little technology. This reproduces the precise position of Europe in world politics, not fighting on the ground like the Viet Cong, but in an intermediary zone, surviving and even occasionally winning by cleverness and maneuverability.

This comparison of dystopian films and spy films reveals surprising convergences. In both the hero is a sort of guerrilla warrior, fighting an

evil technocracy from within. In both his humanity is established by individual action against the machine, while the enemy possesses the helicopters. But the social functions of the two types of films are quite different. The dystopian film exacerbates the conflict of human values and technological society, while the spy film offers a mythic resolution. This explains their different treatments of underdevelopment, which, for reasons that must be analyzed, serves a particularly important symbolic function in advanced society.

#### AMBIVALENCE TOWARD TECHNOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Despite their differences, these films made a similar point: persecuted by a rationalized order, the viewers were asked to identify themselves as heroes in the struggle against technocracy. But there was an element of bad faith in this Manichaeian identification. As Philip Slater (1970: 125) writes, "The impersonal, intricate, omnivorous machinery that threatens, benumbs, and bureaucratizes the helpless individual in Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* is not something external to the individual; it is the individual—the grotesque materialization of his turning away." The individuals play contradictory roles: they are both integrated participants in the society and alienated critics of its conformism and its technology. In the former role they pilot the counterinsurgency helicopters that keep the others in check, while in the latter role they fight a rear-guard guerrilla action for a more individualistic society. Not surprisingly, then, the system is both rejected and loved, feared and accepted.

The imperialism of the spy film was a coded expression of these ambivalences. In fighting a guerrilla war against a technologically sophisticated underdeveloped world, viewers projected the most unpleasant aspects of their own society onto others while establishing themselves as "individuals." The aggressivity generated by repression in the First World was unleashed on the Third World. What better solution to the dilemma of individualism and conformity than identifying regimentation with a foreign nation and defeating it with the perfect marriage of humanism and technology, as represented by James Bond?

This false resolution of the conflict between the individual and society fixated the population in a posture of defense against the social Enemy. Reconciliation with society implied war with the symbolic projections of secret and unconscious "subversive" tendencies. The de-



mand for war became an urgent necessity, for only through it could the individuals ensure their ambivalent integration in the system. It was this psychic constellation that made both the spy film and real counterinsurgency warfare plausible to millions of people.

The dystopian film had a different impact. It idealized alienation from society without, however, identifying any real possibility of resistance to it. Viewers remained caught in the actual ambivalences of daily life, their critical consciousness awakened in contradiction with their social situation. The romantic image of cultured, humanistic, pretechnological society, even though it was not concretized geographically—Vietnam or Cuba was precisely not the place to go—nevertheless indicated indirectly a historical and personal possibility: "dropping out," the "Great Refusal" of advanced society. The dystopian film thus dramatized the symbolic meaning of underdevelopment, the real threat which it contained and the real possibilities of personal liberation it signified.

## THE VANISHING CONSENSUS

May we not be justified in reaching the diagnosis that, under the influence of cultural urges, some civilizations, or some epochs of civilization—possibly the whole of mankind—have become "neurotic"?

—Sigmund Freud 1961: 91

## MANIPULATION AND RESISTANCE

Popular dystopianism is present throughout the culture of the Vietnam era. In this section I will offer a sketch of changes in advertising that parallel the ones documented above in the case of science fiction and film. I will argue that in the 1950s and 1960s the mind managers were visibly struggling to keep ahead of an increasingly resistant public, more and more skeptical of corporations' claims, and that this resistance inspired new approaches not only to selling but to politics as well.

Advertising's dilemma lies in the very nature of persuasion that contains an implicit reference to the real interests and freedom of those to whom it is addressed. Persuasion claims to bring those interests to consciousness where they can be grasped by that freedom. The victims

of all-pervasive advertising and propaganda thus find their own individuality constantly valorized even as it is redirected to alien purposes. At the same time, there is a very real sense in which the manipulated masses are free, free to appropriate and interpret the manipulation to which they are subjected in a variety of unforeseeable ways (de Certeau 1980). The resulting tensions between advertising and its audience are not so much resolved as masked by constantly changing techniques.

While there are no sharp breaks in the history of advertising styles, emphases do change. For example, there has been a long-term trend away from rational toward irrational appeals (Schudson 1984: 60). Ads from the nineteenth century look remarkably benign; they seem to consist primarily of information, usually accompanied by some restrained pictures and a modest slogan. The early twentieth century saw a new emphasis on crude "hard sell" ads pressuring individuals to enter the new consumer markets, followed by a post-World War II shift to "soft sell" image ads depicting conformist lifestyles (Riesman, Glazer, and Denney 1953: 100ff.). As these ads too began to seem old-fashioned in the 1960s, consumers were increasingly offered a self-contradictory *image of nonconformity* that flattered their individualism and originality (Ewen 1976: 218-219).

Whether many of these ads were really effective is irrelevant to my concern, which is the cultural logic they exemplify (Schudson 1984: chap. 4). But surely they had some notable successes. For having grasped the new logic early, Volkswagen took the lead in auto imports and Ronald Reagan became governor of California, and eventually president as well. The new ads were at the very least expressions of a new mood and of the growing centrifugal forces that nearly tore the society apart in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The ubiquitous hard sell of early radio—we have all heard those rasping voices and inane ditties in old movies or on late-night TV—addressed individuals who yearned for success yet feared it. Robert Warshow's analysis of the contemporary gangster film reveals the mechanism of this ambivalence.

At bottom, the gangster is doomed because he is under the obligation to succeed, not because the means he employs are unlawful. In the deeper layers of the modern consciousness, *all* means are unlawful, every attempt to succeed is an act of aggression, leaving one alone and guilty and defenseless among enemies: one is *punished* for success. This is our intolerable dilemma: that failure is a kind of death and success is evil and dangerous, is—ultimately—impossible. The effect of the gangster film is to embody this dilemma in the person of the gangster and resolve it by his death. The

dilemma is resolved because it is *his* death, not ours. We are safe; for the moment, we can acquiesce in our failure, we can choose to fail. (Warshow 1964:88)

The gangster film enabled the individuals to live through their ambition in art and reconciled them temporarily to a mediocre existence.

This same structure was repeated in the advertising of the period. The hard sell drew timorous consumers with their tiny savings into the new mass consumer markets to which they were not accustomed. Advertising bombarded its audience with visual shocks, disgusting melodies, and insistent voices. Consumers were not simply offered information about the product; they were pressured and bullied against their will. This approach left them fully aware that their freedom of purse and better judgment were being violated. But that violation would surely have failed if it did not appeal to a repressed and inadmissible ambition to rise above mediocrity, to enter the world of dreams, success, uniqueness. During this period, consumer goods appeared as temptations to be resisted. The hard sell allied itself with desire against the consumer's reason.

In the fifties, the increased comfort and security of conformist existence conferred a positive value on it. The desire to rise above the crowd receded before the glorification of mediocrity. As Eric Goldman (1961: 264-265) explains, "The unquestionable trend was toward a home in a suburb—the mushrooming miles of middle-class and worker's suburbs—where the prime virtue was adjustment to what the neighbors thought and did. Under these circumstances the urge was not so much for individualism as it was for getting oneself into the most profitable and comfortable relationship with some larger group or organization."

Perhaps the purest expression of this change was the television situation comedy (Hamamoto 1989: 43-45). There the cloyingly sentimental portrayal of the happy home life of Mr. and Mrs. Average became entertainment. The individuals identified themselves fully and joyfully with their roles. No Mom was ever so sweet and pretty, no Dad so strong and understanding. The work world scarcely appeared, for it was still a sphere of frustration and conflict. But the situation comedy seemed to say that these mild inconveniences were surely worth it in exchange for the joys of home. Thus where frustration and conflict appeared at all, they were not tragic but a source of gentle amusement.

Of course, this perfect reconciliation of the individual and the

society was a myth, and the soap opera was there to give it the lie. The alienation of the individual in work was not funny; home life was not blissful; major appliances and planned leisure could not fill an empty life. The individuals had indeed achieved a sort of success in their conformist existence, but this success was accompanied by proliferating anxieties provoked by an economic and social transition that could not be criticized even in the privacy of the soul.

The individuals were required to give allegiance to the increasingly impersonal and mechanical system that, after all, provided them with a decent income. Social deviance, opposition, the desire for something better could cost them what they had already achieved. The unique individual was no longer merely imprudent, but threatening to others. Now all that was different became evil. With Senator Joseph McCarthy, the science fiction threat of the alien became real. The conformist mass lived in fear of Communists, intellectuals, and flying saucers (Condon 1969: 523).

In fact, so compelling was the fear of the alien that an advisory board of scientists warned the Air Force that American communications systems were vulnerable to massive overload if an attacking enemy chose to perpetrate a large-scale flying saucer hoax; they urged the Air Force to examine flying saucer sightings and, preferably, to debunk them. (The text of the scientists' report can be found in the appendices to Condon 1969: 905ff.) This was also the time of the great brainwashing scare, and doubts about the integrity and durability of human personality were expressed at a higher cultural level in the spread of Freudianism. John Frankenheimer's prophetic and scary film *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) summed up these fears (Whitfield 1991: 211-213).

Unable to reject the source of their misery without losing the rewards they owed it, individuals modeled themselves on it to discharge the surplus aggression it generated. Their revenge took the form of possession of and control over mechanical power, automotive horsepower, power mowers, power boats. Meanwhile, ultimate security was available through building a bomb shelter. (There were even macabre debates about whether to let the neighbors in—the consensus was "No.") Mechanized, with a safe retreat in readiness, individuals could remain in conformity with social demands.

The advertising of this period reflected these changes. Confronted with the hard sell ad, the consumer experienced an external compul-

sion corresponding to an inner temptation. But now some consumers, particularly those with a better education and more money to spend, resented this imposition. They learned to defend the freedom of their purse against the crass bludgeoning of the hard sell and reasserted their liberty. Subtler soft sell ads promoted group identification, an identification that incidentally committed consumers to the purchase of the advertised product.

The soft sell worked better because it exercised no compulsion at all, but simply reflected the internalized limits on freedom which the individuals already accepted. Since it was assumed that they wanted to be like each other, the image ad was relatively straightforward. It might show a group of happy and attractive young people, a group to which any viewer would like to belong. Then the ad had only to point out some particular attribute of the members, their toothy Colgate smiles, their Coca-Cola, their clothes, to interest the consumer in the product. Ads of this sort strengthened the conformist pressure even as they played upon it. The ambivalence of the consumer before the hard sell, an ambivalence composed of desire for the product and desire to be free and rational, was resolved in the apparently spontaneous urge to belong to the group.

Perhaps without the war in Vietnam, the "conformist fifties" might have lasted another decade, but if we believe Marcuse, eventually such intense regimentation would have provoked irrepressible aggressivity and conflicts of some sort would have broken out. In any case, the war made it possible for this aggressivity to discharge itself on the Vietnamese along lines exemplified in the structure of the spy film.

During the Vietnam era, most people were afraid to assert their independent individuality, for that could lead to a break with society and a loss of its benefits; they did not want to "drop out" and become beatniks or hippies. But they also feared being swallowed up in the social machine. The greatest danger no longer came from individualism, as in the days of the gangster film, but from the overwhelming drive toward conformity. Thus it was conformity that had to be projected onto others, while individualism became the (mythic) characteristic of American society.

A similar illusory resolution of inner conflicts took place in domestic political life with the conservative resurgence. The right-wing leader was the domestic political version of the spy film and the equivalent of the release of societal tensions and aggressivity in Vietnam. Typically,

he was identified with American individualism by his propaganda and his most widely touted actions, but in fact he did little to change things once in power.

Ronald Reagan's first term as governor of California set the pattern. The artful governor convinced most of his constituents that he was struggling to reduce the size of government by verbal attacks on students and welfare "freebooters." These "Enemies" were stigmatized for their primitiveness and animality, while also being identified with the technocratic state against which Reagan claimed to be struggling. But in fact the budget continued to rise, and the dismantling of the social and political structures for which Reagan called was never really an immediate goal of his administration.

Again, these changes were reflected in advertising. It did not take long for many people consciously to understand the workings of the image. The image ads of the fifties became transparently repressive once the individuals decided to assert their individuality. The yearning to join the group of attractive and happy young people began to give way before the desire to be distinguished from the herd. At this point, the ambivalent individuals responded to advertising not just as integrated conformists, fulfilling the rituals of group identification, but also as alienated selves. But the desire to be unique was not experienced as an irrational temptation as in the thirties and forties. Rather, it was precisely through their uniqueness that the individuals demonstrated their freedom.

Capitalizing on the desire for individuality is difficult, for if everyone really wants to be different, there is no way to organize them through advertising. Indeed the production process could hardly anticipate their needs. The solution to the problem lay in discovering the specificity of the various distinctions which established the new models of selfhood. These "segmented" types could serve as the basis of counterimages, not so much by showing the similarities between the individuals within each group, but rather by emphasizing the differences between groups.

These new ads presented not the integrated but the alienated individual. To them we owe the "thinking man's filter," brassieres for ladies who like modern art, cars the modesty of which signifies the conspicuous parsimony of their owners, and computers that challenge technocracy's marching minions. Eventually a point was reached where the ad no longer even presented an image, but strove to reflect the superior taste of the individual by making fun of advertising itself.

Consumers' self-consciousness had reached the point where the best advertising complimented them precisely in their freedom from the power of the image and its conformist definitions of individuality. But now there was no escape: conformist and nonconformist alike, the lover of ads and their passionate foe, both became advertising images. Personal freedom and economic necessity achieved an absurd reconciliation.

#### THE ENEMY WITHIN

This brief sketch of the history of advertising indicates the extent of the instability and contradictions of the early 1960s. The war in Vietnam was the catastrophe that brought the problems into focus. The price of fighting the enemy in Vietnam was too high to permit the simultaneous integration of excluded groups at home. But such groups tended in any case to be seen as and to become surrogate enemies, and the will to integrate them receded before the need for objects on which to discharge aggression. Technocratic liberalism was not able to follow this transition from imperialism to outright racism, and it fell before more conservative political trends. Meanwhile, new opposition movements showed the individuals the way to discharge aggression on its real source, the System.

Social contradictions were now reproduced at a higher level, for the enemy had appeared within the society itself. Intrasocietal struggle was again possible, although no longer on the basis of the class oppositions of competitive capitalism. But once opposition appeared within the system, the ideal of total social integration was shattered. The excitement of the struggle between the various social groups quickly outpaced their desire for peaceful coexistence. Divisive and fragmenting tendencies emerged to overwhelm the liberal vision. By the late 1960s, the system had notably failed to integrate itself in a "Great Society." The war in Vietnam fixed the media images of "underdevelopment" and "individualism" clearly in everyone's minds and made it possible for oppositional groups to move from a vague humanistic protest of the sort exemplified by "beat" poetry and dystopian science fiction to a political movement.

Students and blacks were the first groups to switch and therefore also the first to draw the practical consequences of their own refusal of the illusory resolution of conflicts offered by the system. They began by making new demands and soon confronted forceful repression. The

inner limit on freedom—conformism—became an objective external limit, and as such an object of collective struggle.

So long as gestures in this direction were prudent and modest, the possibility of co-optation remained, but as the conservative press and politicians slandered the early reformist opposition, the alienated individuals appropriated the role thrust upon them with ever-increasing enthusiasm. The Left began to imitate the socially prevalent concept of the Enemy, the hated Other in whom all social evils are embodied. In accusing the Left of violence and communism, society marked out the path to a new identity. As the slogan went, "We are the people our parents warned us against."

The motives of opposition were present in everyone, but repressed through the dominant ideology. So long as the enemy was a foreign country, it was treasonous to switch sides. But once enemies appeared *within* the society itself, it became easy unequivocally to assert individuality against the system by joining them. And individuals chose this option in large numbers. By 1970 it was clear that the enemy had come home and that aggression seeking an object had no need to cross the seas to find it. Large-scale opposition and social struggle reappeared within the society in large part on the basis of the new dystopian consciousness.

Technocratic liberalism had asked the individuals to realize themselves through their social roles, through their cooperation, through their similarities. But as aggressive tendencies were reinforced by real imperialist warfare, individuals tended to identify more and more with the violence that enabled them to reconcile themselves with the system. It was in the relation to the enemy that the individuals became truly real for themselves, no longer in cooperation with their fellows. The psychic foundations were laid for an era of social strife. For an increasing number of Americans, the rising aggressivity became a concrete desire for blood and enthusiasm in police brutality, political assassination, and social persecution. In opposition to strident nationalism, more and more Americans sought release from responsibility for their society through performing and suffering violence in radical political struggle. The stage was set for a decade of bloodshed and cruelty.



# Alternative Modernity

*The Technical Turn in Philosophy  
and Social Theory*

Andrew Feenberg

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS  
*Berkeley • Los Angeles • London*