

Civilization is Like a Jetliner

T. Fulano (David Watson)

The night the Korean airliner crashed into the newspapers, I dreamed of a tornado. A tornado is a kind of spiral, which is the labyrinth and which is Death.

Death is very powerful right now. Instead of being a passage, Death has become a kind of equipment failure, a technical slaughterhouse. Human and technical failure become indistinguishable when the unquestioning robot and the drooling sadist merge. (I see the Soviet pilot being interviewed—he could be any Air Force gunslinger in any military machine—“I’d do it again—and even more—and love every second of it.” Of course he had the cooperation of the CIA and the U.S. military, who listened in, taping it all, without issuing any warnings to save lives. That, after all, is certainly not their business.)

So we inch closer to midnight, Death’s festival. Reagan, on a California surfboard of lies and hypocritical self-righteousness, rides the crest triumphant, saying that the downing of the KAL 007 (how could it not be a spy plane with such a number!) represents “a major turning point” in world history, adding, “We can start preparing ourselves for what John F. Kennedy called a long twilight struggle.” Another falsehood: crime flows into crime, from the extermination of the Indian “savages” to the wholesale massacres of Vietnamese “natives”—they’ve been fighting their twilight struggle for as long as anyone can remember, these evangelical maniacs, these scourges of the Great Darkness, these agents of Entropy.

But we must remember that the crash is representative, ultimately, of all air disasters, with its dash of militaristic insanity—in a sense, only a variant of the technological frenzy—thrown in for good measure. Civilization is like a jetliner, its East and West versions just the two wings, whose resistance holds the bulky, riveted monster aloft.

Civilization is like a jetliner, noisy, burning up enormous amounts of fuel. Every imaginable and unimaginable crime and pollution had to be committed in order to make it go. Whole species were rendered extinct, whole populations dispersed. Its shadow on the waters resembles an oil slick. Birds are sucked into its jets and vaporized. Every part, as Gus Grissom once nervously remarked about space capsules before he was burned up in one, has been made by the lowest bidder.

Civilization is like a 747, the filtered air, the muzak oozing over the earphones, a phony sense of security, the chemical food, the plastic trays, all the passengers sitting passively in the orderly row of padded seats staring at Death on the movie screen. Civilization is like a jetliner, an idiot savant in the cockpit, manipulating computerized controls built by sullen wage workers, and dependent for his directions on sleepy technicians high on amphetamines with their minds wandering to sports and sex.

Civilization is like a 747, filled beyond capacity with coerced volunteers—some in love with the velocity, most wavering at the abyss of terror and nausea, yet still seduced by advertising and propaganda. It is like a DC-10, so incredibly enclosed that you want to break through the tin can walls and escape, make your own way through the clouds, and leave this rattling, screaming fiend approaching its breaking point. The smallest error or technical failure leads to catastrophe, scattering your sad entrails like belated omens all over the runway, knocks you out of your shoes, breaks all your bones like egg shells.

(Of course civilization is like many other things besides jets—always things—a chemical drainage ditch, a woodland knocked down to lengthen an airstrip or to build a slick new shopping mall where people can buy salad bowls

made out of exotic tropical trees which will be extinct next week, or perhaps a graveyard for cars, or a suspension bridge which collapses because a single metal pin has shaken loose. Civilization is a hydra. There is a multitude of styles, colors, and sizes of Death to choose from.)

Civilization is like a Boeing jumbo jet because it transports people who have never experienced their humanity where they were, to places where they shouldn't go. In fact it mainly transports businessmen in suits with briefcases filled with charts, contracts, more mischief—businessmen who are identical everywhere and hence have no reason at all to be ferried about. And it goes faster and faster, turning more and more places into airports, the (un)natural habitat of businessmen.

It is an utter mystery how it gets off the ground. It rolls down the runway, the blinking lights along the ground like electronic scar tissue on the flesh of the earth, picks up speed and somehow grunts, raping the air, working its way up along the shimmering waves of heat and the trash blowing about like refugees fleeing the bombing of a city. Yes, it is exciting, a mystery, when life has been evacuated and the very stones have been murdered.

But civilization, like the jetliner, this freak phoenix incapable of rising from its ashes, also collapses across the earth like a million bursting wasps, flames spreading across the runway in tentacles of gasoline, samsonite, and charred flesh. And always the absurd rubbish, Death's confetti, the fragments left to mock us lying along the weary trajectory of the dying bird—the doll's head, the shoes, eyeglasses, a beltbuckle.

Jetliners fall, civilizations fall, this civilization will fall. The gauges will be read wrong on some snowy day (perhaps they will fail). The wings, supposedly defrosted, will be too frozen to beat against the wind and the bird will sink like a millstone, first gratuitously skimming a bridge (because civilization is also like a bridge, from Paradise to Nowhere), a bridge laden, say, with commuters on their way to or from work, which is to say, to or from an airport, packed in their cars (wingless jetliners) like additional votive offerings to a ravenous Medusa.

Then it will dive into the icy waters of a river, the Potomac perhaps, or the River Jordan, or Lethe. And we will be inside, each one of us at our specially assigned porthole, going down for the last time, like dolls' heads encased in plexiglass.

— September 1983

fifth Estate

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Fifth Estate #314, Fall 1983

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