

In the Image of Capital

the rise of biotechnology

George Bradford (David Watson)

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Introduction to “Biotech: The Next Wave” by Tomas MacSheoin, [[<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/320-spring-1985/biotech-the-next-wave/>][FE #320, Spring, 1985]]

In this terrifying explication of biotechnology, Tomas Mac Sheoin notes that to reduce the natural world to a single monolithic “logic”—in this case, it is capital’s logic of accumulation and control to which he refers—is to imperil life itself. This totalitarian logic is perceived by Jean Baudrillard as well, in his book *Simulations*, as “that delirious illusion of uniting the world under the aegis of a single principle;” Baudrillard points out the connection between this totalitarian social program and the “fascination of the biological “: “From a capitalist-productivist society to a neo-capitalist cybernetic order that aims now at total control. This is: the mutation for which the biological theorization of the Code prepares the ground.” (110–111)

It can be no accident that the paradigmatic forms in the media and society should correspond to those of biotechnology and genetic engineering. We wrote in “Media: Capital’s Global Village,” FE #318, Fall, 1984) that “human meaning and mediatization...cannot long coexist...the media undermine and destroy meaning by simulating it.” It became clear upon reading MacSheoin’s article that this process of simulation was mirrored in the biological sciences today, this latest frontier for capital; that in fact bio-engineering and its products and the integrity of the natural world cannot coexist either. As in the media, the original will be eclipsed and extinguished by technology’s copy.

“We must think of the media as if they were...a sort of genetic code which controls the mutation of the real into the hyperreal,” writes Baudrillard (155). Is the destruction of meaning in the media universe a foreshadowing of the cannibalization by capital of the sources of life itself? The “operational configuration,” “the correct strategic model,” is the same: life defined by information, information as “genetic code,” no longer “centralized” necessarily but molecular, no longer exactly imposed but implanted. A “genesis of simulacra,” as in photography, in which the original, with its human aura, its peculiar irreducibility to this technocratic-rationalist model, vanishes—or is vanquished.

The metaphor finds its materialization in several spheres at once, because it is not the insight of a single person but the widespread intuition of an emerging world. In another context, Frederick Turner (not to be confused with the author of *Beyond Geography*), writes in what can only be described as a techno-spiritualist-fascist manifesto (“Technology and the Future of the Imagination,” *Harper’s*, Nov. 14) that “our silicon photograph [or circuit] doesn’t merely represent something; it does what it is a photograph of—in a sense it is a miraculous picture, like that of Our Lady of Guadalupe: it not only depicts, but does; it is not just a representation, but reality; it is not just a piece of knowledge, but a piece of being; it is not just epistemology but ontology.”

What the Great Chain of Being was for medieval society, and the clock-like universe for the mechanical-industrial revolution, the genetic code, the molecular cell, and the clone or simulacrum are for this brave new world which threatens us today. MacSheoin describes the invasion by capital into the final domain—the fundamental structures of life. What he finds is not reassuring—the conquest of all forms of life by technocratic capital, the dangerous homogenization which will usher in “total control,” and subsequently, the inevitable collapse of life systems on this planet. Once more the enemy hides behind a “humane” cloak—this time not religious salvation, nor progress, nor democracy, but the conquest of disease and famine—those two apocalyptic nags introduced, on a scale never before realized, by capital itself! Once more, to challenge this further manifestation of Progress, is to oppose curing disease, to turn away from the hungry. Once again only technology and its promise—a totally administered world—can supposedly save us. And once more, it all makes “perfect sense” because it corresponds to the “operational configurations” of the culture as a whole.

If the engineered molecule or seed finds a correspondence in the silicon photograph, let our intransigence take its inspiration from Crazy Horse, the Oglala mystic of whom no photograph was ever taken, and whose reply to requests to photograph him always was, “My friend, why should you wish to shorten my life by taking from me my shadow?” Now all our shadows are, in grave danger by more ferocious “soul catchers,” sorcerers and golem-manufacturers, burglars all, ready to unleash a final paroxysm of plagues on Mother Earth. Read these essays on biotech and be warned. Let’s stop these monsters. Now.

—George Bradford (David Watson), April, 1985

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