

Space Not The Place

Fifth Estate Collective

“With the aid of the high-powered rocket modern man is indeed conquering space. But in the very act of making this achievement possible, the megamachine is carrying further its conquest of man...At the bottom of this whole effort lies a purpose that animates the entire megamachine, indeed, figures as its only viable consummation: to reduce the human organism itself, its habitat, and its mode of existence, and its life-purpose to just those minimal dimensions that will bring it under total external control...So the ultimate gift of space technics, it now turns out is to establish in experimental small-scale models the requirements for imprisoning, conditioning, and controlling large populations.”

—Lewis Mumford, *The Pentagon of Power*, 1970

It was a media event par excellence.

Special sections in the newspapers, the teary-eyed, sentimental commentaries and the Hollywood determination to continue the national “probe into the unknown,” and especially the television closeups of the explosion, done in slow motion and in living color, like the instant replay of an exploding racing car, the gladiators going up in smoke against the pristine backdrop of blue sky. I don’t own a television, but I saw it all, dozens of times at least, on the screen at the corner bar, while having a drink with friends. A media event like few others—even the angry reaction against the reporters by the friends and students of the teacher who died became material for the commentators. They spoke in glowing terms of a “nation” linked via television, sharing the experience, somehow, of an otherwise boring industrial accident.

When you look at it all with a cold and skeptical eye, however, this explosion is not particularly noteworthy compared to, for example, that enormous petroleum explosion in Mexico City which wiped out an entire neighborhood; or other horrifying disasters such as toxic leaks at Bhopal, Seveso and Matamoros (Mexico). But the space shuttle, thanks to the promotional hype from NASA and the media, had become a nationalist fetish-object, emblematic of the Empire’s technological and military prowess, a reminder of the exploration and conquest by Anglo-American civilization of this continent, a reiteration of the frontier mentality of the westward expansion of the Leviathan. The “teacher-in-space” even compared herself to a woman crossing the Great Plains in a covered wagon.

So the “national tragedy” centered around the self-destructing NASA toy—that ludicrous, sophisticated science-fiction gadget—was only a tragedy for the Nation State and its military prestige, not for the millions who idiotically identified with the power and the mystique of the institutions of organized repression which underlie their own misery. Every banality of imperial ideology is summed up in the space shuttle program and its setback—the exploration of the emptiness of outer space—corresponds to the spread of imperial power on earth and the mystique of national “manifest destiny.” Then there is the fascination with high tech machines, with velocity and power, thrusting rockets going from nowhere to nowhere and coming back with empty messages from the void; the superheroes in their flag-emblazoned jumpsuits reflecting the image of power and freedom to people who experience only powerlessness and slavery in their everyday drudgery; finally the sinister, manufactured threat of the enemies of the Empire (did Libya—or gremlins—sabotage the shuttle?).

The millions of fragmented citizens, linked by loudspeakers, waiting at the telescreens for their daily dose of meaning in a meaningless world, actually have no material reason to identify with this military stretch limo, this

crane for building weapons platforms for the next, and final, conflagration—a war in which they will all be killed by men pushing buttons and pulling switches on enormous machinery built piecemeal in the factories they've built. In fact, they had every reason to be relieved, if only momentarily, by its crash into the sea, since that entailed a respite from the dreaded Star Wars program. It came as no surprise, then, that U.S. Secretary of War Caspar Weinberger announced a few days later that many “payloads” for the Star Wars system would be delayed because of the reduction of space shuttle capacity.

Of course everyone gets their cues as to how to react to this event from the television. Some kid tells me in the bathroom of the bar, to alleviate that uncomfortable sense of alienation one gets pissing next to a stranger in a public place, “Isn't it a terrible tragedy for our nation?” When I fail to respond properly to this unquestionable truism on the lips of all, our conversation ranges far and wide enough for him to dutifully recite every box-top cliché about imperial grandeur, America's “greatness,” the evil of its enemies, and to smugly announce at the end that he didn't care in the slightest if thousands were being murdered by US-financed armies to protect corporate interests. “It's only business,” he said, minutes after weeping over a handful of paid technicians who, knowing and accepting the risks, died—for business.

Isn't in fact this what space exploration (and colonization) are all about—the extension of business, that is, of work and alienation, even to the far reaches of the cosmos? Are the only things that are important—pleasure, play, poetry, love, freedom, the Marvelous—really to be found out there in that vast emptiness, rather than down here on this beautiful, sacred earth, now being reduced to a concentration camp, a factory, a junkyard, and a slum by the demands of their stratified, techno-hierarchic pyramid with its eyes forever on the heavens and its steeled boots crushing the wretched victims below? Isn't every human and natural mystery, every dream and every convulsive, beauteous analogy being mined and degraded to provide fuel for these absurd machines whose glistening countenance reveals in their profound stupidity and nothingness our own demise?

Isn't the table laden with nature's feast being relentlessly cleared to make room for the blueprints and calculation tables for conquest? And if these impoverished refugees and renegades found their way to some unknown tribe of dancers, lovers and magicians on the dark side of the moon, wouldn't they—as the pioneers always have—unleash holy scientific war and slavery on them, force them to work in mines and factories in the name of universal progress? Doesn't the construction of one space vehicle demand enough sacrifice, work, exploitation, bureaucratic monstrosity and technological devastation to ruin uncountable lives and natural habitats? Don't all such projects of the rulers reduce us all and all our desires to liquid fuel? Don't the images of power and of adventure on the screens mystify the real impotence and boredom of a dying civilization?

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