

Chapter 1

The Emerging Story of the Machine

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author is concerned with “stories” society makes about “the machine”. A story that holds consensual elements is of great interest if one accepts the premise that story in itself has a strong influence on what we seek to create. Given that many popular stories present nightmare scenarios, a self-fulfilling prophesy would not want to be created. The psychodramatic method was used to produce several unscripted enactments of people’s feelings, thoughts and experiences concerning the machine. Certain elements of setting, character, metaphor and action were then drawn from the enactments and formed into a story.

INTRODUCTION

The work described in this paper is concerned with the stories we are making about ‘the machine’. The premise of the work is that the emergent story which is being consolidated under the gaze of communal interest will be predictive of the actual technology we create in the future. The historical analyses by Lewis Mumford (1966, 1970) offers compelling illustrations of how the

projected material of the mind, such as in story and ritual, have been the primary provocation and inspiration for our human inventions. The paper begins with a description of Mumford’s perspective. This description is embedded within an expression of the spirit of the building momentum of our technical inventions, their seductions, and present costs. The paper seeks to respond to Mumford’s invitation for us to become much more conscious of the cultural and political forces that cluster around the creation and use of technology. The psychodramatic method of unscripted drama

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61350-465-9.ch001

is used so as to access the affective, kinaesthetic and cognitive aspects of people's experiences with the machine. Rather ambitiously, a condensed and selective version of these dramas is presented as a short story. Central and surprising dynamics in the story are discussed.

ON THE ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF TECHNICS

The critical moment was man's discovery of his own many-faceted mind, and his fascination with what he found there. Images that were independent of those that his eyes saw, rhythmic and repetitive body movements that served no immediate function but gratified him, remembered actions he could repeat more perfectly in fantasy and then after many rehearsals carry out. (Mumford, 1966, p. 45)

The ape still bashes the nut with a stick, the bird twigs its nest; not one of the instinctual habits of mammal or dinosaur has ever concocted a screw, a water wheel, or a knitting needle. "Technics has been deeply modified at every stage of its development by dreams, wishes, impulses, religious motives that spring directly, not from the practical needs of daily life, but from the recesses of man's unconscious... It was initially through the fabrication of the mind, through dream and symbol, not alone through the cunning of his hands, that man learned to command his own bodily organs, to communicate and cooperate with his kind, and to master so much of the natural environment as would serve his actual needs and ideal purposes" (Mumford, 1970, pp. 415-416).

Our inner impulses met the physical world in art, symbols, ritual, machines, architecture and institutional structures. The knitting needle, the pipe and the screw; lathes, looking glasses and the compass scribe - incredible things were invented. We designed watches and printing presses and in one stupendous leap of inspiration, a weav-

ing loom was conceived with the patterning of the cloth replicated into a card that directed the sequence of the weaving operations; an astonishing synthesis of engineering with symbol. It was then a short trip down the cascade of creativity to the new breed of thing that is language and logic mechanised - the computer. We appear to have achieved the ultimate God-act and made in our own image; and, we work to give it eyes and ears and skin so it may take in more. As a seed guides the impulse that springs into the magnificence of a tree, so a spontaneous momentum, of perhaps more distant origins than we can easily imagine, coagulates around the infancy of this computer artefact, the nature of its growth to maturity we can only just begin to perceive.

We are well aware of the double-edged nature of new things: when the foot has a boot and the footpath is flat, the ankles become weak; when the calculator is handy, the brain doesn't get exercised as it once did; when the cellphone connects us at every place to every other place, it seems even harder to be present at any one place. Cars destroy street football; speed shrinks space and the dross-cape spreads. The world won't be tidy and uniform. No two pine trees are the same, no snowflake, no galaxy; and so it seems too, every piece of technology resists all efforts to reduce its presence in the world—COBOL lives on, plugs, data compression algorithms, digital formats and hardware devices—all, proliferate.

Still it is claimed that technology will release us from mindless, repetitive drudgery; and, the next product imminent will ease our burdens and save us from the messes we have made. As long as blood runs in our veins, we will invent and innovate our way forwards. And more so, as Mumford (1970) declares, it is our essential nature to transcend the limits of our biological nature "and to be ready if necessary to die in order to make such transcendence possible" (p. 434).

Mumford alerted us to the grave peril of the megamachine; a pentagon of power, prestige, property, productivity and profit. He takes us

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