

On the Triumph of Artifice

“I firmly believe, that before many centuries more, science will be the master of man. The engines he will have invented will be beyond his strength to control. Someday, science shall have the existence of mankind in its power, and the human race commit suicide by blowing up the world.” –Henry Adams, April 11, 1862.

The latest news about the remarkable advances in the development of Artificial Intelligence (or A.I. –following the present bad habit of reductionism-via-acronym), has set me to inquire about the nature and history of **artificiality**, and as to its impact on my life, as well as on all of humanity in general.

Of course, it is obvious that **artifice** is not a new construct: It has existed as a factor in human evolution ever since the first *homo habilis* covered his and her nakedness with the skins of dead animals 200,000 years ago. The invention of arts and crafts such as pottery and smelting ensured the survival of at least a small percentage of our ancestors, who would have certainly perished without them.

Even before the invention of writing, children had already been taught using words, images and sounds that mixed useful information with myth and lore about superhuman entities that created fire or were able to fly strapped to wings made of condor feathers. Learning by rote and memorizing of tables of numbers or glyphs, turned young inquiring minds into slavish workers and disciplined soldiers. Authority figures became kings and/or witch doctors who lead the annihilation of enemy tribes or who recruited thousands of slaves to build gigantic monuments to serve as their tombs or sacrificial altars.

The appearance of **artifice** and **artificiality**, as enemies of the **real** and the **genuine**, can perhaps be traced back to the pomp and ceremony of Roman emperors such as Nero, and of kings such as Louis XIII, both who played and danced in performances of their own compositions. Today’s unscrupulous politicians tend to exploit the entertainment industries to build their public image as celebrities in order to get elected to the highest government offices.

I remember that from a very early age, even as a schoolboy, I always refused to accept the methods of educational indoctrination as were used in by the Western school system in the fifties and sixties. I always asked “Why?”... Why is the apple always red?... Why does $2 + 2$ always = 4?... Why are boys and girls segregated in the schoolyard? Why was our national anthem more sacred than those of other nations? Why do parallel lines never meet? After reading texts of modern physics, I now believe there are no straight lines in the universe...that everything follows an intersecting spiral path in relative space/time. I thank my lucky stars that I was a young man at during an era when the best of my generation tried to Be Real and to repudiate the mechanical, the “plastic” and the artificial.

Unfortunately, year after year and decade after decade, every discovery of the Real and the Natural gets quickly covered over with layers of artifice, turning paper into money, creativity into merchandise, original music into jingles and plows into swords... a bitter, multi-layered glass onion.

Artifice and **artificiality** are built into all curricula regardless of subject matter. Each epistemic paradigm displays its own special vocabulary and methodology which tend to overshadow those of other disciplines: Thus, pharmacology derides acupuncture, and Logical Positivism openly attacked Dialectical Materialism. And they have all made use of the latest media available to promote their ideas and sell their wares.

In the modern socio-political arena, sophisticated methods of propaganda and advertising have transformed all our cities into Potemkin villages, where glamorous storefronts rival steel and glass high-rise monoliths that hide the chaotic squalor of hoovervilles behind them. We all reside in artificial urban Xanadus.

In 1946, Jorge Luis Borges published a story (*On Rigor in Science*) wherein he imagines an empire where the science of cartography becomes so exact that only a map on the same scale as the empire itself would suffice, and people chose to live on the map rather than the country. The story elaborates on a concept which first appeared in Lewis Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* (1895), where one of the characters boasts that: "We actually made a map of the country, on a scale of a mile to the mile!... But it has never been spread out, yet, ...as the farmers objected: They said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So, we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well." *

Artificial Intelligence has now become the very apotheosis of **artifice** –a genie out of a bottle granting us very dangerous wishes.

We now reside on an **artificial** boulevard of that Borges and Carroll map, forgetting the true shape of the real world –slowly sinking in the rising floodwaters.

* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_Exactitude_in_Science

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