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David Watson

Saturn and Scientism

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There she is, looking vaguely pornographic on the glossy covers of the weekly magazines, the planet Saturn. What have we discovered? I don't know, I haven't read them, feeling squashed as I do to the Earth by the giddy inertia of this century which plummets like a flaming satellite towards the nothingness. Grey skies, the weather turning cold, sirens in the distance. Some citizens walk by whispering reverently of the wonders of Saturn, disputing the number of rings and moons according to the latest counts, as the corroding universe about them threatens to be annihilated. They drool over photographs of a planet most of them couldn't spot in a clear night sky – that is, if the night sky hadn't already been colonized and obliterated by the city light and the lethal dust of the very civilization which made it possible to send gadgets and technicians to the stars. But everything is so groovy on Saturn, so colorful and tempestuous. They know because they watched it all on television.

The spectacularization of space: a form of disassociation from an Earth which is coming apart at the seams. It is an odd addiction to scientific trivia which on the one hand resembles the “equipment mania” of hobbyism, and a futuristic brand of scientific and mystical obscurantism on the other. They are hypnotized by the latest additions to an endless series of eternally changing scientific truths. They think the universe is “out there” in the sky. They turn it into an alienated object just as they turn their daily creative activity and their life energy into commodities. And well they should so that the existing state of affairs may continue to prevail, for if they realized that this is their universe, that the only universe is their own world and their own lives, and that they are converting it into a vast, radioactive ruin, they would tremble with fear, and with passion and rage, and they would overturn it all.

They think going great distances at enormous velocities will bring them understanding. But the mystery is all around them; the center of the universe is everywhere, and the circumference nowhere. They are on a treadmill, no matter what the velocity of their machines; and when they arrive at the remote reaches that they seek, they understand no more than they did when they left. (They could have gone there more readily in dreams.)

They think that if they launch enough rockets and feed enough facts into computers that they will someday discover the secret to life. But they

will never find any answers, only more facts to feed to their computers, truths which will quickly be overthrown by new, more “revolutionary” truths. They have mistaken the question of how to live in their universe, with a technological scholasticism. They will only succeed in creating a world of gadgets, gadgets which will do their living for them. What does it mean, after all, to vicariously explore a pseudo-universe by gazing at the video-image on a television screen? What is this knowledge but a massive, technocratic illusion?

They think that the space program represents more freedom, an extension of their universe. In reality it is an element in their reduction. The night sky no longer exists for modern humanity. We live in these cities like rats in holes. Primitives, on the other hand, have a much more intimate relation with the stars, which haven’t been reduced to mere images. They know the seasons and the plants, guide their migrations and their agricultural cycles by them; they name the heavenly bodies, feel their power.

Modern humanity’s relation with the stars is mediated by experts; we look at the planetary pornography in magazines, and know a sampling of reified facts and scientific gibberish which we can spout when it is convenient, but we may as well be living in a cave. Our universe is an artifice, and nature is a commodity to be consumed. Our waking life is reduced to the cubicle and the production line, our dreams to television static, our wisdom to statistical jargon. Modern humanity thinks its scientific metaphors more accurately reflect “reality” than the mystic metaphors of the primitive, but they only reflect an impoverishment and a fundamental widespread ignorance.

The defenders of the scientific faith cite the spirit of discovery and exploration in their ecstatic panegyrics for the space program. The hallucination which these addicts of technology defend is nothing more than the spirit of capitalism in its early development, which is linked historically with the exploration and conquest of the “new world”, a commercial expansion which initiated the greatest pillage and slaughter of all time. The “achievements” of capital cannot be considered separately from the slavery and extermination of indigenous peoples everywhere. The space program has been paid for in oceans of blood.

But of course it won’t be “Man” who explores and conquers outer space any more than it was “Man” who explored and conquered America, but Capital. Human beings will function as the pawns of the military-industrial complex, East and West, which will transform space into capital. Incredible profits will be reaped in space, perhaps as it is divided into territories and spheres of influence. And if there are profits to be made, they will certainly lead to imperialist wars in the skies, star wars which will inevitably spread to the Earth.

This sinister side of the space program reveals how far the disassociation can go. Everyone knows that every advance in space technology and computer technology which accompanies it is an advance in military technology. Faster missiles, more accurate trajectories, more durable equipment, and more efficient fuels intensify the arms race and bring us closer to holocaust. Everyone knows this, but few utter it aloud.

The adventure is here and now on earth, not in desperate technological forays into space. We must begin by taking back this world which has been stolen from us, and learn to live upon it so that we can stand beneath the stars on a clear and silent night and know who we truly are and where we are going.