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Manufacturing America's Dreams

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Auto companies shield their low-tech exploitation of workers behind high-tech displays of mechanical prowess. The less a consumer knows about the blood and guts of manufacturing, the easier it is to buy the dream. So how does America think all this crap gets built?

Last summer, in a desperate attempt to entice young viewers to buy grandpa's dream car, General Motors (GM) ran a TV ad that featured a chorus line of robot arms dancing to techno music around a series of Cadillacs strutting like runway models on chrome-plated wheels.

Fascination with robotic fabrication isn't new. Fiat glamorized the magic of manufacturing with a video of a Strada built entirely by robots in 1979. The only human touch was the baritone bellowing Rossini's "Largo al factotum," triumphantly in the background. Nevermind the film crew had to cross a picket line to access the factory.

Advertisers can't hope to fulfill our dreams if we're troubled with the comfort of workers. Therefore, automation, not brawn and bravado, is the vaunted paramour.

Don't let yourself be seduced and deluded. The auto industry's master talent isn't robotics, it's the ability to automatize humans—including drivers.

GM teamed up with the space team at NASA to create the next generation of humanoid robots. Collaboration may assist astronauts, but more significantly it will enable the next generation of autos to relieve drivers of the task of attention. Travelers will be conveyed to their work and consumer stations in a bubble of uninterrupted complacency. Punch in your destination, sit back, and relax. Auto ambiance will massage both body and mind with a gravity-free experience which will tranquilize resistance and maximize pliability.

For the masters of neoliberalism, it's not just about the money, it's about control: a monopoly not only of the market—where consumers serve the investing class—but of the mind, where class is demolished by trivial choices under a blank mask of individuality.

Slaves didn't drive pickups to the pyramids, but the law of rulers hasn't changed: to maximize power, dehumanize labor. For the master class servants should be invisible and workers should be subhuman—or better yet, inhuman.

Behind every portrayal of vehicular luxury is a factory where profit is measured on a ticker tape of minutes, not stock prices. When engineers set a picnic table full of free snacks in a work area, it's not an amenity, it's a bait pile, a time study contrived to reveal how many extra minutes are available to cram with tasks. Every idle minute ticks a profit lost or a nick of time for the boss to wring another bead of sweat.

Fredrick Taylor, who invented time and motion studies in 1881, was a rube by current standards. He treated humans like machines without consideration for wear and tear, let alone the yoke of mental anguish wrought by automation. Taylor broke up the craft style of work—in which a skilled artisan fabricated a complete product independently at his own pace—into incremental functions which dumb-downed the craft into simple, duplicable, mechanical motions.

Under Taylorism any worker could be replaced at a moment's notice with any available body. Leave your brain at the door wasn't a joke, it was a survival tactic. Work was monotonous, but mastery of the task allowed workers time between strokes to smoke and sip and shoot the shit. Today's factories treat the brain like a muscle. Every worker is expected to be computer savvy and happily able to multi-task adroitly. New auto plants absorb fifty-seven seconds of every ambidextrous minute and the goal is sixty-one.

Back in the day, engineers hid behind pillars with clipboards and stopwatches striving to catch a worker with time on his hands. Today, they're slyer than a Dale Carnegie grad working on commission. They come bearing gifts and award-winning grins.

At the GM warehouse where I worked in 2008, management set up televisions in the break rooms with access to NBA playoffs. Young workers raced to get done in time to catch the last half. Engineers didn't sneak and snoop. They were patient as hunters hiding in deer blinds.

The conversion of humans into automatons demands absolute control, on the job and off. Henry Ford monitored workers' leisure as well as their labor. Random but regular inspections of workers' homes enforced Ford's moral authority: no drinking, no smoking, and church attendance, among other decrees.

Nowadays, all new hires undergo a drug test which imposes the old autocrat's behavioral conditioning with lab coats rather than thugs with morals and matching suits. New controls in auto world—Alternative Work Schedules—are even more psychologically insidious. The company exerts dominance over sleep patterns through work schedules that subvert normal human behavior. Ten hour shifts rotate between days and nights and alternate weekends. Workers subjected to shifts that oscillate from day to night never develop a regular sleep pattern and must warp their lives to orbit the job rather than the family.

The nineteenth-century movement for the eight-hour day—time “for rest” and “what we will”—is a quaint relic of working-class aspirations. After ten or twelve hours of work, an unpaid lunch, and a long commute, all time off is dedicated to recovery and preparation for return to work. Compulsive consumption becomes the mandatory reward because leisure time is a luxury only the investing class can afford. Compelled to cram as much fun as they can into a short span, workers yearn to spend as fast as they earn which is a boon to capital and a bust “for rest” and “what we will.”

Management's quest for absolute control respects no bounds. The peer pressure Toyota exacted to eliminate any movement that didn't add value to the product not only reduced bossing time, it pinched pee time. *The Barking Dog*, a collection of rank-and-file newsletters (1997–2006) from the GM-Toyota venture in Fremont, California, which introduced lean production to North America, describes how, by discouraging hydration, team leaders controlled how much workers urinated.

An urge spurned is a penny earned. Last summer, a Chicago company, unable to induce peer-pressure tactics, installed a badge swipe system that clocks bathroom breaks and penalizes workers who spend more than six minutes of work time in the washroom.

In the 1980s, my fellow workers and I gunned our engines and raced to the bar for a beer and a burger at lunch, but these days the cafeteria, let alone the tavern, is too far away. So cafeteria workers at the GM plant in Lansing, Michigan, deliver food direct to work stations. The Lean Production System, which strives to eliminate all unnecessary steps or expenditures of energy, has turned the social pleasure of lunch into a pit stop. Food is not only fast, it's past before the next task is ready.

In old photographs of factory life we see workers elbow-to-elbow, face-to-face, a hive of frenzied activity. The UAW was born in a mosh pit of mechanized emotion. Crowded conditions gave rise to collective action—slow downs, strikes, sabotage, sitdowns.

Today, masterminds of efficiency have atomized interpersonal communication. Auto parts manufacturing is organized into cells where a worker is surrounded by machines, not coworkers. The manual laborer pivots like a robot from one machine to the next in a clockwork of continuous motion without an idle second. But autoworkers aren't the only humans forced to behave like computer numerically controlled robots.

You know why the UPS guy runs to your porch and back? Because the computer at HQ tracks time lapsed between scanning a barcode and getting the truck rolling again. Airline maintenance and cleaning crews get half the time they need to turn a plane around, because the schedule is in the computer, not on the ground where the real world sweats and breathes and breaks down. Letter carriers are harassed by a GPS which shaves seconds off seconds already sliced and diced into nano-fractions. Amazon prefers humans to robots because they are more flexible and when they break you don't have to fix them. Meat packers are deported when they can no longer feel their hands. Nurses skip lunch and run between patients they don't have time to know, let alone care for. Teachers who love their students get caught juking the stats on Race to the Top test scores. Social workers are presented with human needs they don't have the resources to meet, and at the end of the day they can't lift their heads off their hands until they shut off their emotions and drive home like automatons.

Televised images of automatic ease camouflage massive low-tech exploitation. Sometimes we can't see the river through the debris or perceive the allegory in the story for all the glitz and sparkle, but evidence hides, if we dispel our dreams, in plain sight.

In 2007, GM produced a commercial for the Super Bowl that featured a cute yellow robot on the assembly line. The robot drops a screw and the line stops. Everyone turns and stares. The robot is shamed and ejected from the plant. He struggles to find new employment but fails at every menial venture. He has one skill and one purpose. He is unfit for life on the outside. He feels lonely and alienated. In despair he jumps off a bridge and commits suicide. Then, he awakens from his anxious dream relieved to be back on the line and lucky to have—not just a job—but a place in life.

In the ad GM humanized a robot to the schmaltzy tune of Eric Carmen crooning “All By Myself.” Like most commercials the video conveyed a text and a subtext. The stated message was: quality is built not only into the product, but also into the mind of the employee. The unstated message was: workers are inhuman and we can program them. The overt message of the ad was: autoworkers are incompetent, but they are dedicated to the perfection of a minute task and grateful to hold a trivial role in the corporation. The covert message was: GM sucks the blood out of autoworkers and reduces them to mindless mechanical factotums who feel “All By Myself.”

Auto moguls have an obsessive-compulsive drive to control markets by micromanaging the brains of consumers, as well as workers. Today’s scientists have invented drones that can replace bees, pollinate plants, and make honey, but long ago Henry Ford had “a better idea.” With the help of Frederick Taylor and a crew of violent gangsters, he manipulated humans to behave like drones, labor in mechanized hives, and create for his highness oodles of money.

Ford, the exalted hero of capitalists, was a ruthless, racist, fascist tyrant, but America has always felt enamored of a gentleman with the means to manufacture her dreams.