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Destructive Technological Departure from Tradition in *The Invention of Morel*

Molly Schineller

Technology has completely reconstructed a generous portion of humanity's landscape by detrimentally modernizing the traditional attitudes that chiefly define humanity. Adolfo Bioy Casares' *The Invention of Morel* demonstrates human nature's technological departure from tradition towards alienation and the objectification of the human form. Additionally, the novella exhibits society's trend towards a constant need to improve and destroy traditional elements, propelled by the hope of attaining transcendental godliness.

In the novella, a scientist named Morel invites his closest friends to an island vacation where he plans to test a futuristic machine he has created. This invention begins by recording the actions of himself and his friends over the course of one week on the island and then fatally deteriorates their human forms slowly towards death. In place of the true humans who had originally visited the island, the machine leaves behind holographic yet lifelike image versions to repeat the course of the week endlessly, and these images are trapped in an eternal loop from which they cannot alter their previous actions during the initial week of recording. After the images have been replayed on the island for some time, an unnamed fugitive escapes his country and comes to live on the island in isolation until the reproduced images appear. The fugitive interprets these images as strange nonhuman people who refuse to interact with him despite his futile attempts at socialization, while in truth the images are physically unable to respond, as they are not living humans but replications based on their preexisting human forms. Morel's lofty ideas in the novella do in a way manage to bypass the humanly realms of life expectancy, but at an incredible cost.

Human nature has evolved such that humans have developed a detached and alienated behavior between one another, obvious in common, distant, and impersonal relationships which exist solely for the benefit of one or both parties involved, rather than simply for the sake of friendly altruism. While the benefit of interaction may in some cases be mutual, humans rarely interact with one another without the intent of receiving gratification of some sort. Karl Marx describes these "purely material relationships" as possessing a complete "indifference to [one another], [with] mutual independence" (70). Here, Marx explains that human interactions, while on the surface appearing to involve dependence on one another, inherently exist for the purpose of developing the independence to allow humans to avoid interaction entirely.

In *The Invention of Morel*, the fugitive attempts to engage with Faustine, one of the images on the island, for the purpose of his own sanity and his irrepressible love for her reproduced beauty. His attempted interactions with her are coincidentally avoided by the temporal separation of the fugitive's and Faustine's existences, but still manifest humanity's departure from mutually genuine interaction. When Casares' main character attempts to create a garden that he hopes Faustine will not be able to ignore, he is again overlooked as "[Faustine] pretend[s] not to notice it" (Casares 33). Casares presents the human form "re-animated as an apparatus" which is very much distinct from the true, traditional definition of a human being (Hernández, 186). While Faustine is not "pretending" not to notice the fugitive's advance here due to her existence solely as a human "apparatus," unaware of the garden's existence, this avoidance of interaction is quite believable to readers based on their own impersonal

experiences. Human interaction has become so stunted that the fugitive states that “speaking to [Faustine] would be an alarming experience” (Casares 28). Again, the fugitive may be particularly intimidated by speaking to another person because of his terminal isolation, but he accurately demonstrates here that humans are detached from one another to the point of fearing interaction. Guy Debord discusses many similar representations of technology’s degradation of human interaction in his Marxist collection of aphorisms called *The Society of the Spectacle*. In the book, he discusses “kinship ties,” which have been completely broken down by the interference of technology and have accustomed humans to become far less interactive with each other than they are with machinery (Debord 71).

In addition to progressing towards alienation from one another, humanity is transitioning the definition of what is important in being human and what is not. Society has undergone an “evident degradation of being into having,” where “human fulfillment [is] no longer equated with what one [is], but with what one possess[es]” (Debord 5). Further, and continuously more indicative of the occurrences in *The Invention of Morel*, humanity has explored a “general shift from having to appearing” (Debord 5). The individuals Morel brings to the island with him endure these literal transitions from being, to having, to appearing throughout their week spent with the machine. Upon their arrival, Morel’s friends are true humans, living in the “being” segment of the transition. After having been recorded by Morel’s invention and declining towards death, they transition to “having” an image which does not quite belong to them. This is evidenced in the novella because if the images were entirely possessed by their models, they would not be molded into a weekly routine uninvolved with decision-making or thought in general. Following Debord’s proposed progression of degradation, when the human models officially die, they have completed the transition from “having” an image which accompanies their soul to “appearing” as an image which no longer possesses a soul.

Neuroscientist Lampros Perogamvros has explored the connection between humanity and consciousness, and has developed a theory that “only mind and mental experiences exist, and that physical objects do not exist except as perceptual phenomena” (2). If this theory is true, the only reality that humanity has is its consciousness, which is effectively lost through the implementation of Morel’s invention. Once the human bodies of Morel’s friends have completely died, leaving only acting images in their place, they have lost the “mind and mental experiences” that Perogamvros refers to, and only are present as physical objects which, based on the theory, do not even exist. Morel is forcefully objectifying the group he has brought to the island and forming them into nonhuman images, in the use of his invention. This is demonstrative of the cultural shift society has faced with its new obsession with technology. What Morel has done to the consciousnesses of his friends is something that humans continuously have done to themselves to varying extents during the rise of the technological age: complete destruction, moving towards the whimsical social construct of appearances.

Another shift in human nature due to the rise of technology has been an overwhelming surge of desire to improve societal standards which do not necessarily need improving. In his long-winded explanatory speech about his invention, Morel states the purposes of other past inventions in order to further the relevance of his own invention in the eyes of his acquaintances. Morel mentions the examples of visual inventions “for [the sense of] sight: television, motion pictures, photography” and auditory inventions “for [the sense of] hearing: radio, the phonograph, the telephone” (Casares 68). While all the inventions listed have cultural significance and have successfully sped up the pace of humanity, they were not entirely necessary for its survival. An aphorism in *The Society of the Spectacle* comments on this abuse

of technological power and its relationship with time spent by humans conducting important and unimportant tasks: “the time that modern society is constantly seeking to ‘save’ by increasing transportation speeds or by using packaged soups ends up being spent by the American population in watching television three to six hours a day” (Debord 84). Debord is commenting here that the improvements that society constantly strives to implement actually succeed in slowing down the productivity of society by providing more leisure time during which to relax and enjoy recreational activities such as the ones Morel mentioned in his speech. The sheer existence of these inventions has negatively affected productivity by providing a welcome distraction which obstructs humans from making constructive progress.

Society is not simply driven towards constant change by the pull-factor of the novel intrigue of innovation; constant change is also appealing because inherent in human nature is an urge to destroy traditional ideals. Cultural and artistic critic Walter Benjamin remarks in his essay on the negative effects of artistic reproduction, that humanity’s “self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order” (Benjamin 242). Benjamin is referring to art here, but this statement is all-encompassing towards the “art” of humanity as a whole. It is an attractive and nearly intoxicating concept that one could destroy something that existed in the past and replace it with something shiny and new that has never been seen or experienced before by today’s culture, whether it be replacing minivans with modern electric cars, or clunky wall-phones with handheld touchscreen devices. This widespread phenomena is seen clearly in Morel’s insistence on replacing his friends with representative images simply because it is an opportunity for novel innovation.

With the employment of inventions, humans have led themselves to believe that they have “made the world a better place,” which perpetuates their need to constantly modify society (Casares 69). Humans like to think that they have “interrupted an inactivity” by creating new technology, and that this occasional stagnant technological inactivity is definitively negative: that it is their duty to disturb dormancy of invention and progression (Casares 69). Despite this hopeful belief, however, humanity’s new improvements often “putrefy, ulcerate, and corrupt” what is traditional and good in the world, only to replace the past with less productive and less pure mechanisms (Link 219). Destruction is appealing to the human mind because of the opinion that tradition is a confining, sometimes inescapable trap. This belief has led humans to feel an excessive need to “overcome” tradition by “complete negation of traditional modes” (Ortega y Gasset 72, 78). Tradition is often viewed as an enemy of productivity, which typically leads humans to crave its disruption.

One final excuse for humanity’s perpetual development is its latent hope of attaining transcendental godliness. Humans strive to surpass the biological limits of the species and become much more than they realistically can be within the confines of existence. The “utopian aspiration of creating heaven on earth,” which is a detrimental hope to have, has led to many societal innovations that have created a “material reconstruction of the religious illusion” (Debord 75, 6). Most familiar technology seen in modern-day society would have seemed impossible in the past, and would then have appeared to be a work of god, impossible for humans to create. In working towards ridding society of that which makes it definitively human, humanity is functionally destroying itself. Morel attempts to escape the rational confines of mortal time restrictions with his invention by creating his own small-scale version of immortality for himself and his friends. In doing this, however, the inventor kills the human models of his immortal images. This demonstrates pointedly how humanity’s attempts to exceed its restrictions typically result in the destruction of the imperative elements of what it was seeking to replace.

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Casares' novella demonstrates human nature's harmful technological departure from tradition, and its movement towards detachment and the objectification of the human form. The novella also exposes society's trend towards constant improvement and the inimical destruction of traditional elements with the hope of attaining godly superiority. These changes seen in human nature, while very present and demonstratively detrimental, have not yet caused complete annihilation of society's traditional constructs of warmth, like hugs and family dinners. This complete decimation, however, is alarmingly imminent. Disruption of the definition of humanity is a dangerous field in which to meddle. Some scientists have already begun to research the realities of modeling machines like the one discussed in the novella. Although *The Invention of Morel* is an entirely fictional work, Morel's virtual reality actually functions using "ideas that float today as real possibilities backed by scientific and technological developments" (Almeida 46). With the existential possibility of dreamlike inventions such as Morel's, humanity must be aware and expectant of the fate that may accompany such technological advancements.

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