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MYTH AND SYMBOL IN FLYING FILMS

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ABSTRACT

Hollywood has shown an unending affection for the airplane for nearly one hundred years. From fantasy, to war, to salvation, to heroism, to romance, to adventure, airplanes have been and continue to be a powerful symbol in American film. Two intertwined themes based on flight are menace and hope, and the tension between them has successfully driven many flying films. This may explain why film has featured the airplane as the archetypal machine of the twentieth century, just as, according to Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden*, the locomotive served as the archetypal machine in American literature of the nineteenth century. Specifically, this dissertation will focus on how cargo planes, bomber aircraft, commercial airliners, and all those aboard have been portrayed in film from 1950-2004.

MYTH AND SYMBOL IN FLYING FILMS

Film studies and cultural studies share an interest in the analysis of popular culture, but film studies retains "a fundamental acknowledgement of aesthetic value." In contrast, cultural studies "disavowed the notion of aesthetic value from the beginning."[1] In this sense, my dissertation adheres much more strongly to the latter form of analysis, as I am, with few exceptions, unconcerned with the aesthetics of a film or particular shot, instead paying much closer attention to the larger cultural context in which the film was made and received, just as Leo Marx was not writing strictly about literature, but rather "the region of culture where literature, general ideas, and certain products of the collective imagination — we may call them 'cultural symbols' — meet." As a result, as Marx admits, some of the examples he used had "little or no intrinsic literary value."[2] Similarly, of the flying movies I examine, whether big-budget Hollywood films or cheaper made-for-TV movies, some are no doubt considered by critics to be of little artistic value. But that is beside the point; like Marx, I

hope to explore the region where "certain products of the collective imagination... 'cultural symbols'... meet." To do this, I begin with a brief discussion of film theory and the power of film.

Richard Dyer, professor of film, notes the power of film over its audiences, even to the extent that it has been used to "manipulate people to acquiesce in totalitarian regimes." This cultural studies perspective is concerned with the politics of film, and its central proposition is that "culture of all kinds and brows produces, reproduces, and/or legitimizes forms of thought and feeling in society and that the well-being of people in society is crucially affected and shaped by this."[3] Far from positing a monolithic or homogeneous message in film, cultural studies stresses the contested nature of these cultural products, where disputes rage within sections or between them. As we will see, Leo Marx also believed in the contested nature of cultural products and he uses this belief in a belated defense of his earlier work. Before turning to Marx, however, a brief treatment of film and its relationship to the culture at large will help establish a basis on which to argue this dissertation on flying films.

Film Theory and the Power of Imagery

"Anything that exists can be studied..." Thus begins Richard Dyer's introduction to film studies in the compilation *Film Studies: Critical Approaches*. Arguing that recent years have seen the emergence of a "cultural studies perspective" with respect to the politics of film, Dyer goes on to make a bold but perhaps valid claim for the power of "culture of all kinds and brows." Specifically, he writes:

> Who we think we are, how we feel about this, who we believe others to be, how we think society works, all of this is seen to be shaped, decisively, perhaps exclusively, by culture and to have the most profound societal, physical, and individual consequences. Importantly, cultural studies has a differentiated model of society. Rather than treating cultural products as part of a mass, uniform, and homogeneously modern society, it has focused on the particularities of cultures founded on social divisions of class, gender, race, nation, sexuality, and so on.

Furthermore, culture studies stresses "the importance of power, the different statuses of different kinds of social group and cultural product, [and] the significance of control over the means of cultural production."[4]

As an important example relevant to this dissertation, turn to the coordinated efforts during WWII to steer popular culture in a direction supportive of official policy during the

war. There is broad agreement that Hollywood war films of the 1940s played an explicit propaganda role in rallying troops and those at home to the war effort. However imperfect, these films "did convey some sense of the complexities of global war to civilians even if it was done in such an uneven manner. No other literary or cultural form was as able to provide the immediate communication of these realities of war as well as the movies."[5] Later scholars would support a more general claim for the power of film. For instance, Stanley Rothman, as director of a large study on leadership and social change in America, has been associated with a number of books that examine the impact media has had on American culture. In *Hollywood's America: Social and Political Themes in Motion Pictures*, Stanley Rothman is joined by Stephen Powers and David J. Rothman in a work that stresses that "Hollywood's creative leadership impacts the larger society even as it is influenced by that society." The authors, in noting that "films are made by a relatively small number of people, who... tend to share a common outlook," argue that "over time, motion pictures have had an undeniable impact on the beliefs, lifestyles, and action of Americans." By way of explanation, they write:

> There is little reason to believe that a single film or even group of films significantly influences audiences' views over the long haul. However, if large numbers of motion pictures portray businessmen or Jews as thieves, blacks as violent or stupid, women as weak or clinging, and the military as corrupt, as a matter of course, it is reasonable to believe that such presentations will affect audiences to a significant extent...[6]

Margaret Miles, author of *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies*, expands on the theme that the power of movies comes from the consistent presentation of an image:

> No one film has iconic power, but the recurrence of similar images *across* films weaves those images into the fabric of the common life of American society, influencing everything from clothing styles to accepted and expected behavior. Filmic conventions, of which most spectators are never consciously aware, cumulatively affect Americans' self-esteem, expectations, attitudes, and behavior in relationships.... The answer to my question concerning the power of film, then, is that, to a greater or lesser extent, "we [as a society] are what we look upon and what we delight in," or, in less elegant language, what you see is what you get. But we "get" (the cultural message, as Roland Barthes said), or *are*, what we see not once but repeatedly. We get, at a subliminal and hence utterly effective level, not the narrative but the conventions of Hollywood film.[7]

Film scholar Robert Sklar has explored the history of the rise of cinema in America and has examined the growing power of movies to influence society. In *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*, he notes that by the late 1930s, Hollywood's ascendancy in this regard was already widely recognized. Many academics and literary types regarded moviemakers with "respect, awe and even envy, as the possessors of the power to create the nation's myths and dreams." Scholars and writers of the day acknowledged that "movies had taken over cultural functions they themselves had exercised, or aspired to, in the past," a theme upon which Sklar expands:

> In traditional American society the task of describing the world and communicating that vision to its members had belonged, with different emphasis at different times, to the clergy, political statesmen, educators, businessmen, essayists, poets and novelists. There had never been a totally uniform cultural expression in the United States, there had always been schisms and struggles, alternatives and counterviews, but in general the combatants had come from similar ethnic and class backgrounds and had utilized the same means — the written and spoken word. Now for the first time power to influence the culture had been grasped by a group of men whose origins and whose means were different.[8]

This has been an important achievement because of the great impact film in general has had on modern American culture. Writing in 1975, Sklar laments the lack of cultural studies concerning the effects of film. Setting out to effect a remedy, he composed "a single volume covering the cultural history of American movies from the 1890s to the present, to provide a broad framework for understanding their significance." Sklar stresses the impact film has had: "It is important to begin with a recognition that movies have historically been and still remain vital components in the network of cultural communication, and the nature of their content and control helps to shape the character and direction of American culture as a whole."[9]

Later film critics share Sklar's desire to elevate the status of film to the same level of cultural importance as literature. For example, Desser and Friedman make the case that film deserves recognition and respect as a social construct: "Like a generation of literary critics, we also seek to situate a group of texts within a stream of social, cultural, historical and ethnic factors. Our subject, however, is film instead of literature, and our focus is filmmakers instead of writers."[10]

Some film historians believe that World War II provided the opportunity for film in

America to rise to a higher artistic and social level, becoming a major contributor to how Americans saw themselves, a trend that arguably continues to the present. Because the era of World War II movies was such a turning point, then, it may be worth quoting at length the same words Jones and McClure have chosen to end their pioneering work, *Hollywood at War*:

> Energized by the demands of war, the motion picture during these war years gained point, purpose and direction. They provided entertainment to those hammering out the weapons of war as well as to those fighting the battles. They furthered the military effort by conveying information about war and increased the public's awareness of what was going on. Their real opportunity came in emotionalizing the war situation. This led to an exposure of the nature of the enemy and his assaulting ideology, a more realistic treatment of Allied efforts, and a more dignified portrayal of the fighting men. In dramatizing the stories of conquered countries and attempting to tell what Americans and their allies were fighting for, the screen psychologically and materially met the crisis persuasively and with an urgent sense of its obligations.[11]

As important as these film experts consider film to be, there may be a yet more influential visual medium today: television. Two television scholars, for example, have written about the power of this medium that supplanted film after World War II:

> [T]elevision's penetration was to be all-encompassing, its influence enormous. The new medium was unprecedented in its "sheer mass, in its rapid infiltration of everyday American life, and in the fact that its images... have been transmitted, year after year into the consciousness of hundreds of millions of viewers."... Unlike feature films with their one-time exposure, television series have the unique characteristic of continuity, offering viewers a sense of familiarity and comfort through the ongoing characters whom they welcome, week after week, into their homes, their lives, and their thoughts....
>
> Even the made-for-TV movie, which like the cinematic feature is initially a one-time viewing event, has far greater exposure than the theatrical release; television movies immediately reach a much larger audience, and continue to do so for many years afterward through repeat broadcasts and syndication. Thus they have greater short-term and long-term opportunity to affect audiences.[12]

Myth and Symbol

The "myth and symbol" school of American Studies is generally associated with scholars such as Leo Marx and Henry Nash Smith.[13] While it enjoyed a flowering in the early days of American Studies, it met with harsh criticism later.[14] Fortunately, the pendulum began to swing back in the other direction, and at least one important defense of the method was made by Brian Attebery in his *American Quarterly* essay "American Studies: A Not So Unscientific Method" (1996), which was an explicit response to Bruce Kuklick's 1972 attack. Indeed, Marx himself managed a defense in the Introduction to his 1988 *The Pilot and the Passenger*, a wide-ranging and eclectic collection of his own essays.

Kuklick's Critique; Attebery's Response

Perhaps the chief target of the myth and symbol school of American Studies is the assumption by Marx, Smith et al. about the "collective imagination." Writing at a time of growing racial and gender pluralism, it is not a surprise that Kuklick emphasized that "images and symbols are not uniquely occurring entities. They have the capacity to appear in many minds..."[15] We can now recognize this critique as an "attack on the canon," a canon that writers like Smith and Marx took for granted. This view that "great books [are] keys to the study of the cultures of which they are a part," that "historical truths" about a period can be inferred from these great books (or other art) was a "shortcut around masses of historical data," struck Kuklik as rather false. "What we have instead," Kuklick wrote, "are a series of ruminations with little empirical content."[16]

This "lack of theoretical rigor"[17] was not so apparent to Attebery, particularly after he had gone through the archives of the forty-year-correspondence between Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx. In going over this voluminous correspondence, Attebery discovered "methodological hints" Marx had used in his construction of the myth and symbol method. These were:

1. Isolate the use of industrial-technological themes, metaphors, images in the work of the writer under consideration.

2. Examine the way in which these fit into the novel, story or poem, — the way they are imaginatively assimilated, contribute to the total effect, etc...

3. See how the attitudes toward the emerging machine age are related to the major preoccupations, themes, concepts of the writer; this involves both his personal experience, his explicit statements on the subject as well as what happens in his work.

4. Returning to the works of art and reading into them all that is implicit, how does our information illuminate the writer's work, and his relation to his society?

This method could be seen as "circular," or better, "an open spiral," starting with Marx's exposure to key passages, "broadening out to entire texts, further expanding the field of inquiry to include the writers' extratextual experiences as participants in the age of the machine, and finally returning to the passages for another go at interpretation." Attebery saw in this method an incipient attempt at what was later known as "the hermeneutic circle"[18]

This approach may not have been as neatly packaged as critics contended, as Attebery makes clear after his extensive research:

> Yet both Marx and Smith remain convinced that the nearly impossible task is eminently worth doing. It is important to remember that books like *The Machine in the Garden*, *Mark Twain*, and *Virgin Land* were attempts to find order in evidence that their authors knew to be vast, complicated, and often contradictory. What some readers today find overly neat and unified in their work was the result of considerable effort to remain intelligible, to find some pattern that could serve as a starting point for further investigation. In the published studies, the patterns they came to call myths and symbols often seem to be substantive embodiments of national consensus. Yet the letters reveal that Marx and Smith saw symbol and myth rather as interpretive tools to aid them in identifying the structures of thought used by nineteenth-century writers to sort out their own complex and contradictory environment and in explaining the interaction of individual and society in the formation of those thought patterns.[19]

Attebery has sifted their attempts at using "interpretive tools" down into five basic premises that both Marx and Smith seem to have agreed upon throughout the four decades of their correspondence:

> 1. The subject matter of American studies is the American mind or consciousness; this consciousness is variously experienced and expressed by individual Americans but is also somehow collective.
>
> 2. The method for studying this subject involves interpreting artifacts, especially verbal texts, in cultural context: this context, however, is not a given but is itself constructed by the researcher through other interpretive acts.
>
> 3. The interpreter is himself a product of history: his perceptions are both enabled and limited by the structures of thought given by his culture.
>
> 4. Although interpretation starts from the researcher's own culturally acquired values and worldview, a reading of the past can be tested and validated by interdisciplinarity: using psychological insights to probe political positions, reading historical documents with the literary critic's sensitivity, letting artists' images illuminate writers' words, and so on.
>
> 5. Literature has a special place in American studies because the literary text articulates its own theory about itself and its time and place; it may not be a reliable guide to what most people were thinking, but it is the best entry into how they were thinking.[20]

This last rule in particular offers a means of interpreting the flying films examined here, replacing the literary text with the film, of course. In *Virgin Land*, Smith spelled out his idea about the value of popular texts where "The individual writer abandons his own personality and identifies himself with the reveries of his readers. It is the presumably close fidelity of the... stories to the dream life of a vast inarticulate public that renders them valuable to the social historian and the historian of ideas.[21] While this may have been less true of some of Hollywood's more major flying films because of their semi-overt propaganda missions (the SAC trilogy stands as an obvious example), the made-for-TV movies fit this bill perfectly, which is yet another reason to take them seriously in this dissertation. In any case, now is the time to make the explicit case for reading flying films along the lines employed by Leo Marx in his classic *The Machine in the Garden*.

The Machine in the Sky

The pastoral ideal has been used to define the meaning of America ever since the age of discovery, and it has not yet lost its hold upon the native imagination.
Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*[22]

In *The Machine in the Garden*, Marx argues that the theme of mechanical disturbance in the American "pastoral" is a theme repeated again and again in American literature. His introductory chapter employs the trope of Nathaniel Hawthorne's summer of 1844 project to repose in the woods of Massachusetts to await, in Hawthorne's words, "such little events as may happen." Marx shows how Hawthorne's observations of distant human activity set the stage for his crucial contrast of pastoral versus the machine:

> But, hark! there is the whistle of the locomotive — the long shriek, harsh, above all other harshness, for the space of a mile cannot mollify it into harmony. It tells a story of busy men, citizens, from the hot street, who have come to spend a day in a country village, men of business; in short of all unquietness; and no wonder that it gives such a startling shriek, since it brings the noisy world into the midst of our slumbrous peace. As our thoughts repose again, after this interruption, we find ourselves gazing up at the leaves, and comparing their different aspect, the beautiful diversity of green....[23]

As the key to his discovery about the soul of America, Marx explains that since 1844, "this motif has served again and again to order literary experience. It appears everywhere in American writing." While it may only be a "fictive episode" in some cases, the "little event" is a "cardinal metaphor of contradiction, exfoliating, through associated images and ideas, into a design governing the meaning of entire works."[24]

Marx finds no shortage of literary examples. "We recall the scene in *Walden* where Thoreau is sitting rapt in a revery and then, penetrating his woods like the scream of a hawk, the whistle of the locomotive is heard." There is the "eerie passage in *Moby-Dick* where Ishmael is exploring the innermost recesses of a beached whale and suddenly the image shifts and the leviathan's skeleton is a New England textile mill." Finally comes "the dramatic moment" in *Huckleberry Finn* when Huck and Jim are spending the night peacefully floating down the river when "a monstrous steamboat suddenly bulges out of the night and smashes straight through their raft." What gives these "little events" much of their literary power, and perhaps even more of their cinematic power, is the fact that in a majority of these cases

"the machine is made to appear with startling suddenness."[25] This suddenness becomes all the more pronounced once aircraft have entered the scene, but that discussion must wait for a few more pages.

After having expounded upon Hawthorne's use of the sound generated by the locomotive, Marx turns to an example from two years earlier, this time from Emerson: "I hear the whistle of the locomotive in the woods. Wherever that music comes it has its sequel. It is the voice of the civility of the Nineteenth Century saying, 'Here I am.' It is interrogative: it is prophetic: and this Cassandra is believed: 'Whew! Whew! Whew!'"[26]

What Marx Missed

What is quite remarkable here is the fact that Marx never once extends his vision of "the machine" to the airplane, despite his own and Smith's insistence on the value of popular culture texts. Marx's work on the concept began in 1949; he published an essay, "The Machine in the Garden," in 1956, and then his path-breaking book of the same name in 1964. Finally, he had thirty-five years to reflect on ideas, to engage critics in reevaluations of his arguments, etc., after which he wrote his Afterword in 2000. Still, the airplane and its image in movies are ignored. This becomes all the more difficult to understand given that Marx had collected a group of his more substantive essays and published them in a book titled *The Pilot and the Passenger*. While he used these words to refer to the Twainian riverboat pilot and his passengers, the more common current use of the words should have been manifest. Yet they were not. This is auspicious for this dissertation because it offers the opportunity to apply an important method from American Studies to an unmined field of American popular culture.

The Airplane as Successor to the Locomotive

The locomotive is crucial to Marx's argument about the machine in the garden because it is the preeminent example of the machine in the nineteenth century. As Marx notes:

> By 1844 the machine had captured the public imagination. The invention of the steamboat had been exciting, but it was nothing compared to the railroad. In the 1830's the locomotive, an iron horse or fire-Titan, is becoming a kind of national obsession. It is the embodiment of the age, an instrument of power, speed, noise, fire, iron, smoke — at once a testament to the will of man rising over natural obstacles, and, yet, confined by its iron rails to a predetermined path, it suggests a new sort of fate. The "industrial revolution incarnate"...

Marx buttresses these claims by noting the sheer volume of paeans to the locomotive, the endless number of stories about "railroad projects, railroad accidents, railroad profits, railroad speed" all filling the press. The "fascinating subject is taken up in songs, political speeches, and magazines articles." Leading magazines elaborated upon it.[27] Clearly, the railroad was a potent symbol in its day.

Marx's point is well taken, then. First the steamboat, then the railroad was "the voice" of the nineteenth century. The reign of the railroad may well have continued into the twentieth century, but on the whole, I would argue, it cannot claim the title of "voice" of the twentieth century. It seems to me that that honor would have to go to a faster, more efficient means of mass transportation; just as the steamboat had been exciting but was replaced by the train, in the twentieth century the train was supplanted by the airplane, particularly the jet, which outclassed in size, speed, and capacity the abilities of the propeller airliner. This succession opens up many possibilities for a new reading of airplane films, so a bit more exposition on the link between the locomotive and airplane — and especially their images — is in order.

As we saw in the previous chapter, ancient civilizations had their myths about the sky. Here we can link another myth with one cited earlier. Emerson, for one, saw in the locomotive — this "fire-stealer" — "the story of Prometheus!" "The fable of Prometheus," Marx notes here, "is invoked on all sides."[28] For the airplane, however, perhaps the more appropriate fable is that of Daedalus and his son Icarus. Or perhaps not, for the airplane too has harnessed the power of fire, though less visibly than the steaming locomotive. Symbolically, it has offered both the possibilities and liabilities (recall the nineteenth-century fascination with railroad crashes) of fire and the locomotive.

A further link between locomotive and airplane comes in the symbolic power they hold for their age: "A locomotive is a perfect symbol because its meaning need not be attached to it by a poet; it is inherent in its physical attributes. To see a powerful, efficient machine in the landscape is to know the superiority of the present to the past."[29] If that is true of the

locomotive, is it not more so with respect to the airplane, particularly as it takes flight? One would be hard pressed to argue that a fully loaded 747 on takeoff, for example, does not prove the superiority of the present to the past, if the past is represented by any version of the train. In addition to the technology itself comes the artistic imagery of the machine in question: "Much the same feeling surrounds the symbol of the machine when it is put into words."[30] The same, I would argue, is true — perhaps more true — when the machine is put into film... and projected upon a large screen.

As a further sign of the airplane's rise to symbolic prominence, witness reference to it in popular song. Perhaps the most well known instance is the pop tune sung by Peter, Paul and Mary, "Leavin' on a Jet Plane," where they sing:

So kiss me and smile for me
Tell me that you'll wait for me
Hold me like you'll never let me go

'Cause I'm leaving on a jet plane
I don't know when I'll be back again
Oh, babe, I hate to go

Ironically, this song was written and sung by John Denver, who died while flying his own experimental plane off the coast of California in 1997.

In 1977, the Steve Miller Band released their song "Jet Airliner," which contained these lyrics:

Goodbye to all my friends at home
Goodbye to people I've trusted
I've got to go out and make my way
I might get rich you know I might get busted
But my heart keeps calling me backwards
As I get on the 707
Ridin' high I got tears in my eyes
You know you got to go through hell
Before you get to heaven

Big ol' jet airliner
Don't carry me too far away
Oh, Oh big ol' jet airliner
Cause it's here that I've got to stay

Machine as Menace

After a canvas of the strengths and promises of railroads in chapter IV, "The Machine," Marx begins a shift by referring to John Stuart Mill's critique that such exuberance bypasses ideas. The approving rhetoric just covered about America's embrace of progress through technology "rises like froth on a tide of exuberant self-regard, sweeping over all misgivings, problems, and contradictions."[31] Marx now sets his sights on exposing these oversights to the light of day.

Disturbing the Peace

As seen above, the intrusion of the machine into the American garden was Marx's central thesis, followed closely by his observation that "*More often than not in these episodes, the machine is made to appear with startling suddenness* [emphasis added]."[32] In both respects, the same remains true for many flying films; in fact, given the medium of big screen film and its accompanying sound, the effect is all the more dramatic.[33] For example, the sudden disturbance of the pastoral can be found in flying films as disparate as *Strategic Air Command* and *Always*, as mentioned in the previous chapter. Attention to how the airplane as machine is treated in these and other films will demonstrate the degree to which uses of Marx's reading of literature can be applied to film as well.

The setting of *Strategic Air Command* is the early 1950s, a time of a return to normalcy after the traumatic war years of the early 1940s, the upheavals caused by Communist

advances world wide, and the unpleasant war that had just taken place in far-away Korea. Further, the scene is set in that most pastoral of American pastimes, the baseball field. James Stewart is cast as WWII flying veteran Robert "Dutch" Holland, who has happily returned to his chosen profession of baseball. Out with the younger men, he indulges in the innocent pursuit that had been denied him while in the service. Now, however, the present and the future look pleasant and bright, as he has just signed a $70,000-a-year contract with the St. Louis Cardinals. That he has also just married a young woman further establishes the domestic (national and personal) tranquility that is featured in the opening of the film.

Holland's wife has just arrived with her parson father to take in a practice session on a beautiful day. Dutch comes over to make small talk, then begs their leave as the players are about to begin an intersquad game where he is the captain of the Blue Team. He then jogs out toward third base, where the camera shows only him and the expanse of the outfield and area beyond. Suddenly, his idyll is interrupted by a distant whine, one that grows in volume too fast for Dutch to identify. Mystified, he turns his eyes skyward, where he sees a monstrous ten-engine B-36 bomber. No mention of airplanes had yet been made and no explanation is offered for this sudden intrusion. The plane flies over and Dutch is jolted out of his sporting mood, but the plane is gone before anyone can say anything. Quickly, the scene returns to the pastoral and the game gets underway. Without the forthcoming unraveling of this scene's meaning, the viewer is left disconcerted by the curious juxtaposition of baseball game and bomber.

This disturbance of tranquility is repeated twenty-six minutes into the film when Dutch and his wife are locked in a romantic embrace in their new on-base house. Suddenly, a B-36 roars low overhead, causing the windows and blinds to vibrate. As soon as it comes, however, the disturbance passes, and the newlyweds resume their private pursuits. This time, though, we know why the B-36 plays a central role — after patriotic service in the Pacific during WWII, Dutch has been drafted again to bolster America's bomber-based nuclear deterrent. In addition to the generic interruption of the idyll, the bomber's intrusion also marks the intrusion of pressing defense needs into the personal lives of Dutch and his wife and, by extension, into the lives of countless servicemen and their families, which is the explicit message of the film.

Three decades later, we see an equally well rendered portrayal of the machine in the garden disturbance in the 1989 film *Always*, a remake of the 1943 *A Guy Named Joe*, in which Spencer Tracy starred as the ghostly flier who returns to earth to instruct a young airman about to go off to war. The premise surrounding *Always* is quite different, though. The

action now revolves around firefighters who fly airplanes full of water to drop onto raging flames, and rather than two military aviators, this film pairs a cocky man (Richard Dreyfuss) with his insecure girlfriend (Holly Hunter).

The film opens with two fishermen sitting quietly in their small boat on a placid lake. There is no sound or music, and in fact, one of the fishermen is dozing, all in all the ideal image of "slumbrous peace." Then, far behind the men, in the background, we see but do not yet hear a great plane swooping down on the men, like a hawk silently stalking its prey. As it is still at a distance, the men neither see nor hear it, but we in the audience are gripped by the peril. A two-engined amphibious plane, it finally contacts the water, all the while charging at the two unaware men. Groggily, one man senses something; when he turns to look behind him, he sees the shape of the hulking plane heading straight for them. Then the roar of the engines and displacement of water reaches him, and the dozing man awakes with alacrity. Fearing for their lives, they dive into the water. The plane, never intending to land, lifts off just over the boat. This drama has only taken seconds, yet it succeeds in bringing "the noisy world into the midst of our slumbrous peace." As soon as it has intruded, it is gone and quiet returns, just as in Hawthorne's case: "As our thoughts repose again, after this interruption, we find ourselves gazing up at the leaves, and comparing their different aspect, the beautiful diversity of green...."[34]

The theme is repeated in *Memphis Belle*, a 1990 remake of the 1944 short documentary directed by William Wyler while in uniform.[35] Here, the opening scene shows American boys engaged in an impromptu game of football in an English field. They are there to fly the B-17 on bombing missions over Germany. That American bomber bases were carved out of English pastureland made the machine in the garden motif literal, and this movie is sure to capture it. In addition to the opening juxtaposition of youth engaged in a football game in a field beside their high-tech bombers, we later see their bombers parked at the edge of a field ready for harvest. In contrast to the power of the four-engined B-17 comes a horse-drawn mower gently cutting down the hay. One of the bomber crew stops to help the farmer, reinforcing for us the notion that this American farmboy's service is being interrupted by his tour of duty on a flying machine.

In the same year that *Memphis Belle* came out, a made-for-TV movie employed a related image of the machine in the garden. In *Miracle Landing* two tropes are intermingled: the machine in the garden and the garden as paradise. The setting: Hawaii. *Miracle Landing* is a "docudrama" based on a real incident. On April 28, 1988, an Aloha Airlines 737 with a particularly high number of takeoff and landings to its credit experienced catastrophic

airframe failure while flying over the Pacific. Remarkably, the aircraft remained intact, and the two pilots were able to land it successfully. This aspect of the movie will be treated later; here the point of interest is the positioning of the plane in paradise.

Not surprisingly, stock cliches about Hawaii are used to establish a general sense of place, as occurs when the opening credits roll. An aerial shot of Waikiki centers on the beach, hotels, and sailboats, while a crewmember jogs along Kalakaua Ave., allowing the camera to take a wide sweep of the famous stretch of land. The music, of course, is suitably upbeat. This image of paradise is reinforced in the next scene, when we see a cabin crewmember in her bathing suit painting a portrait on the beach of her young daughter. The surrounding mountains and isolation of the ocean establish the tropical magic of setting, as does the traditional Hawaiian dress and lei that the daughter is wearing.

Such imagery is repeated four more times before the movie has reached the thirty-minute mark: once more as the pilot sails his boat in the serene waters off Diamond Head, ending with a golden sunset shot, and again when two female crewmembers have dinner on the beach in Waikiki. The message becomes heavy handed, however, when we learn that the fictional airline portraying Aloha Airlines is called "Paradise Airlines." Since the Paradise Boeing 737 is a central focus of this movie, ample time is given to introduce it. As the plane sits parked on the tarmac, the camera slowly begins a pan of the tail, where we see a lone green palm tree painted as the airline's emblem. The camera continues its slow pan the length of the plane, past the unmistakable Pratt and Whitney JT8D engines that powered so many Boeing airliners,[36] up to and around the nose of the plane. Upon takeoff, the background behind the plane is of typical tropical scenes. Finally, a later shot in flight shows the Paradise 737 encircled by a rainbow.

A more macabre portrayal of the interrupted idyll comes in the 1993 film *Fearless*, directed by Peter Weir and starring Jeff Bridges as an everyman passenger. The movie opens with a pastoral — a cornfield filled with corn much taller than a man. Mist — or smoke — envelops the corn, and ambiguous music plays in the background. Immediately, we see Bridges walking toward us through the corn. In his arms is a baby, and he is holding a small boy by the hand as they navigate their way. Behind them comes a line of children. Though disheveled, no one is injured, nor is anyone crying, so the nature of the scene remains a mystery. Now the mist/smoke has cleared and seconds later they emerge from the field, where the reason for their presence in the cornfield is made all too clear: they have survived a plane crash. On the dirt road adjacent to the corn lies the shattered tail of a plane. Meanwhile Mexican field hands kneel in prayer for the dead and for the miracle of the

survival of these passengers. An aerial shot of the crash scene shows a green cornfield diagonally cut by the blackened path of the doomed airliner.

These filmic examples are rather straightforward renditions of the unexpected entrance of the machine into the garden, but they merely add to the drama of the film rather than play a central role in the script. In contrast, a recent film employs the image in a way that is central to the very narrative of the film. In addition, this film, *Cast Away*, has so many ties to literary renderings of the machine in the garden that I will devote an entire chapter to its discussion later in this dissertation. Marx's concept of the machine in the garden can be applied to this 2000 film as profitably as to early 19th-century American literature.

Marx's Change of Heart

There was once a town in the heart of America, where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change.

Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring*[37]

Marx catalogs the embrace of technology that writers such as Emerson, Hawthorne and many others of their generation displayed, but being a 20th-century man, he cannot escape the growing conviction that many aspects of technological advance have come at costs not worth bearing. Of special note is the drastic change in mood toward technology that can be found between the original publication of *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) and its thirty-fifth anniversary edition. In this new Afterword, Marx is much more explicit about the downside of the entry of the machine into the American garden. To any modern reader, the perils of the machine are legion, yet in 1964 Marx was reluctant to stress this. About all we read of the postwar world (and Marx had served in the Navy during The Second World War, so he could hardly have been unaware of the growing menace of modern machines) is a mild reference to a "not wholly fanciful premonition of mankind's improving capacity for self-destruction."[38] In his Afterword thirty-five years later, however, he takes a starkly stronger line when referring to the first dropping of the atomic bomb: "Quite apart from its tragic human consequences, no other event in my lifetime so effectively dramatized the nexus between science-based technological progress and the cumulative, long-term degradation of the environment."[39]

Perhaps this change in perspective can be of use. Writing as he was just before America's entry into the Vietnam War, a time before the American masses had begun to question their leadership's use of the military, Marx was, like so many other Americans, no

doubt still enamored of the view that America had fought a "good war" during the 1940s and continued to take the moral high ground during the Cold War. A quick look at the three Strategic Air Command movies (the "SAC trilogy") will confirm that even at the time of the release of the final film, *A Gathering of Eagles* (1963), the view of the American military was still highly favorable. In particular, the machines featured were held in the highest esteem.

What changed between then and the year 2000 is much too vast to discuss here, but any competent reader in American Studies will have some clear grasp of the history. The point here is this: Just as events subsequent to the appearance of *The Machine in the Garden* had a dramatic effect on Marx, those same events also influenced the way flying films were made after about 1964, and neither Marx nor Hollywood filmmakers were immune to these changes. As the perception of the machine became more negative, so too did the degree of menace represented by flying. It was no longer only the failure of flight crew or aircraft that could bring an airliner crashing to earth; now there were hijackers, madmen, chemical threats, terrorists, and a host of other dangers with which to contend. (The events of September 11, 2001, which obviously came after Marx had written his Afterword, only underline the fears that film after film had portrayed. I discuss these issues in the conclusion to this dissertation.)

In his Afterword, Marx now says that as "an enthusiastic wilderness camper and amateur ornithologist," he had "already become sensitive to our society's increasingly reckless assault on the integrity of the natural environment."[40] It is impossible to think of this comment now without recalling Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, published just three years before Marx's own book. Marx does refer to it in 2000, but it is doubtful he had read it prior to 1964. Otherwise, how could he have refrained from using the gem available to him from Carson's opening, which he does use in 2000, in the *opening sentence*, no less: "There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings." Marx notes descriptions of a "serene seasonal" — i.e. pastoral — setting, followed by a theme identical to his own. And then, Marx writes, "with a sharp change of mood" comes "the abrupt intrusion of an external force":

> Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community; mysterious maladies.... Everywhere was a shadow of death.... There was a strange stillness. The birds, for example, — where had they gone?... It was a spring without voices.

Perhaps Marx's failure to be more pessimistic about industrialization in his interpretations of American writers' views on the machine is due to what one critic of myth and symbol has charged Marx with. Writing in *American Quarterly* in 1996, Brian Attebery charges that Marx, along with his teacher Henry Nash Smith, does not "attest to the writers' personal involvement in the materials they studied and the impingement of present concerns on perceptions of the past."[41] Marx should have known better. After all, as we saw above, Marx as long ago as 1948 wrote "See how the attitudes toward the emerging machine age are related to the major preoccupations, themes, concepts of the writer; this involves both his personal experience, his explicit statements on the subject as well as what happens in his work."

Since this dissertation's subject is not Leo Marx, there is no need to further explore why Marx wrote what he wrote. Still, mentioning the shift in Marx's perspective from 1964 to 2000 is fortuitous for two reasons: First, it allows an update of the "machine-in-the-garden trope" from the first half of the nineteenth century to well into the second half of the twentieth, a period in which some of the best Hollywood flying films have been made. Second, it allows a shift in the focus of this dissertation back to where it belongs: up above. After all, upon noting "the spring without voices" in the opening of Carson's seminal book, Marx mentions that Carson's "initial surrogate for the machine is 'a white granular powder' falling from the sky, a substance Carson associates... with Strontium 90, a by-product of nuclear explosions."[42] How fitting that so many of the menaces in the sky to be discussed in this dissertation will deal with nuclear explosions and deadly substances in the sky.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Graeme Turner, "Culture Studies and Film," 193, in *Film Studies: Critical Approaches*. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), ed. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson; as well as Dudley Andrew in the same text, where he adds the insight that television has usurped the "mass entertainment function" (181).
2. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1964, 2000), 4. In a footnote, Marx defines "cultural symbols" thus: "A 'cultural symbol' is an image that conveys a special meaning (thought and

feeling) to a large number of those who share the culture."

3. Richard Dyer, "Introduction to Film Studies," in *Film Studies*, 6.
4. Richard Dyer, "Introduction to Film Studies," in *Film Studies*, 6. See also Jostein Gripsrud's comments on the Marxist conception of film "as a medium for changing people's ways of thinking in 'progressive' directions, or, on the contrary, for reproduction and dissemination of ideology in the sense of 'false consciousness'" ("Film Audiences," in *Film Studies*, 200-201).
5. Ken D. Jones and Arthur F. McClure. *Hollywood at War: The American Motion Picture and World War II* (Cranbury, NJ: A. S. Barnes and Co., Inc., 1973), 25.
6. Powers et al., *Hollywood's America*, 10, 287.
7. Margaret R. Miles, *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 190-191. See also Jones and McClure, *Hollywood at War*, 16.
8. Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 195.
9. Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, ix-x.
10. David Desser and Lester D. Friedman, *American-Jewish Filmmakers: Traditions and Trends* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 4-5.
11. Lewis Jacobs, "World War II and the American Film," *Cinema Journal*, Volume VII, Winter, 1967-68, 21; quoted in Jones and McClure, *Hollywood at War*, 25.
12. Jonathan Pearl and Judith Pearl, *The Chosen Image: Television's Portrayal of Jewish Themes and Characters* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc. 1999), 8. The Pearls justify this attention to the content of television by arguing:

    > Because of its unique capacity to reach and influence a massive audience, television is gaining in prominence and stature as a resource for the study of popular culture and as a primary historical source. The significance of using television as a primary source lies in the need to know and understand what most people perceive. And a most effective way of gaining an awareness of people's perceptions is to tune into their channels of communication. As a measure of television's central position in the lives of most Americans, consider that "what a series such as 'The Waltons' has to say about life in the Depression is likely to have a far more penetrating and long-lasting effect on the nation's consciousness than any number of carefully researched scholarly articles or books" (8-9).

    Richard Dyer also notes the power of television in this respect ("Introduction to Film Studies," in *Film Studies*), 6.
13. Marx critic Bruce Kuklick, for one, argues this, though he adds lesser contributors to the "movement" such as the following authors and their works: R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955); Charles L. Sanford, *The Quest for Paradise* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1961); Alan Trachtenberg, *Brooklyn Bridge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965); and John William War, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953). See Bruce Kuklick, "Myth and Symbol in American Studies," *American Quarterly*, Volume 24, Issue 4 (October, 1972), 435.
14. Kuklick was a strong critic of the "myth and symbol" school. Brian Attebery's subsequent response to Kuklick —— "American Studies: A Not So Unscientific Method," *American Quarterly* 48.2 (1996) —— was obviously meant to build upon Marx's own earlier efforts at defending the movement, particularly as he did in "American Studies —— A Defense of an Unscientific Method," *New Literary History* 1 (1969), 75-76.
15. Kuklick, "Myth and Symbol in American Studies," 437.

16. Kuklick, "Myth and Symbol in American Studies," 447.
17. Attebery has attributed this mode of attack to commentators such as Jeffrey Louis Decker and Patrick Brantlinger, "American Studies, 316.
18. Attebery, "American Studies," 322.
19. Attebery, "American Studies," 327.
20. Attebery, "American Studies," 333-334.
21. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1950, 1978), 91-92.
22. This is Marx's opening line, *The Machine in the Garden*, 3.
23. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 13-14.
24. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 229.
25. Marx is quite taken by this observation about 19th-century American, noting another Melville work ("The Tartarus of Maids") in which the narrator happens upon a winter scene of a paper mill hidden among the mountains. Naturally he mentions *Walden Pond*, along with *The Education of Henry Adams*, then moves to the last century where *The Great Gatsby, The Grapes of Wrath*, and "The Bear" qualify. His explicit list of authors includes Walt Whitman, Sarah Orne Jewett, Henry James, Sherwood Anderson, Willa Cather, Eugene ONeill, Robert Frost, Hart Crane, T. S. Eliot, John Dos Passos, and Ernest Hemingway. Indeed, he writes, "it is difficult to think of a major American writer upon whom the image of the machine's sudden appearance in the landscape has not exercised its fascination" (*The Machine in the Garden*, 15-16). That film incorporates the same "metaphoric design," then, is hardly surprising.
26. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 17.
27. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 191.
28. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 192.
29. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 192. These allusions were taken from Tocqueville.
30. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 193.
31. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 207.
32. Marx, *Machine in the Garden*, 15.
33. Of course, equal drama in the beginning of a movie can be realized when the scene is dark and suspenseful and is then suddenly interrupted by the intrusion of the machine/airplane. Such is the case in *Terminal Velocity* (1994, starring Charlie Sheen) in which a lone woman is driving in the dark desert, ominously being followed by an unknown individual. After one false scare, the darkness is suddenly broken by the brilliant lights of a landing 747 whose main carriage wheels graze off the top of the woman's car as it sets down on an abandoned desert runway.
34. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 13-14.
35. In the original, Wyler and his crew flew actual missions over Germany using hand-held 16 mm cameras (their 35 mm cameras had been lost in 1942 when the ship transporting them from America to England failed to arrive). The Kodachrome stock was processed in Technicolor and then blown up to 35 mm. Wyler was aboard the Memphis Belle when it completed its 25 th mission over Germany (Pendo, *Aviation in the Cinema*, 163-165).
36. See Robbie Shaw, *Boeing: 737-300 to 800* (Osceola, WI: MBI Publishing Company, 1999) and Malcolm L. Hill, *Boeing 737* (Ramsbury, Marlborough, England: Crowood Press, 2002).
37. Rachel Carson, Silent Spring (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962.). Marx uses the quote in *The Machine in the Garden*, 380.
38. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 184.

39. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 369.
40. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 369.
41. Attebery, "American Studies," 317.
42. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 380-381.