Last Exit to Utopia:

Notes on the Byrdcliffe Moment and The Road to Now

A talk with discussion to follow

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When Gioia Timpanelli did me the honor of asking me up to Byrdcliffe to talk about Utopia on the hundredth anniversary of this legendary arts colony's founding I said yes right away. Gioia is one of those rare people whom I trust so thoroughly that if she said "I've booked a ticket for you tonight on a rocket to Mars, I really think you should go," I would start packing my bags.

Thus began a struggle, minor in the scheme of things, and not even grand in terms of my own life. But the nub of it is this: whenever I'm asked to say or write something for any sort of formal gathering, I immediately balk. I find myself locked out of my own imagination and language. So there's nothing for it but to poke around the materials in a general way and wait for something particular to say "Hi, I'm here, what about me?" What eventually triggered my writing was something Carla Smith said when we spoke in her office on my trip up to look around Byrdcliffe and gather documents: "I don't think of Byrdcliffe as Utopian." Her remark, apparently offhand, and to which I don't remember making any particular reply, knocked around in my head like a nut come off a bolt inside a hubcap. Eventually, the noise got so distracting, I was forced to ask, *Well, if Byrdcliffe isn't Utopian, at least in its underlying principles, then what is it?* And then: *What might make Byrdcliffe utopian in the future?*

I am delighted to say I have no answers. But I do have a piece I'd like to read. My hope is it will get us talking.

By the time I got to Woodstock, it was going up in flames…
—Chumbawamba, "I'm Not Sorry, I Was Having Fun"

When Alex, the anti-hero of Anthony Burgess's novel *A Clockwork Orange* emerges from radical behavior-modification in a super-efficient sensurround torture chamber, he can no longer bear to hear the music of his once-beloved "Ludwig van." If you want to make him "creech like bezoomny" and fall to his knees, just hum the opening phrases of the final movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony,[1] Similarly the workings of power, sometimes subtle, sometimes not, during the century after the founding of Byrdcliffe have made most of us similarly Utopia-adverse. We've learned to shut ourselves up in gated suburban communities—fake small towns simulating histories we can't remember—or in segregated central city redoubts where our chief freedom is to look out for number one.

The price we pay for abandoning the collective project of a better world in the here-and-now is that the thought of any sort of common interest in a future not governed by our personal enrichment makes most of us nauseous. So it takes a strong stomach to have a conversation with oneself or others, either in a serious or silly way, about Utopia and the forces that have made it—at least for the present—a dead letter. But if we wish to indulge, however riskily, in utopian speculation, or at least attempt to trace, and connect at the visceral level with the survival of utopian strains of imagination in our lives today, it's worth a look at the contending streams of thought

[1]Beethoven wrote the lengthy adagio section of his "Hammerklavier" sonata, number 29, in a kind of fugue form, feeling his way backward into the not-yet entirely ruptured spirital-rationalist world of Bach. While all the instruments in Ludwig van's day were still handmade, and mostly derived from plant products, the orchestra, without knowing it, was already a coordinated brigade of musicians, hierarchically directed and on its way to becoming a digital sound processor.

and action in and around the founding of Byrdcliffe by Jane Byrd McCall and Ralph Radcliffe Whitehead in 1903.

"Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts—the book of their deeds, the book of their words, and the book of their art."[2]
So said John Ruskin in 1877.

To begin then, a few passages from the chapter of the "book of words" authored by Ruskin and Morris. These are meant to evoke something of the climate of progressive thought out of which Byrdcliffe emerged.[3] As we go, I'd like to bear in mind Ruskin's five categories of great ideas: *Power, Imitation, Truth, Beauty* and *Relation*.

As Whitehead's (and Morris's) philosophical mentor, Ruskin, though he died shortly before Byrdcliffe was founded, would have appreciated the ideals on which it was based. For Ruskin, "Life without industry is guilt, industry without art is brutality."[4]

Ruskin also championed progressive pedagogy, of the sort that Dewey experimented with in a building built at Byrdcliffe by students and presently in ruins. "Let us reform our schools," Ruskin wrote "and we shall find little reform needed in our prisons."[5]

What, during a great age of material accumulation and deprivation was Ruskin's measure of social wealth? "That country is the richest which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy human beings."[6]

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[2] *St. Mark's Rest*, 1877, preface

[3] It's worth noting that Byrdcliffe was founded by an Englishman, while two wealthy Americans founded Ruskin College in Oxford in 1899.

[4] *Lectures on Art, III, The Relation of Art to Morals*, 1870

[5] *Unto This Last*, sec. 77 1862

[6] *Ibid*. essay 4

Ruskin also coined the term *pathetic fallacy* which could be taken as the motto of our present political moment.

Now, a selection of William Morrisisms, this first from *The Beauty of Life*, written in 1880: "If you want a golden rule that will fit everybody, this is it: Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful."

At the height of an industrial revolution "Dickensian" in its inequities, Morris held forth the prospect of: "Wonderful days a-coming, when all shall be better than well."[7]

In his poetry Morris foresaw:

"The more than one in a thousand in the days to come,

Shall have some hope of the morrow, some joy of the ancient home."[8]

And here Morris echoes Milton's revolutionary vision of a life of learning and of dignified labor, which would undo the consequences of the Fall, and "repair the ruins of our first parents."

But Morris was not merely looking backwards. He believed that wonderful days would result from concrete social practice based on a radically altered set of human relations:

"What I mean by Socialism," he wrote in 1884, "is a condition of society in which there should be neither rich nor poor, neither master nor master's man, neither idle nor overworked, neither brain-sick brain workers nor heart-sick hand workers, in a word, in which in which all men would be living in equality of condition, and would manage their affairs unwastefully, and with the full consciousness that harm to one would mean harm to all—the realization at last of the meaning of the word *commonwealth*."[9]

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[7] *The Day is Coming*, 1884

[8] *The Voice of Toil*, 1884

[9] *Justice*.

In essence, Morris envisioned a world in which: "The reward of labor is life."[10]

It was Ruskin then, who posed the spiritual and political questions, and Morris and his adherents, Whitehead among them, who sought to address them in concrete terms. Viewed from today's perspective, the Byrdcliffe Moment—though socialism was never part of Whitehead's plan—can be seen as a final opportunity for the reunion of "hand and heart" to assert its claim. A quarter century later, the mechanized horrors of the Great War just passed had revealed and made sovereign the power of the industrial nation *as* machine. And long before Dwight Eisenhower's PR men coined the term "military industrial complex" the social systems that emerged post-1918 had already begun to fuse domestic life and war, setting into motion a pattern we can recognize, with or without popcorn, as *The Matrix*. Even without buying a ticket, we all experience, one way or another, the Matrix-like quality of everyday life, minus some of the special effects.

The arts and crafts movement left plenty of physical evidence in a variety of design inflections, materials and media. Significant writings by Ruskin, Morris and Whitehead survive and may profitably be read. *Handicraft* magazine played a crucial role in articulating and promoting the movement's aims. The Ideal Home Exposition held in London at the turn of the century served as an arts and crafts watershed, both in England and the United States. In the physical landscape and architecture of Byrdcliffe, we can catch a flavor of the cross-fertilization of Whitehead and McCall's milieu, one which encompassed Bolton Brown, Hervey White, Edna Walker, Zulma Steele, John Dewey, Thorsten Veblen and Clarence Darrow, among the brilliantly fired-up spirits of their day.

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[10] *News from Nowhere*, 1891. Nowhere, or noplace, is one possible interpretation of word *utopia*.

Much beautiful and useful contemporary work is still produced at both in this colony as well as in the wider locale of Woodstock, and this speaks powerfully of the Byrdcliffe Moment's extension into our own time. But the early 20th century also marked a definitive moment for those whose project was to systematically sever the connection between the human hand, heart, eye and mind. And who sought to remove all spiritual value from the process of making things, and reduce productive arts and crafts to extreme repetition in the service of efficient output. We owe it to ourselves to look at the beliefs of those who set about to consciously destroy what remained of integrated, dignified labor.

What was the dominant texture of industrial society a quarter century after Byrdcliff's founding? Call up in your mind some remembered images of Fritz Lang and Thea von Harbau's movie *Metropolis*. The architecture is clear: a hypernatural Edenic Utopia of the rich sits, literally, on top of a mechanized hell of the working poor and lumpen masses. It's fantasy, but not too far off the mark.

In 1926, the year *Metropolis* premiered, a German engineer named Franz Westermann traveled to Henry Ford's River Rouge factory complex near Detroit—the legendary plant that inhaled steel, fabric and rubber and extruded motor cars at the hitherto unimaginable rate of 2000 per day. Westermann professed a lifelong enthusiasm for "everything beautiful, be it nature, art, sport or productivity." In Ruskin's poem *Lancelot,* the hero gazes upon his belov'd Guenivere and confesses, "I went half mad with beauty on that day."[11] On his pilgrimage to River Rouge, Westermann, found himself smitten by an exquisite vision of mechanized power which "not only impresses the eyes by its size and the manner of its technical production, but whose living spirit is palpably present to such a degree that it simply draws people into

[11] *The Defense of Guinivere*, 1858.

its orbit."[12] Another visiting German engineer observed approvingly that when the assembly line worker "looks up- or downstream from his post, [he] receives a vivid impression of how his rationally limited role contributes to a mighty total work."

But the "any color as long as it's black" esthetics of the Model T brand Fordism pale by comparison with the Guenivere, or in this case, Beatrice-like adoration lavished by Italian Fascists on the gorgeous creature known as "18 Bl." She—as this lovechild of the assembly line and the autostrada was gendered in contemporary texts—took the form of a general purpose truck, equally adept at transporting guns, butter, or olive oil. 18 Bl served as the diva at the heart of scores of public operalike spectacles—a "theater of masses for the masses"—showcasing the fruits of Mussolini's domestic and military industrial manufacture. As difficult as it may be today not to view fascist popular spectacles organized around a truck as satires, they were indeed meant in earnest, and often taken as intended. Absent any discernible referent to the human hand, the objects produced by industry-as-state had achieved their own perfected esthetic.[13]

In 1936, the same year as planes made in Germany and piloted by Italians strafed earthbound Ethiopians with airborne machineguns, Chaplin's *Modern Times*, a paradoxically dialogue-free throwback to the silent era illuminated American movie screens. Filled with extraordinary physical comedy, and iconic images of the worker-hero driven mad by the repetitive motions of the assembly line, the movie failed to arouse laughter when it was shown in factory towns. Audiences found it impossible to view the Little Tramp's industrial Odyssey as a satire—rather the film described the lived actuality of their working conditions.

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[12] Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003. p. 172.

[13] Jeffrey T. Schnapp, Hal Foster, *18 Bl and the Theater of Masses*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.

Historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch writes that "Fordism transformed industry into a gigantic wish-fulfillment machine, with the conveyor belt uniting production and consumption, work and leisure into a single system of circulation. The workers who staffed it were paid well enough to become viable consumers, thereby permitting the manufacture of goods in yet greater numbers and at lower prices. This in turn, would stimulate production, further increasing purchasing power, consumption, and hence production in an ascending spiral." *Service* was Henry Ford's bizarrely spiritual term for the entire process, a system that "united employee, entrepreneur, and consumer, supposedly rendering the concept of exploitation obsolete" and which represented "socialization without socialism"—a bloodless hybrid that acquired the catchphrase *white socialism*.[14]

How did so much human labor energy become so powerfully mobilized, so swiftly? How did people, by the thousands, gravitate into River Rouge's real life *Modern Times* to lend their bodies and at least some part of their wills—their human birthright—to the great machine?

The industrial labor methods River Rouge employed were made possible by the turn-of-the-century efforts of Frederick Winslow Taylor. By contrast with "Our Ford"—the name Aldous Huxley gave to the founding genius of his *Brave New World*—Taylor's personality seems eccentric and nerdy, his brand of control almost endearingly quaint. But Fordism triumphed by unifying, quasi-robotically, and under one immense roof, the fragments of the productive process that Taylor had dedicated his life's work to disarticulating. The strategy he evolved was a simple one: break down a complex, integrated labor processes into measurable, rationalized, and therefore manageable, centrally-controllable bits. Wichard Von Mollendorff a contemporary German technocrat, described Taylor's methods as "the militarism of production."

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[14] Schivelbusch, *op. cit.*, p. 265. *The Culture of Defeat*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003.

The first fertile ground of Taylorism was the rapidly growing American steel industry. Beginning in 1880 and continuing on until 1906, Taylor conducted a series of experiments recording as many as fifty thousand tests, cutting up more that 800,000 pounds of iron on ten different machine tools reserved for his experimental use. His goal was to invert the labor knowledge pyramid, putting the manager on top, of his progressively de-skilled worker. The same year that Byrdcliffe opened its doors, Taylor published the first of several books on what he called Scientific Management. Like Ruskin and Morris, he speaks best for himself. Here is his First Principle:

"The managers assume…the burden of gathering together all of the traditional knowledge which in the past has been possessed by the workmen and then of classifying, tabulating, and reducing this knowledge to rules, laws and formulae…". Knowledge of, and therefore control over the labor process, especially the speed of production, must be placed squarely in the hands of the employer. Labor historian Harry Braverman calls this first principle the "*dissociation of the labor process from the skills of the workers*. The labor process is to be rendered independent of craft, tradition and the workers' knowledge. Henceforth it is to depend not at all upon the abilities of workers, but entirely upon the practices of management." [italics in orig.]

According to Taylor's Second Principle, "All possible brainwork should be removed from the shop and centered in the planning or laying-out department." Braverman interprets this as the "*separation of conception from execution*." [italics in orig.] The "science of work" (Taylor's term), really the evolution of the productive process, is to be removed entirely from the control of the workers.

The third principle requires that "the work of every workman is fully planned out by the management…[the plan of the workers' tasks] specifies not only what is to be done, but how it is to be done and the exact time allowed for doing it…" What Taylorism attempts to lay out is a complete management monopoly of control over the labor process down to the most minute step of a given task's execution.

In addition to breaking craft skills down into discrete task bytes, Taylor attempted to radically speed up what he considered the snail's pace at which workers, left to set their own rhythms, performed their labors. In his view, the "loafing, or soldiering" that gangs of workers engaged in "proceeds from two causes. First from the natural instinct and tendency of men to take it easy, which may be called *natural soldiering*. Second, from more intricate second thought and reasoning caused by their *relations with other men,* which may be called *systematic soldiering*.[15] [first italics mine.] The latter form of soldiering, Taylor considered far more destructive of efficiency. So not only must workers be alienated from their skills, they must be separated, to the greatest degree possible, both physically and psychologically from one another.

The widespread adoption of Taylorism as a technique for factory discipline marks the ur-moment of severance among the physical, intellectual and spiritual aspects of the integrated labor practices that Morris and Whitehead committed their intellectual and financial energies to preserve and spread. It also marks the moment industrial society threw itself fully into the Coppelia-dance of consumption, a dance impossible to sit out, its accelerating rhythms evermore exhausting and disengaged from the breathing earth.

It has been a generation and more since large numbers of North American workers toiled on assembly lines. And River Rouge is a rust belt dinosaur now. But was Mussolini's 18 Bl not the prototype of the Hummers, Grand Cherokee's and Lincoln Navigators we presently use to pingpong back and forth from one discontinuous spacetime to another in our strange conflation of domesticity and war?

Centralized, grand scale industrial production is no longer a creature of the first world. Our suburbanized military vehicles contain parts manufactured and then

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[15] All Taylor quotes are from Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974.

assembled in a constellation of neo-Fordist factories in countries where labor costs less. "Taste is the *only* morality," said Ruskin. "Tell me what you like, and I'll tell you what you are."[16] But what do we like? And moreover, what do we make? Are we not in some essential way a product of what we make—and don't we always make something? And further, *how* do we make what we make? Both in technique and spirit, is this not as important as, and inextricable from, the form of the thing which issues from our hands?

This centennial year of Byrdcliffe, founded as it was on Morris's principles, seems a good moment to rebeg for our own time, and toward the seven generations already moving down the conveyor belt of evolution, the questions Ruskin raised about Power, Imitation, Truth, Beauty and Relation. And to look to possible futures from the art and artifacts Byrdcliffe has produced—particularly its beautifully designed, enduring furniture and ceramics. We can also find, in our present moment, strong evidence that the principles of Ruskin, Morris and centuries of English radical thought remain very much alive, even in the midst of the greatest frenzy of consumption alienated labor has ever produced. The spirit of the arts and crafts movement has flown, under the social radar of late capitalism, into the deep consciousness of millions of children. It has been implanted there via J.K. Rowlings's extended work of the imagination, the Harry Potter book series. All of Ruskin's principles come into play within Rowlings' narrative. And the site where they converge is at the young hero's school—half academy, half colony—a kind of Byrdcliffe for wizards. Within Hogwarts's' medieval walls, the traditional arts and crafts of magic are conserved, learned, practiced, and passed from generation to generation as though they were the essentials of life itself.

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[16] *The Crown of Wild Olive*, 1866.