"Any clod can have the facts, but having opinions is an art."

Charles McCabe, San Francisco Chronicle

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Talking About the Automat

Ed Yarwood dropped in the other day just before leaving for a new job in Philadelphia. I felt it necessary to remind him of the inscription on W. C. Fields' tombstone. * He brushed that gently aside. Ed is one of our UC Santa Cruz graduates and one of my favorite conversationalists. He had started to major in classical studies before switching to computer science, and thus may be the only computer scientist on this side of the Atlantic (or, at least, on this side of the Charles) who knows how to form the plural of "platypus" correctly. An ability like that can come in handy for a conversationalist.

Mention of Philadelphia reminded me of one of our conversations of some years ago, concerning the existential meaning of the Automat. Automats exist, so I hear, only in New York City and in Philadelphia. I've never been to Philadelphia, nor have I visited an Automat on either of two brief trips to New York, so I can discuss the subject only from secondary information.** but I think I have an accurate mental picture. An Automat is a restaurant where the articles of food are individually displayed for purchase behind coin-operated glass doors. The food is prepared off-site and staged in an area behind the glass doors, where employees refill the compartments as items are purchased.

From a purely pragmatic standpoint we can treat the Automat as an adaptation of the cafeteria principle. Patrons can view the offerings before deciding what to purchase, and they can assemble any desired combination of articles, no matter how improbable. The Automat substitutes random access and parallel processing for the serial pipeline discipline of the cafeteria. Some implications of this manner of processing have more to do with marketing psychology than with queue theory: perhaps the Automat is more attractive to the patron because it lessens the prospect of having to wait in line before starting to eat. But then cafeteria patrons may buy more food than they would otherwise, adding to the profitability of the establishment, because of the time penalty for going through the line a second time if one does not on the first pass take enough to satisfy him. On the other hand, the small cost of going back for seconds may encourage Automat patrons to spend more than they would in a cafeteria. This presently unresolved question should launch several research proposals.

Another advantage of the Automat, at least to management, is that it makes it unnecessary to hire employees who can deal pleasantly with the public—an ability often in short supply these days.

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In any case, the appeal of the Automat cannot be laid to pragmatic or marketing considerations alone. Ed and I agreed that the real meaning of the Automat has to do with its guise as a simulated vending machine, and with the place of such a machine in the collective self-image of America. Not that the Automat is not a real vending machine—the doors do open in response to inserted coins—but the thing simulated is a much grander machine which has the ability, one may imagine, to materialize the articles of food to be sold. Even though we really know that there are living people inside the machine, we are free to pretend that the whole process is wonderfully mechanized and automated, so that everything from beef to cornbread is chemically synthesized from pure air, pure water, and petroleum feedstock.

The first Automat opened in Philadelphia in 1902. New York's first came ten years later. Those were times when machinery of any kind excited the interest of the public. We had come to expect marvelous inventions: the electric
light, the phonograph, the telephone, refrigeration, wireless, motor vehicles, airplanes, great guns, death rays, and contacts with the canal-building residents of Mars. The Automat was yesterday's Tomorrowland, with no admission charge. World War I may have permanently shadowed the turn-of-the-century optimism for the perfectability of the world through commerce and industry, but it did nothing to alter our belief in benign technology. The mood is well represented in the boys' books of the period. We had two sets of Radio Boys, the Motorcycle Chums, the Motion Pic-

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ture Boys, Ralph of the Roundhouse, and of course Tom Swift, all weaving technology and invention with exciting adventure. Steam locomotives were folk heroes. Technology was the property of the common man. The boy inventor in the hayloft, the part-time inventor in his garage, and the scientist in industry were equal partners in progress. Anybody could become another Edison—didn't Edison's own humble origins prove it? That long passage in Butler's Erewhon, predicting that machines would evolve to dominate their makers, was just a Victorian spoof of Darwinism, wasn't it?

Things changed about 1939. We learned that technology could be used in terribly destructive ways. The only comfort was that the Good Guys seemed to have the better handle on technology. Things would never be the same again. The Trylon and the Perisphere seemed to belong to the previous century. Big Science eclipsed the garage inventor. Edison was superseded by a team of white-coated theoretical physicists. Boys' books were soon to be superseded by television sets. We learned to fear technology, beginning with the end of the nuclear monopoly and continuing through Sputnik, "computer" errors that no human agency can straighten out, ICBMs, Vietnam, environmental pollution, Three Mile Island . . . Suddenly instead of jetting to Tomorrowland we are looking for the trolley car that will take us back to Yesterdayland. If the Automat survives the present era, it will be because of its ability to function as a caricature of itself, gently reminding us how quaint were our feelings about technology in 1912.

J. H.

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