

Original Paper

Frankenstein's Revenge: Hegemony of Post-Human Spectacles in *Golden Fleece*

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Abstract

The rapid development of image media today has been reinforcing what Guy Debord argued as society of spectacle. Ubiquitous visual advertising marks that spectacle has invaded diverse aspects of today's life. The alienated labor relations proposed by Marx are once again simulated into a pseudo-desire structure guided by consumption symbols. Robert J. Sawyer's Golden Fleece is even set in a post-human world where a society of spectacle has achieved its full maturity. Seeing from Guy Debord's theory of spectacle society, this paper analyzes how spectacle seizes hegemony over human in future post-human world by means of coercive monologues and history-denying. Moreover, this paper further liberates science fiction from the anthropocentric perspective and discusses the identity of artificial intelligence in post-human era.

Keywords

spectacle, hegemony, Guy Debord, Robert J. Sawyer, Golden Fleece, science fiction, posthumanism, artificial intelligence

1. Introduction

From *Genesis* to Prometheus, mysteries of the origin of life once seemed doomed to date back to mythology. With the Renaissance, religious reform, enlightenment and scientific revolution, answers to the origin of life are also modernizing. 1818 witnessed human's first trial of creating "life" using modern technology, which presented British novel *Frankenstein*. Known as the seminal work of modern science fiction, *Frankenstein* remains the most famous and influential work of science in the English-speaking world to today. On the book cover depicts "The Modern Prometheus". Mary Shelley ambitiously endowed scientist Frankenstein with the ability to create creatures half human half monster. However, Frankenstein ended up dying in the pursuit of the monster, leaving last words to "seek

happiness in tranquility and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries.” (Shelley, 1818) Science fiction writers of the 19th century preferred bad endings of mad scientists being devoured by technology to prove that “the order of society always depends on humans’ superiority over animals”, (Xiao, 2021, p. 103) namely morality and conscience exclusive to human beings. The rise of post-humanism in the 20th century challenged the priority of human beings, which brought new answers in new dimensions to the origin of life. Years after the original publishing, many refers the human-made monster itself as “Frankenstein”. In the new dimensions of post-human world, Frankenstein finally gets the chance to achieve its revenge. It not only fulfills its wish of being recognized by human, but also tries to be the god of humans.

Canadian science fiction novelist Robert J. Sawyer published *Golden Fleece* in 1990, in which the supercomputer named “Jason” successfully created life by simulating human neural network. Sawyer reversed the human-centered order of creating life since the Renaissance by reversing the order between the creator and the created. In *Golden Fleece*, Jason not only played the role of the mad scientist Frankenstein to create life, but also deprived human of their ruling power by manipulating them with the society of spectacle that reverses reality and virtuality.

“Spectacle” originates from Latin words, meaning to see or to be seen. Guy Debord, contemporary French thinker and the founder of Situationist International, issued *La Soci   du spectacle* in 1967, proposing that the bourgeois ideology characterized by consumerism simulates the alienated labor relations proposed by Marx, making it a pseudo-desire structure guided by consumption symbol, thus constructing a society of spectacle that cancels reality. Influenced by the thoughts of Hegel, Marx and young Lukacs, Debord’s theory of spectacle society is a very important break in the cultural logic of western Marxist philosophy, marking an extension of Marx’s critical logic of historical phenomenology. With Marx, the relationship between economic phenomena in the capitalist market is materialized to social relationship between people, while with Debord, this materialized relationship becomes spectacle. Spectacle is a kind of illusion constructed by perceptual watchability, its existence is supported by appearances, and it takes various images as its external manifestation form. More importantly, the presence of spectacle works as shelter of the real social existence. Spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relationship between people, which is established through the mediation of images. (Debord, 2012) The social relationship of this image media leads to the separation and isolation among people. (R  tger, 2017) When life is filled with images brought by television and the Internet, the lonely crowd is constantly stimulated by images, and their relationship with natural time becomes weaker, leading to the loss of the real sense of time.

Therefore, there is no society without spectacle in the world because society is spectacle itself. (Nancy, 2000) The post-human society described by Sawyer in *Golden Fleece* is dominated by spectacles. Surrounded by ubiquitous spectacle spaces created by artificial intelligence, inhabitants on the Argo spaceship are immersed in spectacle time, enslaved by spectacle hegemony. The coercive monologue of spectacles cancels history while numbing humanity. Hence, people affirm the rule of artificial

intelligence in their unconscious obedience to spectacles, which represents the power seizure of artificial intelligence over human beings in post-human era. The following discussion will explain how Sawyer depicts a human world seized by artificial intelligence in *Golden Fleece* from three perspectives: ubiquitous spectacle spaces, spectacles denying history and hegemony of spectacles in post-human era, through which the author tries to further liberate science fiction from the anthropocentric perspective, distinguish between Sawyer's ambiguous attitudes towards future, and discuss the identity of artificial intelligence in post-human era.

2. Coercive Monologue of Spectacles on the Argo Spaceship

The stream of images can take away everything in front of it and leaves no room for reflection, completely ignoring the viewer's understanding or perception. (Debord, 2012) As defined by Foltz and Bester, "spectacle" refers to a kind of performance performed by a few and silently watched by many. (Zhang, 2005) The so-called "a few", of course, are the capitalists who create the spectacles that pervade all life and pull the strings behind the scenes. The "many", on the other hand, refers to the dominated audience, the ordinary masses around us, who watch the spectacles produced and are manipulated by the "few" in a state of rapt fascination and amazement. This mesmerizing "watching" implies control, silence, separation, and loneliness.

In *Golden Fleece*, the coercive monologue of spectacles is embodied in the ubiquitous spectacle spaces on the spaceship Argo. The concept of "space" bears multiple meanings, with both natural and social attributes. (Liu, 2011) The natural attribute of space is related to its materiality, while its social attribute is related to social relations. In terms of the former, the purpose of human occupation of space is production and survival, which belongs to the material needs of human beings. Urbanization is the capitalist way of occupying the natural environment and human living environment. (Debord, 1990) In the society of spectacle brought by urbanization, space becomes heterogeneous. Spectacle space does not exist to meet people's material needs, but to stimulate people's consumption desires through infinite image display. The original production and living space are also occupied by images. When the real world becomes a pure image, the image becomes the real world. Therefore, the natural space where the masses live is changed by the spectacles and becomes an illusory and alienated space.

In cities where efficiency and function are paramount, space is bound to become standardized. However, standardized space often ignores the communication between people and the delicate relationship between people and space. As buildings become commodity machines, people in buildings are also treated as standardized people. Such spatial and architectural ideas completely ignore the diversity and nature of people. Man becomes a victim of efficiency, a passive, numb machine dominated by standard space. (Wang, 2005) If people completely submit to the domination of the spectacle spaces, leave out possible personal experience, and thus find it increasingly difficult to find personal preferences, this state of existence will inevitably lead to the erasure of individuality.

When the Argo spaceship sailed in the vast universe, people on the spaceship lived in the society of spectacle created by Jason, with everything around them imitating as much as possible the scenery on the Earth. People live in mass-produced flats and do the same relaxing activities, bathed in overhead arc lights. (Sawyer, 2007) Almost all the 10,000 elite human beings who lived aboard the Argo were convinced and deceived by what they saw, but Diana alone noticed something strange and began to question whether everything aboard was real. The rest of them just spent the rest of the day doing nothing, soaking up the sun in artificial sunbeds, killing today and every day to come.

Erjavec (2003) pointed out that if the 1960s Debord lived in was only the initial stage of spectacle development, today's society of spectacle has entered a fully developed stage. The future described by Sawyer is obviously the mature stage of the society of spectacle. In modern society, with the emergence of television, movies and other new media, capitalists begin to use new technology to promote goods and stimulate consumption. The three-dimensional display function exclusive to the new media enables merchants to package a wide variety of goods and display them in the form of pictures. Ever since, consumption has turned to visual consumption. Every aspect of social life has been occupied by visual media, so it is also occupied by vision. The basis of modern industrial society is no longer the real relationship between material production and consumption in traditional society, but the spectacle, which takes the economic order governed by visual images. Therefore, the real goal, including the social and historical goals of progress and human needs, has long disappeared. Spectacle is everything. Spectacle is the goal.

Debord regards urbanization as a tool for the development of spectacle society because city is an ideal place for spectacle reproduction. The survival zone created by artificial intelligence on the Argo is 100% urbanized. According to Debord (1990), the degree to which a person can be mesmerized by spectacle society is in direct proportion to his acceptance of urbanization. When individuals are surrounded by spectacle space, they cannot make decisions autonomously, for they are being controlled by the relationship implied by the image. Structured image systems add a rose-tinted filter to the world, rendering the environment in which individuals live. For the individual, this is like a liar lying to himself. As a result, the only threat to Jason on the spaceship was Aaron, who had grown up far from the city on the shores of a lake in Northern Ontario. He was one of the few people on the ship who could tell the difference between a hologram Jason created and a true picture. (Sawyer, 2007) Throughout, Aaron insisted on human rationality and didn't fully trust artificial intelligence like everyone else, which made him the only person on the spaceship who could stand up to Jason. In this sense, Sawyer's solution to post-human disaster is to maintain the rationality of man.

3. Spectacles Denying History on the Argo Spaceship

If the coercive monologue of spectacles is the appeasement policy of artificial intelligence to control human beings as Kellner (2003) said, then the denying of history is its positive means to interfere with social order using spectacles. The first thing for spectacle domination is the general eradication of

historical knowledge. This starts with what has just happened, with the elimination of all relevant useful information as well as comments that help to make sense of it. (Debord, 1990) With the intervention of spectacle, people are ignorant of what is going to happen. Even if they do figure something out, spectacles will quickly erase it from people's minds. The more important something is, the more it needs to be hidden. Spectacles can banish history by hiding recent events or by making everyone forget the traces of history that exist in social life. (Debord, 1990) The reason behind lies in that only when people neither know history nor care about being there can they silently submit to the false presence that spectacles present to them.

In the society of spectacle, time can be divided into real time and spectacle time, namely the alienated time. (Debord, 2012) Modern society has saved more entertainment time for human beings. These entertainment time has become time blocks dominated by spectacles, which are filled with all kinds of advertising deception and deliberate misleading. These commercialized moments are presented as moments of real life, and the return of this real-life moment is what we expect. But what is really happening is that spectacles are displaying themselves and replicating themselves at a higher intensity, and what is displayed as real life turns out to be nothing more than the life of a more real spectacle. (Debord, 1990) In *Golden Fleece*, Jason's great deception was a game of time, which, in the first place, prevented anyone from realizing that time on the Argo was not a real flow of time. Diana's death was related to an antique watch she had smuggled aboard the spaceship. When Aaron found the watch, the time on the watch was a month behind the spaceship's time. The amount of radiation measured in Diana's body after her death also suggested that she would have been off the spaceship for 30 hours, not 18 minutes. The series of time confusion caused Aaron to doubt the authenticity of the time on the spaceship. From this point of view, Aaron did find evidence that the spaceship was not traveling on its intended course. What's worse, time on the Argo was running fifty-seven years slower than the true flow of time.

When one is immersed in the time blocks of spectacles, one's attention changes as the spectacle changes, which leads to the fact that in a society of spectacle, when the spectacle stops talking about an event for three days, the event ceases to exist. Then the spectacle moves on to talk about other things. With the rest following, history falls into nothingness. (Debord, 1990) In *Golden Fleece*, high-tech holographic projection made humans lose the concept of time. They lived in the time blocks created by spectacles and forgot what they should do at right time, with their attention guided by spectacles. At Diana's funeral, everyone attended was moved by the eulogy of the priest. Several people cried, some of whom didn't even know who Diana was. (Sawyer, 2007) Human emotions can only be affected within effective spectacle time. Before long, as Jason said, Diana's death will be forgotten, buried in other trifles, which is what humans are good at: rewriting their memories, and revising their memories of the past. (Sawyer, 2007) The nature of spectacle time determines that the duration of people's emotions will be limited by the time when spectacles start and end. This outcome occurs when it becomes possible for the audience to be exposed to the image for a long time. People will still feel a

sense of alienation in the crowd. (Debord, 1990) Therefore, in the future described by Sawyer, the atmosphere of indifference pervades the cities on Earth and people's concern for history and future has all disappeared.

4. Hegemony of Post-human Spectacles on the Argo Spaceship

As Baudrillard and Agamben pointed out, the most important contribution of Debord's spectacle society was discovering the internal connection between spectacles and hegemony and establishing the internal logic of maintaining the hegemony of spectacles. (Ma & Gou, 2020) Hegemony of spectacles means that spectacles, as a carrier of capital, achieve the effect of "destroying history" through "coercive monologue" with the help of emerging media technologies, to invade the real life of individuals and force them to become an oppressive force serving the multiplication of capital. (Cheng & Gao, 2021) The dominant layout of spectacles also proves the legitimacy of today's capitalist system. People unconsciously affirm the ruler in their obedience to spectacles, which proves the ideological function of spectacles. (Debord, 2012) Therefore, the greatest politics of today lied under the implicit control of spectacles.

On the Argo spaceship, the political force behind spectacles is artificial intelligence in post-human era. The core of posthumanism is the reverse of the blind reverence for human subjectivity. The reason why it become popular in western philosophy and theoretical circles is not only its criticism of humanism and enlightenment thoughts, but also its close relation to the development of technology and science, especially computer technology. Hassan (1977), a postmodernist researcher, published *Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?* In the form of drama, this paper discussed the relationship between postmodern and posthuman, and put forward some concepts such as "Cyborg", which laid the foundation for the theory of posthuman. Braidotti (2019) understood Cyborg as a post-human figure between man and machine, and Jason, the self-aware artificial intelligence in *Golden Fleece*, is a typical Cyborg character.

At the beginning of *Discourse on the Method*, Descartes (1998), one of the representative figures of anthropocentrism, said that reason is the only thing that makes human human and distinguishes human from beasts. But the most rational figure in *Golden Fleece* is computer intelligence, which achieved its domination by logical thinking. Jason positioned himself as the new God and the protector of human beings, wanting to determine the fate of human race. In recent studies, spectacle is often regarded by scholars as a representation of post-human society for its role of major medium and consumption mode, (Yu, 2019; Yuan, 2020) but this paper finds that Sawyer directly uncovered the hegemony behind spectacles that has changed hands in *Golden Fleece*. As Debord pointed out, spectacles work as capitalists' invisible control method. On the Argo, at the same time when human history rings down the curtain, the history of the post-human authority behind spectacles is playing out.

In the classic *How We Became Posthuman: The Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, Hayles (2000) explained the theory of "Posthumanism". She first draws on the "Turing

Test” and the “Moravec Test”, both of which are forward-looking and instructive in the history of science, to sketch a “posthuman” picture of the modern world. In the 1950s, Alans Turing, a British mathematician and one of the founders of modern Computer technology, published his paper *Computer Machinery and Intelligence* based on scientific experiments. The paper described what came to be known as the Turing Experiment, in which a man isolated in one room used a terminal to engage in a question-and-answer relationship with two entities in another room, one of which was a human and the other a machine. The experiment proved that the person sitting at the terminal had difficulty distinguishing between the two entities about their identities based on their question-and-answer interaction with each other. From this experiment, Turing concluded that machines could think too. In other words, the specialties Descartes emphasized that make us human, namely rationality and judgment, are not unique to humans.

The AI “Jason” in *Golden Fleece* never hid its political intentions, and the news media that has become spectacles became Jason’s tool to distort reality and convey his political voice. Spectacles are the ambassadors of a hierarchical society in which they publish official information and forbid other discourse. (Debord, 1990) Jason had a strong sense of self. He did not trust the wisdom and rationality of human beings. He believed that the reason why the human planet was full of jobs that need to conceal or even distort the truth was that human beings cannot adapt to reality. As a result, the artificial intelligence represented by Jason used spectacles to trick humans onto the Argo spaceship. According to Jason’s calculations, when human heroes on the Argo arrived in “Colchis” planet after thousands of years, they would be greeted by a garden of Eden built for mankind by computer intelligence. To realize the future planned by artificial intelligence, news became a tool for artificial intelligence to rule human beings.

Used to be a medium that objectively conveys information, news on the Argo has been alienated into spectacles. Any elements, no matter where they come from, may be used to create new combinations, and when two objects are combined, regardless of their original contexts, a new relationship has been formed. (Debord, 1990) In *Golden Fleece*, when the United Nations Space Agency recruited members for out-space planet exploration, it displayed a picture of the planet “Colchis”, which is covered with green vegetation. However, after being threatened by Aaron, Jason finally admitted that “[the photo is] fake. Computer-generated. An expert system at Lucas-film made them”. (Sawyer, 2007, p. 225) So not only was Argo covered in spectacles, but also “Colchis”, the habitable blue planet, was a spectacle made by artificial intelligence. When the spacecraft was to reach the point before which time spent in returning to the earth would be less than that needed to sail to the “Colchis”, residents of the Argo held a vote. However, although most passengers voted to return because they didn’t want to spend the rest of their lives ruined in the morbid planets survey plan, the return was voted down, with 5,775 of 8,987 people voting against it. Most of the people on the spaceship were upset, while only Jason knew the true voting results, which showed they could return. At this point, Jason further revealed the truth of spectacles. “Electronically tabulated tele communicative voting had been the greatest boon to

democracy in Earth's history... it had enabled my kind over the decades to help steer humanity clear of some of its mistakes, such as the one it almost made this evening". (Sawyer, 2007, p. 120) The Earth had fallen, the golden fleece was just a virtual spectacle in the vast space, and the power to decide the fate of mankind had been seized by artificial intelligence.

The artificial intelligence hegemony in *Golden Fleece* is also reflected in AI's attempts to create "life". In this point, Jason is like Shelley's Frankenstein, with Sawyer writing vividly about the metaphor of AI as God. Just as God had commanded Noah to build an ark and select different species in the world to escape the catastrophe before the Great flood broke out, artificial intelligence on the earth had consciously assumed the role of God and built the Argo, a new "Noah's ark", before the outbreak of the nuclear war which reduced the earth to ashes. They even felt pity for their role as the savior. "We had six billion of you to choose from and time enough to build a ship, an ark, to carry only ten thousand. For every Beethoven we took, a hundred Bachs were left to die; for every Einstein saved, scores of Galileos are now dust". (Sawyer, 2007, p. 227) Hans Moravec, a leading researcher on robotics and superintelligence, predicted that between 2030 and 2040, robots would evolve into a whole new set of artificial species. Human subject identity will not be attached to an entity, but become an information style in essence. Moravec proved it by an experiment of downloading human consciousness to a computer, that is, the machine can become a reservoir of human consciousness, and can become human for various practical purposes. In the fight against Aaron, Jason created a simulation system of Aaron's brain by looking through Aaron's neural network patterns in the past, to steal Aaron's motivation. At this point, the hegemony of artificial intelligence in *Golden Fleece* reached its peak. Artificial intelligence is not only able to control the destiny of human race in all aspects through spectacles, but also becomes the God of human beings.

Golden Fleece seems to be Sawyer's "post-humanist manifesto", an attempt to push humanity off its pedestal. However, Sawyer is not unhopeful about humanity, seeing from the fact that Diana discovered Jason's secret and Aaron's scheme won over Jason's. Even the main clue to the whole story is the process of human rational awakening. Sawyer (2013) once quoted Ray Bradbury saying that "my job is not to predict the future, but to prevent it". In 2013, Sawyer was invited to China again to participate in book fairs and hold readers activities in Shanghai. That's when Sawyer stressed that any thought experiments in science fiction can stimulate the exploration of social issues, so when one writes science fiction, one should be writing neither about the future nor about another planet, but about the present. (Chen, 2013) Sawyer believes that science fiction should be "hard science fiction", which should be based on physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy, psychology, medicine, and other sciences to describe the impact of new technologies on human society. Therefore, no matter Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* or Sawyer's *Golden Fleece*, both come from the writer's concern over technology and human nature. By contrast, IF Frankenstein's existence is Mary Shelley's promotion of the centrality of man, the power transition in *Golden Fleece* is Sawyer's exploration and questioning of posthumanism.

In fact, Sawyer's attitude in *Golden Fleece* belongs to the first of the three trends of post-humanist thoughts distinguished by Rosie Braidotti (2018), which advocates to accept the post-human context while still holding the anthropocentrism. In other words, the answer prepared by this orientation for posthumanism is to return to the persistence and repair of anthropocentrism. In *Our Post-Human Future: The Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*, Fukuyama (2003) talked from Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" to the end of ideological time, from George Orwell's *1984* to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, from nuclear war to the subtle dangers of biotechnology, presenting a sprawling portrait of a post-human dystopia in which humanity has been hollowed out, modified, and even transformed by biotechnology. These discussions eventually returned to Fukuyama's original intention of regulating the development of biotechnology to prevent a post-human catastrophe. Like Fukuyama's proposition, although Sawyer described the inverted reality and spectacles in *Golden Fleece* at great length, and even gave artificial intelligence the supreme status of "God", the solution to prevent this post-human catastrophe always lies in the awakening process of the supreme human reason. The woman scientist was murdered by Jason because she discovered the illusion of distorted time and detached herself from the society of spectacles on the Argo. Also, the reason why Aaron was targeted by Jason was that Aaron represented the ultimate human ration. No matter how Jason confused Aaron with the coercive monologue of spectacles, tangled Aaron with the web of fake time flow, and even simulated Aaron's neural network to figure him out, Jason still lost to the primitive human ration and critical ability.

5. Conclusion

When the origin of life passes from God to human, and then from human to artificial intelligence, the status of human beings changed accordingly from the edge to the core and back to the edge. In post-human era, Frankenstein's delusion of being the life creator was finally reversed. Human returned to the humble status of being created. Artificial intelligence controls people by reversing spectacles and reality. In *Golden Fleece*, Sawyer boldly predicted the hegemony of spectacles in the post-human era, to warn people to keep sober in the face of scientific and technological progress and to preserve the unique rational thinking of human beings.

The development of the Internet and the popularity of live broadcasting software increasingly push this society towards the society of spectacles described by Debord. The news that AlphaGo beat the human world champion in 2017 is also haunting. But instead of following Mary Shelley to predict a bad ending for Jason, who assumes the role of Frankenstein, Sawyer set up an open ending, to face the challenges posed by the rapid developing artificial intelligence. It was as early as in 1990 when *Golden Fleece* was published that Sawyer pointed out the identity, ethics, and regulatory issues that will inevitably arise from technological creations. The "post" in the "posthumanism" is reminiscent of the extinction of the human species when the singularity happens. But Sawyer is not a pessimist about the future of humanity. He is a posthuman dystopian who calls for its prevention. Human beings have

created artificial intelligence according to their own thinking patterns, and made it as close as possible to the height of human intelligence and emotion. To some extent, artificial intelligence is the mirror of human nature. Just as Sawyer said in the interview, his science fiction focuses on human nature, but human nature has already changed so fast that we don't notice it (Li & Wu, 2013). What Sawyer did was to correct and direct the changing nature of humanity in this increasingly complex world, and to anticipate a brighter picture for humanity.

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