

Figure 2.1: Cover of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, an American icon.

and a sort of “there’s no place like home”¹¹ in reverse. However, unlike *Oz*’s Dorothy longing to return to the Kansas she knew and loved, I have come to the US as the home that is supposed to be what I know and love.

All of these themes are very important, but the story that I am portraying is of the “everyman,” and of the American mythic masculinity that dictates how I should live my life. How can I, the everyman, compete and succeed to make it to the top and/or be happy? Is my future to take a brainless job or to fulfill a meaningful role in life? As Marshall McLuhan says:

"Most people sell out very quick for job. Job is not a role. Most people will sell out role very quickly for job. Job is easy, fragmented and specialist, repetitive. Role is tough. It takes a lot of energy and imagination."¹²

50-Man-Machine’s main influence is my present reality of returning to graduate school after three years of work at a low paying television station. Prior to the television job I had completed my undergraduate degree in experimental photography and journalism with a minor in marine microbiology, studied Thai spiritual art, Visual Dhamma¹³, in Bangkok for a summer and completed my Masters of Arts in metal sculpture and performance based in technology. This education lead to nearly two years of working for low paying newspapers, thrift papers, a furniture manufacturing company, and apprenticing under a sculptor. My most lucrative job was as a sound engineer at local clubs and international music festivals.

¹¹ Referring to L. Frank Baum’s original novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* written in 1900.

¹² "Marshall McLuhan Gets Processed," *Ideas*, CBC Radio, Dec. 2, 1969. Taken from the CD-ROM *Understanding McLuhan* by Southam Interactive, released by The Voyager Company, 1996.

When the LISTN (Louisiana Instructional Satellite Television Network) tele-learning network advertised a position as computer animator, sound person and creative director I was ready and got the job. This was the only such job available in the area for some time. The problem came when the amount of work far outweighed the amount of pay and especially when it became obvious that a job paying less than \$20,000 per year could not support my student loans and other basic living expenses. Without savings there was no way out of the situation except for the military and higher education options. Having been around the military most of my life, I did not want to become that part of America. I remember as a teenager living “on the economy,” off of the military base, in Bavaria, Germany avoiding American GI’s at all cost because they were troublemakers and could be very embarrassing. At that point in my life I had had little experience with standard American culture and was very sure that the American military abroad was not representative of America. Another thing that separated my family from American citizens abroad was that my father was a government employee attached to the military and therefore we did not have the same rights as uniformed families. We could not live on “little America” Military posts or bases and often lived quite far away within the local culture on what was termed the “economy.” Consequently, many of my expectations of America, the fair American system and a perfect future, are skewed from what I now know as reality. At the time, I did not know that I was living between cultures, nor did I realize that the issues of Eastern versus Western society, and (military) power versus the individual would affect my life and way of thinking to such a great extent.

¹³ Visual Dhamma is explored in *Ten Thai Contemporary Artists: The Spirit of Siam in Modern Art* by John Hoskin, Bangkok, Graphis Co., LTD, 1984.

Figure 2.2: A promotional card for Lang's classic film *Metropolis*.

education that will most likely raise your personal financial responsibilities far beyond what can realistically be afforded and this places you in a position where you must enslave yourself to the highest paying corporation in order to attempt to meet those debts. Of course, these responsibilities do not truly show themselves until the student is well on his or her way to completing the education that will supposedly lead to a happy lifestyle but will commonly put him or her deeply into debt. There is a double-edged sword in America's offerings of opportunity. We are bombarded with success stories of the American dream on a daily basis, such as the lottery system, which offers unrealistic hope for American citizens to escape their predicaments.



Figure 2.3: Actress Uma Thurman playing the role of a “Valid” genetically engineered corporate worker in Andrew Niccol’s futuristic film *Gattaca*.

In Andrew Niccol’s 1997 movie, *Gattaca*¹⁷, the viewer is brought into the life of a person not of the right breeding. As a matter of fact he was born outside of the genetic engineering that is the staple in his world. He is an “In-Valid.” His physical attributes do

¹⁶ *Wizards*. dir. Ralph Bakshi. per. Mark Hamill. Bakshi Films, 1977.

¹⁷ *Gattaca*. dir. Andrew Niccol. per. Ethan Hawke, Uma Thurman. Columbia Pictures, 1997.



Figure 2.5: The evil assassin in *Wizards*.

Figure 2.4: A scene from *Brazil* in the laboratory of a “social” doctor.



Figure 2.6: One of Wizards army.

mixture of cartoon animation, rotoscoping and film in order to tell a good versus evil story with a brainless evil army propelled by Nazi propaganda films. I find this story to have similar elements to the real-life post World War II “Jam Handy Organization”²⁰ American workforce propaganda films. These high quality films commonly

showed a very large and content working class pouring into factories and mills. The JHO films seemed to be divided between promoting America’s ingenuity and huge production capabilities and promoting the products and the age of modern consumerism. What are these films really selling? What were there creators trying to get the population to believe?

I have long thought that a balding man who combs long hairs over the top of his



Figure 2.7: Three guises of the illusive Wizard of Oz: the Wizard, Professor Marvel and the Gatekeeper.

head in order to hide his natural baldness is a huge leap in the promotion of the false and a good show of silly vanity. This same man runs our financial institutions, our insurance agencies and our government. We are made to trust the 50 year-old-man that believes he can disguise his baldness with a few sprigs of hair, a bottle of hairspray and tedious time before a mirror. In MGM’s release of L. Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* we eventually see the wizard behind the curtain, and we see his frailness. In our society, the

²⁰ Jam Handy Organization films as presented in the “The Rainbow is Yours” and “Capitalist Realism” on *Our Secret Century*, a CD-ROM series by Rick Prelinger and released by The Voyager Company, 1996.

50-year-old-man-that-rules-the-world is everywhere, but he is not someone whom you can put your finger on.

With *50-Man-Machine* I wish to share these feelings and this story with a variety of people, possibly in the hope of gaining understanding and moral support. I have chosen to create a surreal, almost childlike environment to express these ideas. In the eight days of the installation I have witnessed many reactions ranging from immediate recognition and disapproval to long childlike explorations by adults. With the public release of *50-Man-Machine* as an enhanced compact disc art piece and documentation piece I hope both to gain more understanding and appreciation, and to find an alternative route to success outside of the machine.