UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

The Fordian Slip:
From Plant to Plantation

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by

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In 1927, American industrialist, innovator, and inventor Henry Ford founded Fordlandia—a plantation city in the Brazilian Amazon intended to cultivate a steady rubber supply for the Ford Motorcar empire. Only seven years later, Ford founded Belterra, a twin town, downstream, a second attempt to implement monocultural agriculture, suburban aesthetics, and paternalistic labor practices in the jungle. By 1945, both cities were abandoned, preventing Ford from completing the full vertical integration of his motorcar empire and leaving an unusual failure in Ford’s prolific modern legacy. This thesis explores the pathologies of platform production embedded in Ford’s
persistence of his plantation experiment. It reads the double debacles of Fordlandia and
Belterra as a slip in Ford’s capital project that reveals a repressed social desire in Ford’s
production platform. This slip exposes the misattribution of circumstance and
contingency, context and conditions in the process of platformation. The Fordian Slip is
the mixing of motives and intent--the same mistake, repeated twice, in the same way.
“The only real mistake,” says Ford, “is the one from which we learn nothing.”
A love of nature keeps no factories busy.

Feeling lurks in that interval of time between desire and its consummation. Shorten that interval, break down all those old unnecessary barriers.

Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*  

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1 Huxley, Aldous. *Brave New World*. New York: HarperCollins, 1932. In 1931 Aldous Huxley discovers Henry Ford’s autobiography *My Life and Work* on a boat to America. He reads Ford’s testament to his personal motivations and relationships, his invention of the assembly line, and his endless predilection towards doing over thinking. He writes the dystopian science fiction *Brave New World*, in which Henry Ford becomes a messianic figure for the World State. The citizens of the World State live in a society focused on regulation, maintaining youth, sexual pleasure, drugs and endless goods, a world bereft of critical thinking, ethics, empathy or natural cycles. The citizens hail “Our Ford” instead of “Our Lord,” sometimes replacing “Our Ford” with “Our Freud,” a nod to Freud’s theory that sexual activity beyond reproduction is a key to human happiness. In the text, protagonist Bernard Marx visits The Savage Island, where he is exposed to freedom beyond controlled and regulated pleasure. His curiosity, which eventually leads to exile, liberates a quest for deeper social and personal complexity, but this desire ultimately ruins him, in a classic tragic tale of curiosity stirred beyond the platitudes and constructions of social regulation and control. Some speculate that the Savage Island in this *Brave New World* is modeled after Fordlandia, Ford’s utopian industrial city in the Amazon, a project predicated on romantic ideals and progressive visions, which slipped so disastrously off course...
Still today the best way to get to the jungle cities built by Henry Ford on the Amazon river, in the Amazon forest, is by gaiola, known commonly as “birdcage boats,” which depart daily from Santarem downstream. Follow the mirror flow of fauna and flora south through the central artery. After about six hours, just before the split in the Tapajos River, spot a water tower above the treeline. This is Fordlandia’s infamous beacon, a remainder and reminder of the plantation city purchased by the Ford Motor Company in 1927 and abandoned by 1945. Just 50 more miles downstream, find Belterra, Ford’s second failed attempt to cultivate his own rubber source for his motorcar empire. Both towns by now active again, their occupants repurposing the refuse of a lingering legacy.

First Fordlandia, then Belterra, two sites in yet another such episode of colonial modernization in which the ever famous Henry Ford disastrously endeavors to design a jungle city after his self-same name. The stated goal: to close the loop in the Ford Motor Company’s almost comprehensive vertical supply chain by securing a steady stream of rubber supply for global production lines. But upon closer inspection of this lesser known Fordian saga, find a slip in Fordian logics, in this shift from factory to farm, from plant to plantation. It’s a slip from progress to prior, from fantasy to fallacy, from intention to accident. It’s a slip from speculative experiment to disaster, from foresight to hindsight, from known to unknown, and so on and so forth. A double debacle, a function of timing and trajectory, where a modern industrial masterplan meets the tropical wilds, where desire floods its channels, where rationality goes rogue. The Fordian slip. A rubber tap, a rubber trap.
At the eventual loss of $20m (an estimate of $200m in 2016), Fordlandia was a capital development boondoggle, at least according to the business books. But ever the salesman, Ford stories Fordlandia as a realization of a civilizing impulse in news reports. “It's not a success in the making of rubber,” he quips in Time Magazine in 1943, “but in the making of men.”

But why, unlike at so many other global sites that submit to Fordian conversion, did the Fordian model fail to catch in the Amazon context? What was it about this place, this particular case, that made Ford’s geopolitical momentum go so terribly awry? What intentions and circumstances, in the times and timing of 1927, spurred this tropical tangle? What does the repetition of mistakes reveal about this system’s sensibilities, about risk and revolt, patience and persistence? And why is it that this story, to this day, reads more like fiction?

Greg Grandin’s *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Ford’s Jungle City* provides the most rigorous if not compelling account to date of Ford’s Amazonian saga. Grandin considers with considerable speculative leeway the drives that shape the strangely persistent pursuit of the plantation project. Grandin argues that social and psychic impulses, superseding capital interests, drove the development of Ford’s Brazilian plantation. The significant setbacks that plagued Fordlandia would have, he surmises, in situations with more objective risk assessment and economic oversight, led to a much earlier declaration of defeat. Ford’s production platform in the US was catapulted by a triumvirate of standardized assembly, and the cultivation of a consumer class, in the

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Amazon indigenous intelligences of culture and agriculture diverted the Fordian jungle plot. In the Fordian case, precedence escalated the disaster’s scale.

It’s a familiar tale to many, long now told, of American colonialism--an impulse of total control, of extraction and exploitation, a seizure of resources, a hubris of modern planning, of grand speculations from above and afar. Already by now global industrial expansion has projected manifest density on primal territories under the ideological auspices of progress, mass engineering, and civilization. This modality of global harvest--extraction for an industrialized West and a self-declared efficient North--has been thoroughly criticized for its mechanisms and consequences--its cultural and ecological violence, obliteration of indigenous intelligences, and accentuated inequities in conquest and capture. Indigenous tappers, the Brazilian governments, and the jungle ecosystem conspired, however unwittingly, as resistance. Some contemporary readers might find some solace in the triumph of native resistance to Ford’s rather naive and patriarchal design interventions.

Yet, almost all accounts of Fordlandia to date conclude nature as the ultimate reckoning for the savagery of this colonial conquest. This fetish of origins, this specter of original sin and nostalgia for an earlier return, retreats to romantic fantasies and primitive projections, in the process surmising the jungle and its inhabitants as oracular force rather than recognizing the complex system to which the slip plays subject. Instead here, we’ll revisit here the Fordlandia scenario as if it were an early act, a primal scene of the modern anthroposcene, a global imaginary of natural conquest and cultural transformation that will eventually give way to today’s rapidly unfurling automation
epoch. Here we observe the slip as an incident and indication of social desire, a flow of forces, a production principle and technological tool, a revulsion and revelation.

Skeptics might interpret this return again to Fordlandia as yet another clip of industrial ruin porn, another dystopian diagnosis. Indeed, ogling broken spectacles and staring long into the blindspots of past epochs can become a privileged past time. Our goal in revisiting the case of Fordlandia is to understand its logics as a speculative design experiment, as a platform pathology, that provides a series of principles that can be rescued for the future construction of such topias--from tropical and technological. It is from a deeper dip into dynamics of this double debacle and its vicissitudes that our chronicle sets forth.
October 13, 1925. Dearborn, Michigan. A letter from the Russian Agricultural Agency in America arrives for Henry Ford. The letter regards a crop of exotic specimens, largely Para rubber seeds, recently planted at Thomas Edison’s Winter Estate in Fort Myers, Florida. The letter is a request for visitation and exchange, for collaboration with the Russian cause. The script across the letter top suggests the request did not go unanswered. “Tell them we understood they were to look over the plants in Florida, will see them if they come back.”

“Their” prospective return--the plants, the Russians--alludes to a growing alliance between The Ford Motor Company and the new Soviet Union. Ever the capital opportunist, Ford has been cultivating new markets as slowing car sales in the US foreshadow a forthcoming Great Depression. “While the American automobile industry undergoes a severe recession that left a number of manufacturers bankrupt, Henry Ford’s Russian sales increase more than five times. Business with the USSR accounts for more than four per cent of the company’s total 1924 tractor production. With this percentage rising to just over ten per cent in 1925, there is good reason to keep the Soviet Loyalty to Ford products.”

A substantial contract with the USSR in 1929 enables Ford to circumnavigate the USA’s Great Depression on the coattails of the Russian Revolution. Ford develops a grand production scheme--most notably a large assembly plant at Nizhny-Novgorod---to

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service a budding communist agricultural industry and to accelerate the newly
engineered Soviet economic experiment. Ford’s swift and efficient middle class
developed under the auspices of capital production, and its reformulation of the whole
person and worker, is referenced by Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin alike as a critical phase
on the way to communism. Ford cashes in on the construction, providing engineers and
equipment to accelerate a new Soviet experiment, albeit one reliant on international
capital. Ford, an increasingly mythical if not quintessential American figure, regularly
references the agnosticism of business as an alibi against growing alliances with
suspect statecraft.

The rubber plots in Fort Myers are yet another manifestation of a long-standing
entrepreneurial friendship between Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, and Harvey Firestone.
Ford gets his start as a mechanic for Edison’s Illuminating Company, where Edison,
despite his own electric automobile research, encourages Ford to pursue experiments
with the gas engine. Over the years, Edison becomes a technological father and friend
to Ford, a friendship fueled by seamless competition and collaboration as an inevitable
function of ruthless invention. From 1915-1919, the quartet, completed by naturalist John
Burroughs, take summer camping trips through the California, Tennessee and Florida
wilderness. The ‘adventure tours’ seed fantasies of natural encounters in the primordial
American wilderness, a landscape once for survival now in the service and of leisure,
enabled by a luxury caravan of mass-produced resources in tow. In the advent of the
automotive age, nature--once a habitat to be harnessed, then an ecosystem to be
explored and conquered, is now but a set for enacting the work-as-pleasure principle.

The idyllic scenes of fireside connection after a hard day of chopping wood are not only efforts to re-enact the authenticity of the experience of pre-industrial labor, but are equally and perhaps inextricably for show, captured by Ford Motion Pictures for a rapidly emerging mass market stoked by the mass media of film. The trips are soon broadly known to the American populous, as Ford and Edison include snippets of their adventures in the free newsreels distributed by Ford Motion Pictures to cinemas for show before and between features. The tours stop after only six years, as the effects of popularity slowly overtake the isolation and independence of the American wilderness, transforming the myths of these untouched lands from fact to fantasy.

These cross-country escapades inspire an early Henry Ford, optimist and pacifist, to seek outlets for exporting American civilization, capital innovation, and the puritan spirit of physical work beyond the United States to other lands. Notably, Ford does not emerge from his early international pursuits without substantial bruises to his ego. In 1917, Ford, a vocal pacifist, bankrolls a Peace Ship delegation to Europe that ropes in a number of debutants and aristocrats with the stated goal of ending WWI. Without professional political backing and rumors of infighting amongst the American gaggle of wealthy, uninfluential socialite shipmates, the Peace Ship is mocked in global papers. Upon landing in Europe, Ford declares illness, and in an exquisite display of deus ex machina, is choppered from the port, and extracted from the center stage of world scorn.

It's unclear who on that long supposedly peaceful boat ride introduced Ford to the myths of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, but ironically enough the trip opened the flood of aggressions from a man ever-compelled by material production over
mathematical abstractions and capital lending. As platforms of production tend to do, Ford’s earnings from assembly production begets platforms for information. Ford first founds the Dearborn Independent, then the International Jew, newspaper media platforms that target Jews for a capital system unhinged from practical work and focused on financing and debt. Ford’s humiliating experience on the Peace Ship ironically accelerates his fascist aggressions, instigating a growing ethnic prejudice from our anti-Semitic industrial developer who wages a lifetime battle of unhinged financial speculation again state and market forces alike.5

With the assembly line humming along, markets propelling themselves, and more and more elements of the Model T under the Ford production umbrella, Ford finally gains in complete control of his own company after years of backstabbing, undermining, and infighting amongst his investors.6 Ford Motors turns its attention to international “civilization” and “education” as part of an integrated growth strategy driven by puritanical, patriarchal ideologies. As Europe and Asia forge new political and economic alliances, Ford, Edison, and Firestone review more proximate landscapes for harvesting resources and exporting modern capital’s promises of individualism, industry, and exploration. The south’s savage men and materials are the next beasts to be tamed in the Fordian production machine.

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5 Ford’s anti-Semitism, which evolves by way of friendships with a number of prominent fascists—from Lindbergh to Disney to Hitler—is the subject of much scholarship and speculation. Certainly these tendencies towards romantic dictatorships and obliteration of otherness influence the ideological framework Ford’s approach to indigenous communities in Brazil. Meanwhile, Ford’s approach to race within the United States proper has competing and conflictual manifestations of a much more open ideology, particularly inclusive of African Americans and Asian Americans, and unusually gender progressive. What is consistent is a social vision beyond the individual body.

6 The story of Ford Motors is a story of competition and control, with various investment forces and manipulations. Through a deceitful sale of his own stock, Ford eventually achieves full power over Ford Motors, befuddling the conspiring Dodge brothers and securing full ownership of the company.
Ford and friends tout the automobile as a paradigm for social intimacy, an opportunity for friendship and exchange with unfamiliar others. “In Mexico villages fight one another,” Ford said, but “if we could give every man in those villages an automobile, let him travel from his home town to the other town, and permit him to find out that his neighbors at heart were his friends, rather than his enemies, Mexico would be pacified for all time.” Ford frames the automobile as a mechanism against strangeness and alienation, a road towards a pacifist destiny. Ford’s simple fix evades, via feigned or intentful oversight, a long tension in Mexico between a hierarchical church and an oppressed and exploited poor. In Mexico, land ownership continues to be a contested issue, agitating collective power of resistance against an already been parceled and placated as in Northern market. The car as political purview and proposed solution becomes one and the same reduction for Ford, an example of the oversimplification of relations that eventually takes him victim further South.

The October 1925 letter confirms that the Floridian samplings are well underway by the time Edison’s Botanical Research Corporation is formalized as an official entity in 1927. That year, Ford, Edison, and Firestone contribute $25,000 to the company, and Edison builds the agricultural laboratory at the Fort Meyers Estate the following year. The Edison Botanic Research Corporation provides a test site for researching rubber seeds from far flung global climates and a point of international contact for connecting speculative agricultural advancements with outlets for global export. With only a small sampling of trees, the three claim the success of the Para Rubber Tree. And thus it is

7 Grandin, 60.

rubber, often referred to as nature’s milk, to which Edison, author of electric light, dedicates his final days.

When US industry sets its sights on Brazil in the mid-twenties, the Brazilian political and economic players are no stranger to a global rubber market that has already generated waves of boom and bust across the northern Amazonian in Brazil and Peru. Beginning in the 1830s, the bicycle market, and just before the turn of the century, the new motorcar market, espoused the Belle Epoque, a period of cosmopolitanism that transformed many Brazilian cities into international hubs as a result of rubber hunger and harvest. But Brazil uniquely refuses to succumb to imperial condensation efforts in those early rubber plantation years, insisting on rights for Brazilian tappers. In 1876, the British rubber business literally disappears in the middle of the night. Barron Henry Wickham smuggles 70,000 Amazonian rubber-tree seeds onto his boat under the watch of supposedly oblivious Brazilian guards and sets sail to the London Botanical Gardens. In England the British graft more resistant varieties, then sent to the Asian colonies in Malaysia, Ceylon and Singapore, where successful British and Dutch rubber plantations are established. By the early 1920s, the Brazilian industry is a bust, at the behest of their own resistance to geo-economic exploitation.

Our industrialists an inexplicably hasty grab for international plots to instantiate preliminary sunshine state tests abroad. In 1926, before the Botanical Research Lab is official, Harvey Firestone secures a 99-year lease with the Liberian government for a million acres (the specific plot to be chosen by the company) at a price of 6 cents per

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9 Jackson, Joe. *The Thief at the End of the World, Rubber, Power, and the Seeds of Empire.* Viking: New York, 2008. The Kew Gardens insist that the Brazilians knew of Wickham’s midnight export plan all along, the thieving a tale invented by Wickham himself to enliven his campaign and enhance his international value.
acre. Firestone goes on to create the world's largest rubber plantation, which provides influxes of funds to Liberian warlords who wreak havoc and terror on the population throughout the rest of the century. Following suite, in early 1927, Ford's cronies head to Brazil, and after a single night of drinking and dealing, lawyers close an agreement with the Brazilians, granting the automaker 2.5 million acres on a specific plot in the Amazon with a 9% return, complete with police protection and tax-free entry of Ford equipment and supplies. Brazilian officials promise gold, diamond, and robust agrindustrial harvest, and the Ford Company begins mobilizing resources in Michigan to collect its treasure.

“On October 11, 1927, Henry Ford announces that he will embark on a tour of South America, including the site of the future Fordlandia, with Charles Lindbergh in the pilot’s famous Spirit of St. Louis.” But following a test flight with Lindbergh in Dearborn, and the loss of a trusted Ford aviation pilot that same year, Ford determines an aversion to flying. The South American tour with Ford is delayed, the first in a long series of evasions by Ford, who ultimately never sets feet nor eyes on the grounds of his jungle plantation.

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In the spring of 1928, the Norwegian sea captain Einard Oxholm leads the first expedition of resources from Detroit to the new Amazon settlement. The steamer *Lake Ormoc* pulls *Lake Farge*, a barge carrying the complete makings of a US settlement. The bounty includes tractors, prefabricated buildings and houses, a sawmill, food, hospital equipment, a powerhouse, ice-making machinery, and railroad equipment—“everything that spells civilization to the white man.”

Ironically enough, transport is the most persistent challenge in the project to complete vertical integration of all Fordist production. The setbacks begin right away, as the Oromoc and Farge get waylaid in the north, failing to catch the river’s high season in the early spring. The decision to reject offers of local help costs almost a year, since the low season renders the property veritably inaccessible for the large shipment of supplies until the next December. As with every decision made by the Ford crew of managers and engineers, they stay resolute, despite regular evidence to the contrary, that the indigenous jungle people and plants are no match for their imported knowledges of management, engineering, and industry. Here is the initial slip on the inevitable path to ideological insistence, the slope from hubris to ignorance, a ship of tools run by a ship of fools.

Captain Oxholm is appointed the first plantation manager, despite zero previous agricultural experience, via telegram from Detroit. His first order of business is to raze

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the jungle along with the small tappers’ city of Boa Vista. This inaugural act of obliterating—modernity’s prototypical original sin—destroys all the topsoil nutrients needed for seed cultivation and renders, unwittingly, the grounds a veritable desert. This classic colonial mistake of “cleaning the slate”—the white dream of starting from scratch—backfires in sequence. The fires of course deplete any potential for exchange between the knowledge of the land maintained by Boa Vista’s long term residents and Ford’s new industrial crew—who is perfectly confident that their Midwestern managerial know-how will play out perfectly in the wild to be tamed. Ford’s team erects small houses in rows, assembles office buildings, and plows a dirt road through the center of the village, the first line of passage for the new city. With its most rudimentary infrastructure in place and the ready physical past almost obliterated, the plantation is open for operation.

Early on in the 20s, Ford’s $5 work day program in the United States brought workers flooding to Detroit, in large part stoked by the promise of purchasing the machines they manufactured. Ford here reproduces the recruitment scheme. The pay of 35 cents a day in the Amazon offers a pretty penny compared to the 20 cents per day standard in the Far East. Responding to posters promising good pay, housing, and Western comforts, tappers flood the plantation. Tribes of kin cram into the rows of prefab suburban houses designed for nuclear families. Unlike the thatched, open air roof huts long perfected over years by Amazonian tribes, raised above the ground to avoid insect proliferation, the enclosed prefab houses as design imports from the suburban are stiflingly hot, and their positioning on the ground allows for regular insects infestations, spreading yellow fever, malaria, and hookworm across the tapper community.
Displaced logics accelerate discontents. Ford’s regimen dictates an eight hour workday, which here falls in the dead heat of the tropical sun. The rubber tappers have been accustomed to years of the British system in Brazil, wherein overlords paid out for rubber collections in a part-feudal system. Workers are used to independence despite low wages and impoverished conditions. Workers once determined their own hours, often choosing to labor in the early morning and late at night out of the heat of the sun, now outfitted with worker ID badges, whistles, and uniforms, processed, regulated, and standardized by the hour. Ford sets out to dominate the tropical bodies and plants into submission rather than refining and supporting an existing collection process. The impractical and irrational work plan in the throws of the tropical heat fuels anger and exhaustion, as much from the work as by the inefficiency of the demand.

In Detroit, Ford Motors takes a progressive approach to identity politics for the time—at least on the surface the company is agnostic to the race, ethnicity, or gender of workers. But the company demands grueling and breaking efforts on the production line as well as submission to the Ford Sociological Research Department, which manages paternalistic compliance to social regulations forbidding alcohol, smoking, and unmarried women through surprise visits to company houses. In the Amazon, the company town issues similar social controls as well as a host of other regulations—a ban on hammocks, native food, and breast feeding—that push the Fordlandia from factory town to strange social experiment. As in Detroit, workers here are encouraged to square dance and plant gardens, attend poetry readings and participate in English only sing-alongs. These activities, are begrudgingly adopted by Boa Vista’s former residents, if at all. The turmoil, social dissatisfaction, and jumble of elements means that no one—from tappers to managers—is secure, let alone settled. A collective cabin fever, a deep disquiet sets in.
While the strict regulations technically apply from managers to tappers, the overlooked violations by managers are obvious to all. Just across the river and just beyond the Ford property, an ‘Island of Innocence’ springs up, an enclave of bars, nightclubs and brothels with a blackmarket boating system to boot. The Island makes a mockery of the plantation city’s virginal approach, an erotic enclave on the perimeter that channels the surplus energy stored in the ceaseless heat of the day into the shadowy passions of night. And so, on the periphery of a deeply puritanical plantation, an ecology of excess and rebellion begins to thrive, a catch-all for the pent-up expenditure otherwise unresolved within the bounds of the emerging plantation city.

The Fordist operatives presume from the outset that the logics of the industrial plant will easily graft onto those of the Amazonian jungle plantation. Preferring managers and engineers to “experts” such as scientists and researchers, none of the appointed deciders have requisite knowledge of agriculture or biology, let alone a deeper knowledge of tropical jungle ecology or indigenous culture. Our reader might find no surprise in the knowledge that the jungle fires intended to create a level plane for cultivation render the land hilly, rocky, and infertile. Rubber trees, once intermittently spaced and mediated by a diversity of foliage, protected from layered centuries of trees, are here packed closely together in standardized rows. The regular distribution and lack of intermittent division makes them easy prey for tree blight, sauva ants, lace bugs, red spiders, and leaf caterpillars. Ford’s monoculture is no match for the ecological complexity long perfected and protected by the jungle layers.

As the plantation’s industrial proxemics unhinge disease, the hospital provides modern salvation as Fordlandia’s most treasured jewel, honored by tribes and
researchers from Detroit alike. The hospital promises local remedy from psychic and physical ailments while conducting biomedical research for new species in Florida and Dearborn. Inside a well lit space designed by architect Albert Kahn, white gowned angels in a clean, air conditioned, electrified space concoct cures for the perpetrations unleashed in the Amazon’s destruction--yellow fever, malaria, poisonous insects, infections. The hospital offers respite but no standard solution for the jungle’s strange psycho-tropic ailments, a home for regular victims of afflictions including madness and isolation as suffered by both managers and tappers alike imported to the foreign city. Like a church, the sterile, clean space offers resurrection or rest for the broken body and mind.

The alternative to Fordlandia’s workforce mandate of death by disease is disappearance by way of attrition. With the small budding town yet to offer real commercial outlets for spending surplus capital, there is little incentive for tappers to stay at the Ford complex once some money has been collected. Unlike in Detroit, where high pay incentivizes workers to purchase the fruits of their labor, supporting consumption from small goods to the very vehicles they make, here the high pay for rubber tapping offers no immediate reward. Ford Company advertisements attempt to lure new workers with provisions of food and shelter and modern village spaces such as a cinema and dance hall, and eventually some American middle class luxuries like a community pool, schools, tailors, shops, restaurants, and shoemakers, golf courses. Regardless, these attributes of American small-town life provide no long term temptation, with their work for Ford providing no promise of either security or escape by car or boat, and for the Amazonian tappers it's clear that a more desirable life can be found by saving Ford's funds and spending them elsewhere.
As quickly as 1930, Fordlandia’s population peaks at 10,000. It’s the same year the native workers revolt. The rebellion is tipped off by a simple, seemingly rudimentary switch—from proper table service to American cafeteria-style service and the introduction of American-style burgers at lunchtime. Declaring themselves “workers not waiters,” a riot unfurls, from food to fire. Machine workers and tappers blaze lands and homes and processing factories. Workers smash the plantation time clocks, symbols of the new illogical and inefficient regulatory system of order and domination. The few managers who survive the riot do so either by escape into the jungle or by an airlift from a Pan Am billionaire residing in Brazil who comes to the rescue. The revolt is eventually suppressed with support from the Brazilian government. But the destruction is vast and rebuilding is slow, and the violent energy and emptied labor force dramatically protracts the operational development of Fordlandia. The plantation is put to use for logging while waiting for a new crop of rubber trees to grow, but even the ones that do never produce latex at any significant scale.

In 1933, the boys in Detroit declare Fordlandia a “research” station, and the central office relocates 50 miles downstream, relocating blind faith in the promise of industrial agriculture once more. A new town, Belterra, is established. With resilient echoes of the first attempt, the land across Belterra is razed, laying the groundwork for a second failed experiment. And just as before, the regular rows of plants breed bugs and tree blight and allows forest fires to spread. Riots and uprisings, albeit smaller than the first, create turmoil and tension for workers and managers. Each time the plantation is brought down, either by nature or its laborers, Detroit’s imports flee for home and a new cadre of managers from Dearborn swoops in to revive the effort anew, rebuilding with the same faith in the ultimate power of their advanced technologies and cultural ways
rather than developing an evolving knowledge of the dynamic systems in play from the
lands to the people. There are in fact a few changes—in Belterra regulations like sing-a-
longs and gardens are gone, replaced by infrastructures like paved streets and fire
hydrants that lend a certain degree of stability to social relations.

By 1945, Belterra’s trees have reached maturity, and there is a bit of rubber, but
the enterprise still has yet produce anywhere close to efficient supply. Despite a second
boom in the late thirties, and the US Government’s takeover of the Botanical Research
site in Florida, the Amazonian operation is finally observed as a financial debacle. The
invention and stronghold of synthetic rubber in the early 40s renders natural harvest of
the Havea irrelevant. Henry Ford’s son Edsel had for years been passionate about the
Brazilian experiment, but after both his and his father’s death, in a new Fordian company
consolidation, the colonial Amazonian venture can be seen as an economic failure rather
than social experiment.

And so, in 1946, Ford’s grandson, Henry Ford II, the new president of Ford
Motors, sells the property back to the Brazilian government at a loss of over US$20
million (aprx $208 million in 2013). The rubber production saga carries on in Liberia, and
Los Angeles, and Detroit, and the city falls off the radar of Ford Motor history, at the
fringes of industrial modernity, making its way in as a wilderness encroaches.

First as tragedy. Again as farce.

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12 Stragedy refers to the tragedy of strategy, or the tragedy of planning in which tragedy—or the inability to surmount faced
obstacles—is an inevitable outcome unwittingly built into the ideology of the plan.

claim here that the communist Idea persists: it survives the failures of its realization as a specter which returns again and
again, in an endless persistence best captured in Beckett’s Worstward Ho: “Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”’
But what is the slip per say, and why is it so emblematic, so pertinent to the saga at hand? The slip as an unconscious mechanism first appears in Freud’s 1902 “mistake” book, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. Formally known as parapraxis, popularly known as the Freudian slip, the theory goes that slips of the tongue or pen reveal repressed wishes or attitudes, often of a sexual or aggressive kind. In the guise of a mistake or misnomer, slips disclose unconscious desires. What appears as an accident can be traced back to an impulse that unwittingly rises to the surface, a secret desire that escapes in the flow of the everyday.

While slips in language are most commonly referenced, Freud notes that slips also take form as forgetfulness, the misplacement of objects, sleight of hands, or other such errors. Whatever the shape, the slip must have the character of a “brief or temporary disturbance,” happening without attention or intention. “If we notice the slip at all,” Freud says, “we must not recognize any motivation for it in ourselves, instead we must be tempted to put it down to carelessness or chance.” The slip must be sloughed off as a faulty action, an accident. So, to be sure Fordlandia can be read as a Freudian slip per say, we must ensure that there is not some ulterior or subaltern intention for Fordlandia’s failure, no lurking purpose for the plantation’s ultimately disastrous design, some sinister self sabotage built into the agricultural collapse. Surely Fordlandia and Belterra’s double disastrous ends disclose some repressed desire, in Ford himself and in the Fordian platform, in the project of cultivation and civilization.

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Praxis, of which parapraxis finds its referent, centers the core force of the Fordian approach. For Ford, thinking, learning, reflection and analysis all occur through action, at the behest and skepticism of abstract and conceptual activity. Ford’s success, his platform modality, is in large part attributable to this lack of hesitation, alongside a puritan ethos in which life and labor alike is realized through manifestation, or good works. Ford sees the cerebral activity of consciousness as a limitation and hindrance to the primacy of action. Thus Ford’s praxis is a force that enables him to move, fluidly, albeit subconsciously, through the world. Parapraxis—that which accompanies the doing—can also be understood as that surfeit of production, that which informs action and emerges from it, that must, at some point, be acknowledged or revealed...in this case a surplus that culminated for Ford just as the Amazonian attempt gets underway. Praxis and its paradoxical refrain, a contrarian accompaniment, a malingering motive that underpins the foundation of any action, prefiguring the possibility for any platform, at any moment, to slip away from its original intent.

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15 Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, New York: International Publishers, 1971, 403. Gramsci writes, “The philosophy of praxis does not tend to leave the simple in their primitive philosophy of common sense but rather to lead them to a higher conception of life”. To reveal the inadequacies of religion, folklore, intellectualism and other such ‘one-sided’ forms of reasoning, Gramsci appeals directly in his later work to Marx’s ‘philosophy of praxis’, describing it as a ‘concrete’ mode of reasoning. This principally involves the juxtaposition of a dialectical and scientific audit of reality; against all existing normative, ideological, and therefore counterfeit accounts.
MOTIVE

It begins, as most Freudian sagas do, in the scenes of childhood. Ford grows up on a farm, his nights by candlelight. Ford’s father nurtures his interest in agricultural science, taking the Ford boys on long nature walks, teaching them natural taxonomies and ecological phenomena in the field. Ford watches his father toil long hours on the farm, a slave to the land and ceaseless labor. Henry resists such resignations, dreaming of an alternative, a more efficient machine, a means to resist fruitless labor as original sin.

Out of father’s earshot, Ford’s mother encourages his interest in mechanics and experiment. This figure of love, who bids him reverence and admiration, dies when he is but 12 years old. That same year, Henry develops a fixation with machines, and clocks in particular. He goes around the town fixing clocks. He takes them off of neighbors walls, fixes them and puts them back together again, working away better than before. Through clocks, he learns engineering through gears and mechanical contingencies, parts and components, detail and determination. He becomes a tinkerer, a doer, a precise and practical young man. Through fixing clocks he practices the art of problem solving, moving piece by moving piece and he designs a double clock, of local and national standard, to compare such zones in one elegant machine for keeping time. Fixing the machines is a fix, a fixation, a resistance to the chaos and struggle of the world at large. Ford fixes to fix everything in working order, finding solace in organizing

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16 Much speculation circulates as to Ford’s actual relationship with his father. Most accounts suggest that Ford only later constructed the strained relationship to accelerate a myth of independent success.
time. What better way for young Henry to contend with the emptiness of the loss than through that messianic impulse to convert something broken to something workable again. The clocks become a channel for regulating sorrow, production as a means for defying loss, for reproducing the mechanics of life, for building resistance to irrationality of death. Henry fixes the clocks to defer the trauma of nature’s cycles of life and destruction. By saving time he can redistribute human energy into forums for control, mechanisms that can be operated and resolved beyond natural dominance. Do first, think second, account for everything, the early inklings of a life’s work that will define him and his context as resolutely American.

Ford leaves the family farm at 16, moves to Detroit, and weds his wife Clara. Ford tries to follow his father’s footsteps and settle as a farmer, but he’s quickly restless. He returns to Detroit, becomes a steam engine repairman, and then an engineer. He dreams of solving the problems of his father’s farm on the largest scale possible, to free man from the cycles of mother nature, to alleviate labor with machines, to expand the potential of time and civilization. Ford develops the quadricycle, the gas motor, the tractor, the Model T, the assembly line, the $5 day. And tied up in these accelerating, ever-expanding, coordinating inventions is Ford’s quest to mobilize the masses in reforming life through a Calvinist path to salvation in the here and now. Thus the production of pleasurable scientific work--by methodically, pragmatically, persistently, insistently, taking things apart and putting them back together again.

Ford’s dream is to choreograph all of life, leisure, and growth within an expansive and closed production cycle. From early on in his motorcar success story, Ford seeks to scale his masterful orchestration of the manufacturing plant to the scale of a factory town, but in fact a number of American ventures suffer false starts. Already in fact by 1916, Ford is looking for ways to reverse engineer the intensive urban consolidation his industrialization generates. Ford experiments in “field to factory” projects, with the goal of dispersing smaller production sites for sub-assemblies managed by Ford to provide employment and education to rural areas. Here, Ford insists no paternalistic or sociological intent, aside from creating schools to encourage vocational and technical knowledge.

As Ford becomes evermore connected to the global economy, and sees the logistical impossibility of distributing and coordinating smaller-scale component construction, his thinking shifts towards vertical consolidation. Reduce contingencies, he thinks, of timing, of quality, of interchange, of fit. Ford, with mounting commitment and fervor, seeks a site for a completely centralized city experiment. Just a few years before purchasing the lands in Brazil, Ford almost succeeds in purchasing the Wilson Dam in Muscle Shoals Alabama, a power plant for an unrealized munitions factory halted by the end of WWI. He intends to use the dam to produce nitrate fertilizer. A Feb. 12, 1922 article entitled “Rush for Muscle Shoals” opens: “The dream city reared suddenly at Muscle Shoals by Henry Ford somewhat after the fashion of Aladdin with his wonderful


lamp is already being peopled." Speculative developments include suburban houses, orchards, farms, and new sidewalks in anticipation of Ford’s arrival. In 1924, Ford’s proposal, which requires government support for almost all of the revitalization costs is denied, and Ford is sidelined by public repossession of the plant. The damn’s value is transitioned to public wealth and eventually reincorporated as the Tennessee Valley Authority, which became the nation’s largest public power provider. But the dream of Muscle Shoals does not slip away, rather, it generates its own momentum and fuels the bruised ego and chipped shoulder of our entrepreneuring engineer.

By the time the prospective plot in the Amazon comes about, Ford’s unrealized urban vision has taken on new geopolitical ambition and aggression in response to financial manipulation and national power plays. Ford’s Amazonian intervention is certainly part of a broader strategic collaboration by US government and business to break up the Anglo-Dutch rubber monopoly and develop self-reliance from Europe and Asia through closer allies and outlets for American industry in South America. It’s quite likely, Grandin concurs, that Ford is privy to the history of rubber harvest and production in Brazil. Under Wickham’s watch, tribal overlords managed rubber tappers in the Amazon, stoking a quasi-feudal slave-economy to feed increasing global rubber appetite at the century’s turn. Ford, ever sensitive to material costs and market speculations, certainly realizes that Wickham’s seed smuggling and new Asiatic trade has instantiated a monopoly that has driven the price of rubber far above its production value. Ford


sees an opportunity for competition, independence, and consolidation of material production, taking up his hobby-horse against speculative economic bubbles not his own.

But Ford’s insistence on Fordlandia’s quest seems motivated by something beyond capital markets and monopolies. One speculation is perhaps a spiritual, religious ideology, an unresolved element in Ford’s American-colonial project that drives, however unconsciously, his puritanical quest. Grandin writes:

Over fifty years ago, the Harvard historian Perry Miller gave his famous “Errand into the Wilderness” lecture in which he tried to explain why English Puritans lit out for the New World to begin with, as opposed to, say, going to Holland. They went, Miller offered by way of an answer, not just to preserve their “posterity from the corruption of this evil world” as it was manifest in the Church of England but to complete the Protestant reformation of Christendom that had stalled in Europe. In a “bare land, devoid of already established (and corrupt) institutions, empty of bishops and courtiers,” they would “start de novo.” The Puritans did not flee to America, Miller said, but rather sought to give the faithful back in England a “working model” of a purer community. Thus, central from the start to American expansion was “deep disquietude,” a feeling that “something had gone wrong”— not only with the inability of the Reformation to redeem Europe but subsequently with the failure to achieve perfection, to found and maintain a “pure biblical polity” in New England. With the Massachusetts Bay Colony just a few decades old, a dissatisfied Cotton Mather began to learn Spanish, thinking that a better “New Jerusalem” could be raised in Mexico.23

Perhaps Ford was driven by the unsettling imperfection of his American project, that somehow the social piety that had escaped his grasp in the urban cultural center of Detroit could be more closely cultivated further South. Indeed, setting up a plant in the Amazon thus gives Ford the chance to kill four egrets with one stone--an opportunity to redesign the agriculture plantation just as he had organized the industrial plant, the

23 Grandin, 55.
chance to control the final integral material for his vertical supply chain, the chance to redirect US reliance on European and Asiatic trade to the Americas\(^{24}\), and the chance to demonstrate the scalability of the American system, quelling the lingering ills of the British rubber system by 'liberating' the productive spirit through regulation, order, and grueling work.

This series of personal and political thwarted attempts to get a town off the ground has made Ford increasingly determined to expand the principles of his ever-growing factory empire to the village scale. Platform ambition can easily cloud the cold logics of reasonability. In fact, Ford receives direct messages regarding the low probability of success in the Amazon. A 1926 governmental report concludes the best course for American intervention in the Amazon would be as a harvest intermediary, like the British model, rather than as full rubber producer. But somehow already by 1927, the possibility of an Amazonian intervention has slipped from speculative prospect into certain destiny. By the end of the very first trip in Brazil, Ford’s cronies have concluded that there is no better spot for a plantation than this plot on the Tapajos river, lands owned by Villares, who serves, coincidentally, as both tour guide, government official, and owner of said property. The Ford boys have been swept away in the deja-vu of the Belle Epoch, drinking and dining in the remains of a collapsed epoch, deceived by the tragic stoppage to the theater of Manaus, seduced by the age-old myth that the jungle is but primordial land ripe for cultivation. Ford’s reps are positively convinced that these brown folk couldn’t possibly know the value of their own backyard, and these white midwestern managers, so swept up in the southern gothic enchantments are so blinkered they can’t smell a rat.

\(^{24}\) Ibid.
Indeed, by the spring end of that year, thanks in part to the speculative shifts in new plots by Firestone and Ford, the Sri Lankan rubber monopoly is already starting to slip away, and Ford's clearest motive at the outset, that of instilling economic competition for his tire market, is already secured.
TIMING

March 31, 1927. A news brief in The Day, New London, Connecticut: “Henry Ford in Auto Accident.” Henry Ford has crashed into a tree, but all details are withheld for several days. Rumors fly. Perhaps the accident is not so accidental. There may have been an attempt by a Studebaker to run Ford off the road.

Perhaps coincidentally, however fortuitously, the crash prevents Ford from testifying at another lawsuit, this time filed by Aaron Shapiro of the co-operative farm workers movement. Shapiro has sued Ford for anti-semitic slander in Ford’s paper The Dearborn Independent. Ford issues a public apology, and settles the case from home, already humiliated for his illiteracy, brutality, and practicality by journalists everywhere. Lest we forget the particularly personal nature of this agricultural vendetta against an increasingly hardened Ford, determined himself to change labor relations for farmers and resolve forever the toils of his father’s vocation. Ford folds the newspaper, seeking new outlets for a stoked populist agricultural mission.25

1927 is a slippery year for Ford’s vision in general, a year in which the production logics that led to the prominence and growth of his motorcar platform start to slip away and a new configuration of culture and desire, ushered in by his very invention, overtake the palpability of his original designs. It’s during these first years of Fordlandia, from

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25 “Henry Ford Slightly Injured in Automobile Collision.” Miami Daily News, 30 March 1927. Henry Ford at the time the world's wealthiest man, was hospitalized after he struck a tree. The auto magnate had been driving his coupe it was run off the road by a larger Studebaker on Michigan Avenue in Detroit. Reports of the crash were kept from the press for several days[30] and the matter was later investigated as "an attempted assassination", but the case was later dropped. [1] Researcher Jim Morris concluded that the accident was the motivating reason for the inclusion of safety glass in all Ford automobiles thereafter.
1927-1933, that Ford transfers the official transfer of company leadership to his son Edsel, with whom Ford had a tenuous, bullying, and vengeful relationship. It's also the year that Ford’s beloved “Tin Lizzie,” the Model T, stops production to make way for the new Model A, which Henry begrudges. In sunsetting car and company, Ford’s control and dominion, his most beloved success, is slipping away.

Not to mention the more salacious elements of the year’s culminations. It just so happens that the timing of these latex adventures coincides with Ford’s affair with Miss Evangeline Cote, whom he eventually marries off to one of his executives to keep in close proximity. The affair carries on for many years in a house Ford built, with a secret stairway architected for such occasions. The affair is Ford's personal slip, a violation of his commitment to the nuclear family, his obsession with purity, and his righteous moral aptitude. One might diagnose the need for this kind of expression as a “natural” overproduction of energy, as desires generate desire, that regular success and power in new dimensions mean that his early farm love no longer satisfies, and like the Amazonian lands, is seeking more exotic and erotic horizons. Or perhaps it’s more simple--Ford finds undeniably a pretty lady whose verve and prowess seems to match his own. Regardless, all of these secrets surely mean that Ford can no longer focus all of his desire and energy into his company. Guilty or not, with these energies flowing, he turns increasingly brutal, hostile, and unforgiving in his company management affairs.

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27 Hill, Napoleon. Think and Grow Rich. Anderson: MindPower Press, 2015, 158. Hill’s text, originally published in 1937, explains the theory of transmutation, which is “The switching of the mind from thoughts of physical expression to thoughts of some other nature. Sex desire is the most powerful of human desires. When driven by this desire, people develop keenness of imagination, courage, willpower, persistence, and creative ability unknown to them at other times. So strong and impelling is the desire for sexual contact that people freely run the risk of life and reputation to indulge it. When harnessed and redirected along other lines, the positive attributes of this motivating force may be used as powerful creative forces in literature, art or in any other profession or calling, including, of course, the accumulation of riches."
This little slip, the extramarital love affair, results in not only a lover, but also a speedboat, named Evangeline, and a child who Ford secretly supports and nurtures as a second son while increasingly treating his first as a bastard.
ATTENTION

In 1984, cognitive scientist Don Norman argues against Freud’s longstanding interpretation of the slip as a function of desire. Norman argues that slips should be understood in relation to habit rather than repression of anger or sexual instinct; cognitive science finds that patterning, sequencing, habit accounts for most mistakes. According to Norman, slips are a function of repetition, inattention, incomplete sense data or insufficient knowledge, an elision that produces a displaced action. What lives already on the tip of the tongue simply slips seamlessly into a new formation, without resistance. It is the lack of attention, of commitment to the word, task, or judgment at hand, which produces such slip. Nothing to see here, Norman argues, but a little mistake. Of course, given the distractions in company turnover and his little affair, to easy to view Ford’s slip, his inability to mastermind from afar the transition from factory to biological harvest, only as a function of only his displaced attentions, a consequence of the duplicitous image of puritanical consistency and curious passion.

Dr. Baars, who echoes Norman on this theory, notes however that the formation of habits of course has its own logics and rational, and that of course these must be attributed to something—albeit socialization, culturalization, or individual development, if not a combination of all three. Habits are reactive, cumulative, and unconsciously strategic in relation to the general milieu. For Baars, the slip functions in reference to an always present alternative option, often similar in sound or sense living in the subconscious, rather than indicating some repressed wish or unconscious desire. These

slips,’ Dr Baars adds, ‘are a special case of the failure of an editing capacity of the mind that is far more general than Freud saw. With every action, the mind has to edit out competing alternatives; when the editing fails there is a slip. The vast majority of these alternatives, and the slips they lead to, are neutral, not Freudian.’ Indeed, the option indeed was always there, to close up shop, or to somehow focus on turning the tides, but Fordlandia kept going on its initial trajectory, no doubt as much an impossibility of editing out the truth of failure, the contingencies of risk, and the assuredness of success.

Dr. Reason enters the debate on slips from the standpoint of risk—providing a broader perspective of the slip as part of a system of organizational risk, human error, and accident. Looking particularly at crisis, Dr. Reason concludes that four factors play into accidents: “Organizational influences, unsafe supervision, preconditions for unsafe acts, and the unsafe acts themselves.” These accidents include ‘active failures’ and ‘latent failures:’ active failures are attributed to immediate breakdowns in the system, while latent failures are connected to oversights in the system mechanism as a whole. Perhaps one steady attribute of the slip is a failure to edit as much as a failure to include, showing surface alternatives from which the intended choice or solution is made. But it’s the system, not individual character flaws, Reason claims, that influence the slip.

Reason concludes that the biggest function in mistakes of systems is ideology proper, not personal motivation. So even if in the moment we might not attribute such-and-such a slip to such-and-such wish, or such-and-such salacious back room liaison, the entire paradigm of choices is configured by the limitations and opportunities of such-and-such

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29 Ibid.

framework of possibilities. The platform never escapes its paradigm, but it can escape into a new one.

But perhaps we've digressed too far into these mundane if not overly personal psychoanalytic constructions of mistake and accident in this modern transit affair, that you and I have gotten overtly entangled in the psychic elements of the drama of these players rather than delving into the unconscious effects and affectations of an entire system at play in the wild. The Fordian slip, as opposed to the Freudian one, is a question of context, the fact that this mistake of such grand scale happens not once but twice, the repetition of disaster. And this fact, of Fordlandia and Belterra, of the double folly, enforces the impossibility of thinking this slip as only a mistake of a man alone, a repression of some personal desire. True, Ford, master of navigating risk, is undone by the last link in the chain. It's a systematic contradiction, the social and the capital paths crossed unwittingly, a crossed wires desire, the echo of reproducing the machinery of a system, the impossibility of extracting a design from its circumstance.
PRODUCTION

While Ford is battling Aaron Shapiro on the rights of agrarian unions, Gramsci is writing “Americanism and Fordism” from an Italian prison, mapping the subaltern forces that influenced Ford’s accession in America and evaluating the potential for Ford’s program to extend beyond the United States. Gramsci sees, in Ford’s $5/day in Detroit, in Ford’s premise that workers should own the things they make, a potential stage on the path of Marxist development, a first wave of economic distribution and middle class mobilization, the early possibility, albeit unrealized, for a coordinated modern machine to rationalize and overcome the limits of capital alienation.

Gramsci asks if, given the cultural and economic conditions of production in Italy, it would be possible for Ford’s system to take hold there. Gramsci’s exercise proves especially useful for considerations of the Amazonian case, in that the question of hegemony considers how desire and socio-psychic dynamics influence the ability to transfer production systems from one context to another. Gramsci wants to account for the forces that become visible, repressed, and suppressed in the new configuration, a Speculative and retrospective address.

Gramsci’s essay details three axes of note in charting the preconditions for the instantiation of Fordian rationality: accumulation and distribution, sex, and psychoanalysis. In the United States, Gramsci notes, Ford manages to subsume all of the functions of life, not only work, into his production apparatus as a function of consolidation. “The experiments conducted by Ford and to the economies made by his firm are a consequence of direct management of transport and distribution of the
product. These economies affected production costs and permitted high wages and lower selling prices. Since these preliminary conditions existed, already rendered rational by historical evolution, it was relatively easy to rationalize production and labour by a skillful combination of force (destruction of working class trade unionism on a territorial basis) and persuasion (high wages, various social benefits, extremely subtle ideological and political propaganda) and then succeed in making the whole life of the nation revolve around production.\textsuperscript{31} As the car cyclically produces its own momentum by absorbing and developing new appetites, let alone demands, it literally delivers social and material mobility at once; and the worker benefits only at the behest of his immobility.

Gramsci emphasizes that the functions of production must be mirrored in the engagement with the forces of reproduction as liberation and control. “It is worth drawing attention to the ways that industrialists (Ford in particular) have been concerned with the sexual affairs of their employees and with their family arrangements in general. One should not be misled, any more than in the case of prohibition, by the puritanical appearance presumed by this concern. The truth is that the new type of man demanded by the rationalization of production and work cannot be developed until the sexual instinct has been suitably regulated and until it too has been rationalized.”\textsuperscript{32} In a prior thread we reviewed the ways in which the suppression, if not denial of sexual desire is a precondition for Fordist logics of rationality, control and power. Gramsci extends this argument as a precondition for Fordist mass production--the physical demands of the

\textsuperscript{31} Gramsci, 285.

\textsuperscript{32} Gramsci, 297.
line and mechanism can only be meet through a highly regulated sexual instinct, repressed through social pressure and suppressed by the sociological unit.

Gramsci writes:

Puritanical initiatives simply have the purpose of preserving, outside of work, a certain psycho-social equilibrium which prevents the physiological collapse of the worker, exhausted by the new method of production. This equilibrium can only be something purely external and mechanical, but it can become internalized if it is proposed by the worker himself, and not imposed from the outside, if it proposed by a new form of society, with appropriate and original methods. American industrialists are concerned to maintain the continuity of the physical and muscular-nervous efficiency of the worker. It is in their interests to have a stable, skilled labour force, a permanently well-adjusted complex, because the human complex (the collective worker) of an enterprise is also a machine, who cannot, without considerable loss, be taken to pieces too often and renewed with single new parts. 33

Is platform automation propelled by suppressed desire? Ford’s puritanical ethos of hard work and good deeds was enhanced by staunch monogamy, nuclear family values, and abstinence, undermined by violations and violence on the line that kept the system constraints in check. In Fordlandia these principles were formally implemented as social regulations, but without the cultural reinforcement of urban plans, architecture, leisure outlets, and protestant worship, not to mention the automobile as a desired transit device. As rule without manifest reference, no equilibrium was ever found, between man or manufacture, nature or culture at hand.

Even more pertinent is the question of what actually unfolds in Ford’s reproduction ideology. For Ford reproduction ultimately is production, part of a comprehensive vision wherein every single material, every scrap, every surplus element,

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33 Gramsci, 303.
from energy to concrete output, is recycled in the production process. Thus, in Fordlandia, breast milk is banned, not only as an expression of control over reproduction, but we can speculate on the desire to experiment with the impact of soy on markets for rubber nipples. Nature folds into a Fordian cycle of pushing, as far as possible, the contingencies of labor from the body’s mechanisms, a liberation from the restraints of natural organism into a matrix of new constraints and possibilities. With a particular penchant for agriculture, soy is already being tested for various Ford initiatives at surprising scales, from the construction of a car made solely out of the product to the destiny of the Amazonian forest, eventually razed to make way for massive soy fields far beyond the scope and scale of any rubber plots. This form of genius, this Fordian implication, is the violence of progress that proceeds along the path of its foundation. The platform shapes desire as much as desire shapes the platform.
Then again, the slip of the platform system is that moment when the rationalities of expansion and absorption fall out of step with the excesses of its own reproduction. In the case of Fordlandia, an overemphasis and impatience in social projection and control, a slip into domination from direction, when the rogue element in man becomes an unwieldy reference, a wayward referent. Taussig: “Wildness challenges the unity of the symbol the transcendent totalization binding the image to that which it represents. Wildness pries open this unity and in its place creates slippage and a grinding articulation between signifier and signified.”34 Between this Detroit farmer and this tropical order, full of secrets and secretions, jungle orders and chaos, some other rationality of excess lingers in the interim, a forgotten fantasy, an unbeatable power, a smarter system with deeper desires and deviant dreams. Ford’s platform relies on this unreliable other, the impossible quest, the promise that somewhere not too far away all desire might be fulfilled. This secondary effort, the promise repeated, the mistake reenacted in the city of Belterra, is too inflected by a desire for conquest rather than a calibration of control. This is a mistake of how to reinstate surplus within a platform system. Energy must be absorbed within rather than siphoned out or rejected.

But it’s also something about the jungle, that site of contestation between harvest and cultivation, that enchanted site, where the doubling of the desires of reproduction seems to confront the realities of their own generation. Werner Herzog encounters this reproductive slip in the making of Fitzcarraldo, a film based on the Peruvian rubber baron Carlos Fitzcarrald, in which Herzog reenacts the challenge of moving a steamship

over a steep hill in order to access a rubber rich territory in the Amazon Basin. The ironies of the inevitable debacle of reproducing a failed reality seem the only way to come to know the conditions of the original, the original as a lost or forgotten desire, the fact that second nature slips back so quickly towards its first configuration.

Kinski always says it's full of erotic elements. I don't see it so much erotic. I see it more full of obscenity. It's just - Nature here is vile and base. I wouldn't see anything erotic here. I would see fornication and asphyxiation and choking and fighting for survival and... growing and... just rotting away. Of course, there's a lot of misery. But it is the same misery that is all around us. The trees here are in misery, and the birds are in misery. I don't think they - they sing. They just screech in pain. It's an unfinished country. It's still pre-historical. The only thing that is lacking is - is the dinosaurs here. It's like a curse weighing on an entire landscape. And whoever... goes too deep into this has his share of this curse. So we are cursed with what we are doing here. It's a land that God, if he exists has - has created in anger. It's the only land where - where creation is unfinished yet. Taking a close look at - at what's around us there - there is some sort of a harmony. It is the harmony of... overwhelming and collective murder. And we in comparison to the articulate vileness and baseness and obscenity of all this jungle - Uh, we in comparison to that enormous articulation - we only sound and look like badly pronounced and half-finished sentences out of a stupid suburban... novel... a cheap novel. We have to become humble in front of this overwhelming misery and overwhelming fornication... overwhelming growth and overwhelming lack of order. Even the - the stars up here in the sky look like a mess. There is no harmony in the universe. We have to get acquainted to this idea that there is no real harmony as we have conceived it. But when I say this, I say this all full of admiration for the jungle. It is not that I hate it, I love it. I love it very much. But I love it against my better judgment. 35

The jungle, the culmination of the violent nature-machine, upon which Herzog compares Kinski's intimate interpretation with his own love at a distance, is no less rational, no more constructed, than its plantation cousin. But the jungle operates in the space of excess, a conglomerate of uncharted forces. And we see the ways in which the Fordian system of desire from Detroit has been choked, in which production and reproduction are constrained rather than cultivated, producing a labor without a guise of love,
however false, however constructed, save for those managers in Detroit, for whom the romance continues to exceeds the reality. "Eroticism, unlike simple sexual activity, is a psychological quest...eroticism is assenting to life even in death".36 In the jungle, Ford confronts the limits of his platform production conceptualized as a social body based on individual success, rather than the surging forces of collective momentum of revolt and reconstruction without a channel. In the move from the plant to the plantation, the -ation, the action or progress, slips towards the stage of its eternal return.

In 1932 Ford begins work with the Soviet Union to construct a large car and tractor production factory; that year Diego Rivera arrives to the Motor City at the commission of Clara and Edsel Ford to create murals for the Detroit Institute for the Arts. Rivera arrives on the tales of the March Hunger March, finding admiration and camaraderie in Ford’s capitalist and utopian machine, while a pregnant Kahlo remains more withdrawn, skeptical, and unenchanted with industrialization, finding it without “sensibility and good taste.” Rivera has been in Russia, learning from the constructivists, finding the interconnections of systems of abstraction and coordinated production in development as art and mass design. The commission’s agenda is to serve as “salve” for the thousands of workers that have been laid off during the Great Depression, and others whose union activity is escalating in a radicalizing Detroit.

At the DIA, Rivera paints Kahn’s River Rouge factory, a glass palace of machines and workers together bathed in light, as the material investment of the epic phases of civilization. Rivera says: “Marx made theory...Lenin applied it with his sense of large scale social organization...And Henry Ford made the work of the socialist state possible...I paint the story of the new race of the age of steel.” The factory workers are depicted front and center of a massive production cycle that integrates the co-production of man with nature and machine. Making visible the entire production process with unparalleled technical precision, Rivera creates an allegory of wholistic system of

37 Ibid., 46.
38 Ibid., 50.
39 Ibid., 120.
technology and society; the act of gestalt relocates power to the workers at the center of a mass system of collective production centered on the aesthetics of a coordinated process. Fordian praxis, at production scale, develops a coordinated social machine, which Diego demonstrated as the critical step towards the realization of Marxist mechanization.

Rivera paints Ford's industry as a second iteration of the Western biblical allegory, supplanting the Holy Trinity with lifegiving technological resources of human care and industry. Rivera constructs a distinctly “American” aesthetic, blending populist themes with a progressive coordination of energy. A reference to our rubber plantation can be found in the bottom right of the middle register, where men collect sap for rubber latex, a demonstrative moment in Rivera’s depiction of the harmony of nature’s harvest with industrial bounty. Religion here has given way to science and technology, absorbing religion’s mythical dimensions. The machine becomes the holy ghost--the organization of production as the cultivation of human social life. The workers are front and center in synchrony, as the critical element in generating human progress and production. And this religion is technophilia, the faith that if coordinated properly all of man’s labor will be channeled and distributed in the perfect synchronization of a new society.

Reviews referencing Diego Rivera’s Marxism and the “un-American” qualities of the mural prompt the public to visit Rivera’s mural in the thousands, meanwhile inspiring an inquiry into the political motives of Ford’s commissions program. The mural almost suffers oblivion during McCarthy’s witch hunt, but survived, and also remains to this day as a testament to all those workers who participated in building this production unconscious, who gave their body and their drives to the system. And yet it’s undeniable
that Ford’s capital empire contained its own desires to reorganize man alongside machine, desires once invested in the sociological unit that originally accelerated Detroit into a platform for consumer construction and capital bounty would meet their demise first in the Amazonian project and then in Detroit as a whole as the logics escaped to find more rational and flexible ecosystems elsewhere. The platform produces social desire, and social desire inevitably escapes the platform. Pleasure and prowess must be calibrated and perverted rather than suppressed or repressed; the platform must engage the evolving promises of the future embedded in the present while keeping at its core those premises that motivated its successes in the first place. And those premises are not always obvious on the scale between the one and the many.

In 1941, Walt Disney visits Fordlandia as part of FDR’s ‘Good Neighbor’ program, on a tour of Latin America. The tours have one main objective—building American freedoms and economic connections in resistance to world fascism, which was developing strongholds in Brazil. Disney’s trip draws publics out by the thousands. Hitler’s rallies are no match for the powers of Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck in the popular imagination. The visit results in a short film celebrating the social utopia and scientific progress built by the Motorcar business. *The Amazon Awakes* is a five minute traipse into an idyllic village called Fordlandia (in actuality, Belterra) where white and native people live in a jungle harmony of modern leisure and civil livelihoods thanks to strong social ties and Americanized comforts. The film focuses on the town’s social infrastructures and Western developments—the schools, hospitals, golf courses, and homes fitted with modern conveniences. The camera never pans out to show the agricultural plantations supposedly fueling the operation, only details of the construction process, which frame by frame, propose the immense potential for production from
seemingly endless natural resources provisioned by the jungle. Disney’s film ends with a perfect expression of the violence of western positivism for the civilizing industrial settler: “Today the Ford plantation is a new enterprise, attributed to skill and science, the new weapons of the 21st Century pioneer.”

And unhoned of both skill and science, or perhaps too focused on the simplicity of conquest rather than the complexities of cultivation, within a few years of the piece showing a flourishing civilization, the Fordlandia enterprise is abandoned altogether. This social mandate, of skill and science alone has been demonstrably unraveled by cultural resistance of the human and agricultural nature, in which a Fordian platform of functional progress beyond brute force and submission became a doomed program of social transformation bereft of both context and culture.
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From the horizons of hindsight, Fordlandia is often interpreted as a triumph of natural forces. This interpretation appeals to an aesthetics of the post industrial sublime, romantic sensibilities of the jungle overtaking machines as if once and for all. These projects—from Dan Dubowitz’s photos to Melanie Smith’s videos—often resurrect some original past, an expose of loss from which Ford is finally revealed to be a megalomaniacal agent and the jungle a force of good. Our observation takes note that the layers of flora and fauna, friends and foe only reveal the complexity of cultural entanglements, from the ecological to the social, from the temporal to economic, from aggression to eros—an order striving for sense and succession, to surpass the strategies of species, to better synchronize the evolution of men and machine.

More crucial is to observe the loops of logics and the tributaries of timing, the dynamics of desire and momentum of drive that in tandem contribute to Fordlandia and Belterra’s demise, to observe the disastrous repercussions at once as both consequence and coincidence (neither nor alone), a function of displaced context and over correlation. Freud says “One may not be inclined to think that the kinds of mistakes I have elucidated here are very numerous or particularly significant. However, I think we may wonder whether we should extend the same ideas to assessing those much more important errors of judgment made by people in their daily lives and in scientific studies….Only the most unusual and well balanced minds seem able to preserve the perceived image of outward reality from the distortion it usually suffers by being filtered through the psychic individuality of the subject perceiving it.”\footnote{40 Freud, 218.} Fordlandia is such a
judgement error, a repetition of that latent, unresolved desire of technological fathers to transform men beyond money, to change the system while keeping society the same. This fabula of facts, this tale of modern topics, this tropical modern scene, is a platform story, a pathological progression of a new cycle of production and subsumption, a symptom of interwoven suppressions and repressions of interconnection and control.

Lest The Fordian Slip serve as a reminder to social pioneers and innovators alike, from the warehouses of Amazon.com to the network of Anonymous, that the platform slip lurks and lingers, from rise to retreat, perceptibly and imperceptible. Better to cultivate and coordinate emergent energies and diverse intentions as a force of production and power--from the wisdom of bodies, to the flow desire, autonomous and collective, intended and happenstance. The case of Fordlandia and Belterra stages the conditions for liberation as for repression, either scenario configures the legible and intelligible of what is already present, material and immaterial, functional and fictional. Contexts are also constructs, cycles of forces real and imaginary, probable and possible, a risk that is both a projection and a matter of fact.
REFERENCES


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