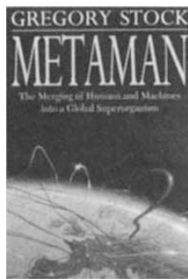


/BOOK REVIEW

Was Robocop Just a Movie?

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Metaman,
by Gregory
Stock,
Simon &
Schuster, New
York, 1993,
\$24.00.

There are some writers whose work leaves you unconvinced and unconverted, yet at the same time unable to see the world in quite the same way thereafter. The detailed arguments may not be persuasive, but the overall presentation is enthralling and indeed memorable. For me, the outstanding book of this sort was Theodore Roszak's *The Making of a Counter Culture*, published by Faber and Faber in 1970.

"Consider the strange compulsion our biologists have to synthesize life in a test tube—and the seriousness with which the project is taken. Every dumb beast of the earth knows without thinking how to create life," Roszak wrote. And again: "The capacity of our emerging technocratic paradise to denature the imagination by appropriating to itself the whole meaning of Reason, Reality, Progress and Knowledge will render it impossible for men to give any name to their bothersomely unfulfilled potentialities but that of madness. And for such madness, humanitarian therapies will be generously provided."

It is easy to pick holes in Roszak's attack on the immanence of scientific thinking in the modern world. It's tempting to see his message as simply a clever version of the hocus-pocus that always threatens to break in to corrupt our much-prized rationality. That would be a mistake. Roszak not only writes entertainingly and with poetic clarity, but he also has a perspective we would be wise not to ignore.

Much the same can be said of Gregory Stock's *Metaman*. Subtitled *The Merging of Humans and Machines into a Global Super-organism*, it differs dramatically from Roszak's book in that it embraces science and technology with confidence and gusto. It extrapolates and integrates them into a process within which human and human society, knitted together through modern communications, can be considered as fast evolving into a single "super-organism." For the chronicler of the counter culture, such a vision would doubtless constitute the worst imaginable nightmare, the consummation of his greatest fears. Nevertheless, and while many will prefer to peruse Stock's worldview as metaphor, rather than as actuality, his energy and freshness do compel us to reflect anew on societal and global changes of the late twentieth century.

"We tend to see such things as air travel, telecommunications, and even rubbish collection, in terms of

how they serve people. But just as the activities of an animal's individual cells mesh to serve the needs of the animal as a whole, human activity has organized itself into large functional patterns that join to sustain the entirety of Metaman," Gregory Stock insists. "Metaman has many of the same basic needs as an animal has: finding and consuming food, circulating energy and nutrients, replacing damaged and worn out parts, regulating its internal environment and sensing and responding to changes in its surroundings. . . . Metaman may be unlike any other living thing, but none the less it is feeding, moving, growing and rapidly evolving."

Stock deploys both logic and artistic license to persuade us that his vision is meaningful rather than simply a philosophical fancy. He talks of termites and telecommunications, computers and commerce, biotechnology and agriculture, in an analytical sweep through the modern world that is breathtaking in its catholicity. Often, however, it is the relatively trivial observations he uses that tellingly illustrate our increasing interdependence and sophistication—for example, that a typical supermarket in the U.S. now has 18,000 items on the shelf, compared to 2000 just forty years ago. And the whole process of complexification is accelerating apace. Benjamin Franklin, returning today two centuries after his death, would be amazed by our technology but would find our society comprehensible. In a further two centuries, this would not be so, because the "basic anchors of human experience" such as aging, the senses, the body and childbirth will be greatly altered, while "machines will be intelligent participants in a closely knit global environment in which peoples' mental and physical capacities are enhanced by bio-machine interfaces."

As John Donne pointed out in 1623, "No man is an island, intire of it selfe: every man is a peece of the Continent, a part of the maine." In his stirring book, fact-packed in the manner of Jules Verne, Gregory Stock takes Donne's observation into a new dimension, showing that society or societies can no longer be considered in isolation from the global cat's cradle of systems spawned by human ingenuity. Though lapsing occasionally into a totalitarian ethos in which individuals are mere pawns rather than players ("giving and drawing from one another as we participate in a momentous step in the evolution of life"), this is a revealing and at times inspiring portrait of the qualitative change in our world now being wrought by science, technology, and human drive and determination. But do let's remember that we have a choice in these things. ///

Bernard Dixon is a contributing editor of Bio/Technology.