

All watched over by machines of loving grace: So drop your disks and nix your network???

I generally watch documentaries based upon the topic or theme e.g. nuclear issues, language studies, ancient history, climate change and so on. Rarely do I watch one based upon the title only.

This three-part examination of the relationship of computers to society is an exception: I was so intrigued by the title, having come from career of forty years in computers prior to my escape from corporate life, that I just had to see it.

I wasn't disappointed. The writer/director (Adam Curtis) combines stock footage of computers, city and urban scenes, moody or discordant music, crowd scenes, famous people and a clever, cogent argument in an attempt to show the extent to which humanity has become entrapped by the IT revolution since the 1950s. It's a three part series and definitely worth every minute of your time. But, it's not only about computers...

For starters, in Part 1, I could easily relate to Curtis's slant on the link between the extreme socio-economic philosophy of Ayn Rand that helped to influence Alan Greenspan's view of the world before and after various financial calamities, and up to the catastrophe of 2008. All of which was only possible – a crucially important fact – by pervasive, global computer technology used by greedy and opportunistic bankers, speculators and investors, all acting in their own self-interest.

I can vouch for that, having been an insider with the online IT divisions of various banks in the UK and North America for fifteen years in the 1970s and 1980s. The standing joke in banks: you can't trust bankers. Wink, wink, nudge, nudge....

Part 2 debunks the idea that nature is in equilibrium or seeks to find equilibrium. Instead, nature is in a constant state of flux and change, chaotic and unpredictable – and hence dangerous. (And, like it or not, humanity is part of nature.) This should be obvious – think of daily weather patterns globally. Curtis here links the emerging social networks as analogous to the chaos of nature which, coupled with our cancerous over-dependency upon computer technology, can only result in more unpredictability, uncertainty and opportunity for disaster. It's more than likely, I think, that Curtis is correct. To what extent, ultimately, is obviously opaque.

Part 3 finishes the job in a somewhat elliptical fashion: you must follow the logic closely as we are introduced to an eminent scientist, [William D. Hamilton](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W._D._Hamilton) and a brilliant mathematical genius, [George R. Price](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_R._Price). They argued that the real culprit in our chaotic existence is The Selfish Gene, a description that is now the title of Richard Dawkins's book that made him famous globally (It's an interesting, persuasive book and worth reading.) Humanity is

then characterized as “soft” computer driven automata, explicitly removing the possibility of any spiritual or divine influence in human affairs. I can live with that, having decided long ago that we are all but organic machines with brains far, far superior to those “brains” of digital computers – thankfully. And the conclusion that crystallizes the essence of altruism – Ayn Rand’s mortal enemy – is a tour de force of ironic tragedy.

Graphically horrific images from recent depravities in Africa are interwoven to illustrate and prove the case; but it would totally spoil the finale to say anymore. (But, don’t worry – be happy as the computers continue to bring us closer to cybernetic Valhalla: because, just as Li’l Richard long ago screamed that The Girl Can’t Help It, neither can the rest of us. So: do just dance on, won’t you! ;))

Perhaps the editing of the series and some jump cutting are a mite fast at times; and the sound appears to fade occasionally. Apart from that, I highly recommend investing the three hours.

Is Curtis showing us heaven on earth? See the movie. You be the judge.

Rating: 9

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