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Curie's Children*

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On Science

Why is it that dogs aren't yet blue with red spots, and that horses don't yet radiate phosphorescent colors over the nocturnal shadows of the land? Why hasn't the breeding of animals, still principally an economic concern, moved into the field of esthetics? It's as if nothing in the relationship between humanity and the biological environment had changed since the life-style revolutions of the neolithic age. Yet at the same time that the farms of North America and Western Europe are today producing more food than we can consume, we also, not coincidentally, have learned techniques that ultimately make conceivable the creation of plant and animal species according to our own programs. Not only do we have mountains of butter and ham, rivers of milk and wine, but we can now make artificial living beings, living artworks. If we chose, these developments could be brought together, and farming could be transferred from peasants, a class almost defunct anyway, to artists, who breed like rabbits, and don't get enough to eat.

If you could make a film of the European landscape that covered the millennia of history but compressed them into a convenient half-hour for the comfort of the public, it would show the following story: first, a cold steppe, populated by large ruminant animals migrating northward in spring and southward in the fall, and followed by the beasts of prey, including humans, that hunted them. Then, an ever denser forest, inhabited by no-longer-nomadic peoples living and working in clearings kept open by the use of stone tools and fire. Then, a basically familiar scene of fields of edible grains, and pastures of edible animals, with occasional forests surviving as sources of newsprint. And if you could project your movie camera into the immediate future, you would see a continent-sized Disneyland full of people working very short weeks because of automation, and trying desperately to amuse themselves so as not to die of boredom. The question is, Who will be the Disney of the future? He or she might, I suggest, be a molecular biologist.

All the organisms of the Earth are colored. We all secrete dyes in our skins and these dyes have important functions supporting not only the individual (protective coloration) but also the species (sexual signals). We are now beginning to understand the chemical and physiological processes of these secretions, and to be able to formulate the laws that govern them. Molecular biologists may soon be handling skin color more or less as painters handle oils and acrylics. Then the internal dyes of animal and vegetable biology may acquire a crucial new use: they may help the human species to survive its boredom by filling the future-as-Disneyland with multicolored fauna and flora.

Please don't think this fanciful conceit. Instead, take scuba gear and a torch, and jump into a tropical ocean. Down deep you'll see fields and forests of plantlike creatures whose red, blue, and yellow tentacles sway with the currents, gigantic rainbow-colored snails trailing through the scenery, and swarms of silvery, gold, and violet fish overflying it. This is what our familiar terra firma may someday look like. It has almost become feasible to transfer the genetic information that programs deep-sea coloring into the inhabitants of the earth's surface. You might say that this painting of the future is a kind of land art, but of a much more complex type than the one we know. Instead of wrapping rocks in fabric or shoving them around with bulldozers, we may be able to compute and compose a complex living game.

There is a kind of potato that is pollenized by a single species of butterfly, which itself feeds exclusively on that potato. The butterfly may be said to be the potato's sexual apparatus, and the potato the butterfly's digestive system, the two forming a single organism. In this particular symbiosis, the butterfly's wing is exactly the same blue as the potato flower. The wing color results from the reflection of sunlight by minuscule mirrors, that of the flower from the transformation of chlorophyll, but nevertheless they match, the consequence of a complex evolutional chain of feedbacks and adjustments. The Disney of the future should be able to program such effects at will. He or she may perhaps compose an enormous color symphony, evolving spontaneously through endless variations (mutations), in which the color of every living organism will complement the colors of every other organism, and be mirrored by them. A gigantic living work of art, of a wealth and beauty as yet unimaginable, is definitely possible.

Today's environmentalists and ecologists, who stubbornly continue to call themselves "green", will object that a landscape transformed into a Disneyland, a work of art, will no longer be "natural." But consider: When they planted fields, they accelerated the artifice. The futures Disneyland will simply continue it. And anyway, why can't art inform nature? When we ask why dogs can't be blue with red spots, we're really asking about art's role in the immediate future, which is menaced not only by explosions both nuclear and demographic, but equally by the explosions of boredom.