Nature and Technology in David Mamet's The Water Engine

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SADRŽAJ/CONTENTS

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Nature and Technology in David Mamet's *The Water Engine*

Capitalism has become an everyday term in our modern lives. While the common perception is that growth, profit, and accumulation of all sorts are the most important factors for economy, this can only be so at the expense of some members of the society, most often the poorer laborers. The Water Engine, *a radio and theater play by US author and playwright David Mamet, puts its focus on one of these workers, Charles Lang, whose dream is to escape from the claws of capitalism. Thereby, the play offers a depiction of interdependence between nature and technology, which is recognized by Lang, but which he cannot achieve. My paper will first show the different functions nature and technology occupy respectively, which are not fully divided, but rather merge at the end. Nature, for Charles and his sister, forms a kind of a utopian place of refuge, whereas technology represents the capitalist ideas of progress and suppression. In the end, however, it becomes clear that both nature and technology, the latter belonging to culture, are a part of the web of life and are therefore inseparable. It is the aim of the play to criticize the obsolete dualism of nature and society and to open our minds to a collaboration of humankind and environment in order to construct hope for a better future.*

Key words: ecocriticism, capitalism, nature, technology, environment.

INTRODUCTION

David Mamet's play *The Water Engine*, which was first performed as a radio play in 1977 and successively adapted as a stage play, deals

with the urgent topic of the relation between society and nature by employing the theme of capitalism. It was first drafted as a short story, but not accepted for publishing (Callens 2004: 50). After that, Mamet turned the plot into a radio play, which was not only presented on the radio, but also shown as a radio play on stage, carrying the subtitle "An American Fable". Throughout the play, technology and nature are assigned different functions, according to the protagonists' views concerning these two terms. First, nature is portrayed through the eyes of the protagonist Charles Lang and even more through the eyes of his sister Rita, who has a deep connection to nature's idealistic, utopian side. While nature seems to be an independent sphere especially for the two lawyers Morton Gross and Lawrence Oberman who represent capitalist ideals, it is, however, deeply interconnected with man and culture. Technology, being a great and important part of capitalism in the play at hand, fulfills the capitalist functions of progress and of maintaining the status quo with the help of suppression. Although Charles Lang sees an interconnection of the two fields, he is unable to achieve a true cooperation. My analysis will show that all of the protagonists are still too focused on an obsolete binarity of nature and culture that has yet to be overcome. As technology is only used in order to amass more wealth, gain more profit, and thereby oppress the poorer, development towards a "greener", more environmentally friendly future is hindered. Literature here serves as a means of criticizing the contemporary (and also current) situation, suggesting in its basic thesis, as well as in the very title of the play, a coalescing of technology and nature in order to aim for the better future Rita and Charles hope for, but are denied.

"NATURE" AND "CULTURE"

As a first approach to the subject, it helps to have a look at the terms "nature" and "culture". How can such complex concepts be grasped? Both terms are part of our everyday life and are naturally employed in our common language use. Their typical definitions are indeed quite interesting to notice. Nature, most often, first describes forests, meadows, fields, as well as rivers and lakes, and hence forms a synonym to landscape or "natural scenery" ("Nature," Merriam-Webster.com). "Environment" is also often understood as a synonym to nature, which immediately makes us think of environmental

problems, as these are nowadays inextricably linked with the term "environment". The play at hand points to this connection as well by centering around an alternative energy source, an engine running on water. First and foremost, nature is defined as a construct[8] delimited from humanity. Nature melds "all the animals, plants, rocks, etc. in the world and all the features, forces, and processes that happen or exist independently of people" ("Nature," Dictionary.Cambridge.org). Thus, the fact that nature is untouched by the hand of humans, remaining in its native state, is important. Here, man is a representative of culture, the latter being based upon human existence, since it is defined as the "the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time" ("Culture," Dictionary.Cambridge.org). The opposing characters of nature and culture become clear: the first one exists independently of humankind and forms an independent "creative and controlling force in the universe" ("Nature," Merriam-Webster.com), whereas culture is indeed made by man.

While this opposition is not only plausible, but also seems to be necessary on a first approach to the concepts, a second glance at literary works dealing with this dualism raises the question whether the two concepts can really be separated from each other and if they can, how this can be done. Considering the matter in humanities, Gabriele Dürbeck and Urte Stobbe remark, "Obviously, 'nature' is still the 'other' to 'culture', even if the nature-culture-opposition is decidedly picked out as a construct again and again" (2015: 12). As nature forms the basis of all life, which means that humankind could not exist without it, culture as well owes its existence to nature. James W. Moore therefore suggests letting go of the formerly established dualism of nature and culture. Because "[t]he two acting units – humanity/environments – are not independent but interpenetrated at every level" (Moore 2015: 28), it would be better to talk of

[8] The term "construct" may sound artificial at first, which might contradict the notion of nature that is expressed here and its demarcation from culture. Choosing the word "construct", however, shall not indicate that nature itself is constructed. In fact, the choice is due to the attempt to verbalize the complex abstract term "nature". Language, then, is made by man and therefore a part of culture and artificial. So, the contradiction cannot be fully dissolved.

"humanity-in-nature, rather than […] humanity *and* nature" (Moore 2015: 35). Thinking back on the term "environment" as a synonym to nature, we can easily establish ties between nature and culture. Environment is, especially nowadays, a notion that is intimately connected to man and culture. Environment has to be protected by (and not seldom from) humans. This happens with the aid of cultural developments and inventions, for instance in the technological sector. Research in the field of renewable energy sources is an important topic here, as these sources work in cooperation with nature, preserving it instead of controlling, exploiting, and polluting it. Most often capitalism gets in the way of this urgent task, being solely focused on "the accumulation of capital" (Magdoff and Foster 2011: 38). The "exploitation of laborers" (Magdoff and Foster 2011: 38) that is such a normal part of capitalism is what Charles must face, too. In order to escape from this system, he and his sister Rita dream of leaving the city. First following the protagonists' convictions, my analysis will present the diverse characteristics nature and technology display respectively.

NATURE AS A UTOPIAN SPHERE

For Charles and Rita, the difference between countryside and city is a significant one. They do perceive nature as an opposite of the urban sphere they live in and where they feel trapped. Therefore, the siblings grasp nature as a utopian sphere. The term "utopia" basically stands for "(the idea of) a perfect society in which everyone works well with each other and is happy" ("Utopia," Dictionary.Cambridge.org). This meaning dates back to Thomas More's novel *Utopia*, published in 1516[9]. Derived from the Greek prefix "ou" and the Greek word "topos", utopia can be translated as "not-place", "no-where" (Klosa 2004: 885) and is therefore aimed at describing an unreal vision. Yet, a second point of view considering the translation of "utopia" comes into focus, because the Greek prefixes for "not" and "good" (*ou* and *eu*) are very close to each other, in written form as well as in the

[9] In this novel, More depicts an ideal society, not provoking any criticism at all. The common welfare is the most important factor so that the residents do not have any reason to be unhappy. More mainly wanted to criticize the conditions in England at the time.

English pronunciation[10]. This means that "utopia" can also be translated as "good place".

What is striking in applying these two meanings to *The Water Engine* is an absence of nature in direct form. The whole action of the play takes place within the city, that is to say a cultural sphere. None of the people ever leave it to resort to nature. This leads to quite a conventional opposition between city and countryside. Rita speaks about the feeling of losing control, which she definitely associates with life in the city and which affects very existential parts of her life, like her privacy and therefore also her well-being.

> RITA. … And privacy. You can't keep things out. This is what I thought: that when you live in here you can't control what comes in. Sounds come in. And fumes. From things you had no part in. … You can't control these things. (*Pause.*) That's why everyone should live out in the country. (Mamet 1977: 33)

She feels that the outside world intrudes into her private life and she is not able to defend herself against it while she still lives "in here" (Mamet 1977: 33), which is to say in the city, in her apartment. The "country" (Mamet 1977: 33), nature, is where she wants to escape to. The opposition between "in" and "out" is important in order to separate the existing circumstances from the visions of Charles' and Rita's dream. "In" does not only mirror the enclosed sphere of the city, connected to imprisonment because of its narrowness. The fact that Rita cannot design her life in the way she would like to reinforces the feeling of being caged. There are always things intruding her private sphere which are aggravating and disturbing. Rita can only specify these things as "[s]ounds [and] fumes" (Mamet 1977: 33), also due to her blindness.[11] "Out", on the other hand, belongs to the field of

[10] The two points of view date back to the writer Thomas More, who has already been mentioned. He thereby created a play of words in order to add an ambiguous aspect to the title of his novel *Utopia* (Geus 2011: 13).

[11] *The Water Engine* itself does not explicitly talk about Rita's blindness. There are hints to her need for help. Her neighbor Mrs. Varec, for instance, asks if she can get her something from the store, and Charles, too, is always quite worried about the well-being of his sister, who, as it seems, never leaves their shared apartment alone. The sentence "I think he stopped there by the window" (Mamet 1977: 33) can be read as a reference to her

nature and characterizes an open area, associated with freedom, vastness, and infinity. Hence, positive attributes are assigned to nature, whereas the city, opposing the rural area, is portrayed solely negatively.

Though Charles and Rita express their wish of owning a farm in the countryside, where they can sit out and raise animals (Mamet 1977: 23, 32), this vision is depicted very vaguely, so that the reader becomes unsure about whether the siblings have ever been in the country before. Charles himself asks his sister, "Have you been on a farm?" (Mamet 1977: 23) Although Rita approves this question, the ideal of a life on a farm is not padded any further and therefore does not gain in clarity. As Rita does not add any details to her imaginative perception, their dream does not become concrete, but always remains a "no-where", a personal utopia for Charles and her. Moreover, farming itself can be seen as a human intervention. Rita and Charles cannot fully let go of their own cultural backgrounds and it is shown that nature is still somehow connected to these influences. This illustrates Magdoff's point about capitalism, "It is capitalism's ethic, outlook, and internal values that we assimilate and acculturate to as we grow up." (2011: 38) Rita and Charles, too, are entangled in the web of capitalism and even their dream of becoming independent from it includes its traces.

In terms of the depiction of nature in *The Water Engine*, Rita's role has to be observed specifically. She is the one who, even more than her brother Charles, dreams of "their escape from their industrial urban prison" (Callens 2005: 80). Yet, her personality remains as vague for the reader and viewer as the vision of nature uttered by her. Lang occurs in different social roles – as inventor of a revolutionary technology which he wants to defend no matter what, making him an ambitious and courageous character; as caring brother who, above all, wants to afford his dependent sister a better life; as a helpful neighbor who assists the boy Bernie with repairing his toy airplane, simultaneously supporting his technical talent; last but not least as an unhappy, underpaid factory worker who feels forced to steal material

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blindness, since the window – often a motive of seeing and realization in literature – does not make it possible for her to see anything. In addition, in stage adaptations and in the film version of 1992, Rita is portrayed as a blind woman. Johan Callens broaches this theme, as well (2005: 48).

from his employer in order to fulfill his personal American dream. Rita, however, is always perceived as a dependent person, locally restricted. She is nearly solely met in her apartment, which also remains a vague and empty room, due to the lack of any descriptions. The impression of Rita that is conveyed by the play is fully limited to her connection to nature. This connection is in fact a more profound one, bearing a mystical component. When Rita first appears, she already utters sentences that suggest a foreshadowing of the following incidents. She intensely warns her brother not to trust Gross (Mamet 1977: 18). These sentences gain in importance retrospectively, after the reader becomes aware of the fact that consigning his idea to Gross is the first step towards Lang's persecution and the eventual murder of him and his sister. This kind of foreshadowing reappears at the beginning of the second act, when Rita explains, like in a meta-comment about the following action, "They're going to get him now. They're going to get him now. The whole thing will go down." (Mamet 1977: 40) Immediately afterwards, Lang scarcely escapes from two police officers, who obviously represent the powerful establishment just like Gross and Oberman. Only shortly after, Rita is abducted. The unspecific "they" is a typical hint at the helplessness in relation to superior power structures, indicating that Rita does not exactly know who comes after her and her brother, so she hardly has any chance to defend herself against them. The fact that Rita is the one to predict the fatal ending makes her character even more mystical, considering her blindness. She becomes a blind seer, whose glance is not distracted by the banalities of everyday life, but who is able to focus her thoughts on an unconscious, inherent power. This makes it possible for her to neglect the indifference of the city and to reestablish a connection to nature instead. This relation finally culminates in a kind of union of the siblings with nature, when their bodies are found "on a stretch of industrial lake frontage" (Mamet 1977: 58).

At this point, it is worth adding that David Murray of all people, the journalist Lang wanted to meet, is the one reporting the discovery of the dead bodies. Ironically, Murray now "meets" Lang, but without being aware of it. The truth is just within a striking distance, which is underlined by the dialogue between Murray and his secretary.

> SECRETARY: I thought that you were going to the zoo, for God's sake.
> MURRAY: Yeah, "they took my engine." Well he stood me up. I'm up here on these drowning deaths. (Mamet 1977: 58-59)

"He" is just one of those "drowning deaths". Murray does not assume a deeper meaning than that of a banal, daily crime. He is not able to unearth the truth: that the suppression of an alternative energy source, which might be beneficial to the common welfare and at the same time dangerous to the prevailing power system, is concealed. Therefore, the press, actually responsible for independent and clarifying news coverage, becomes an instrument of covering up, since the mundane report about the murder of two unidentified people can soon sink into oblivion. This also shows how powerful and influential the capitalist system already is.

"The cause of death in both cases appears to have been drowning," (Mamet 1977: 58) is what Murray explains in his coverage. This means that water, actually a significant part of reaching their dream of a better life, has become the Langs' cause of death. Whereas Lang could find a positive attribute in the power of water – that is to say an environmentally friendly way to generate energy – Gross and Oberman take advantage of this power in a violent way and therefore add a terrifying, brutal layer to it. As their death creates a union with nature which Charles and Rita could not reach during their lifetime, this somehow excuses them from their prison within the cultural sphere of the city. However, Gross and Oberman keep their supremacy and even intrude into the opposing field of nature. It becomes clear that the capitalist system will do anything to maintain its power. While Charles and Rita still perceive nature as a sphere separated from culture and city, capitalism already makes use of its elements. Technology here represents capitalist ideas, including progress and suppression.

TECHNOLOGY IN *THE WATER ENGINE*

Technology is a central theme in David Mamet's *The Water Engine*, which can already be deduced from the title, pointing to Charles Lang's invention. Therefore, the core of the play is this technological creation, which will, as Lang hopes, allow for a better future. This

indicates that technology forms a criterion for progress. Here, it is important to have a look at the boy Bernie who literally embodies the saying "Children are our future". Moreover, technology serves as an instrument of power, deployed by an influential economy whose supremacy is due to technological accomplishments and which does not flinch from using its authority as a means of suppression. In the course of the play, this is illustrated by the two lawyers Morton Gross and Lawrence Oberman, who act as representatives of capitalist ideals.

Technology as an indispensable criterion for progress

In the year of 1934, the USA was trying to manage and surmount the economy crises which had been caused by the so-called Black Tuesday, the beginning of the stock market crash in 1929. The 1920s, when "corruption, the misuse of power, and discrimination" (Karrer 2008: 93) were not unusual, were determined by the "predominance of the biggest corporations controlled by Rockefeller, Morgan and Mellon" (Karrer 2008: 94). The US government set up reforms aimed at regulating the economy[12] and hoped to regain the trust of the disappointed middle class and to strengthen the economy at the same time. Fulfilling the latter purpose required technological advancement especially.

In order to remain within the limits of this paper, it is necessary to look only shortly at the most important technical and technological innovations at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s. As it has already been mentioned in the preceding chapter, the automobile industry was of great importance. This is shown by the fact that "between 1920 and 1930 … the number of cars in the USA [rose] from 8 million to 23 million." (Heideking 2006: 233) The assembly line, developed further by Henry Ford, rendered great services in producing such a big amount of cars. The conveyor belt made it possible to cut down on time as well as on costs (FOCUS Online 2013, n. p.). Big factories were responsible for the production. Concerning *The Water Engine*, protagonist Charles Lang works in such a factory as well. It is not explicitly stated, however, whether the

[12] These reforms were part of the so-called "New Deal" which should encompass "every economic area" (Heideking 2006: 257, my transl.).

factory produces cars or parts of cars. In any case, the reader comes to know that low-paid worker Lang has to "run a punchpress" (Mamet 1977: 30). Charles Lang probably thinks of exactly these factories, when he tells patent lawyer Morton Gross about his invention, "There are no more factories. This engine. … It draws its power from the earth." (Mamet 1977: 22) Lang sees the potential of his water engine and believes that building and using it leads the way into a future not based on the predominance of big concerns.

The Chicago World Exposition in the years of 1933 and 1934, which explicitly praised the technical and technological progress, underlines the fictional work with a relevant historical context. This provides closeness to reality, suggesting that the story of *The Water Engine* could as well be a renarration of a true incident. The one hundred years after Chicago's foundation in 1833 were perceived as a "remarkable century, one in which the application of science to industry had brought profound changes in both the economic and cultural structure" ("A Century of Progress Records"). The topic of the World Exposition was based thereon, so that it circled around science and technology and was entitled "A Century of Progress Exposition".

A look at the fictional level reveals that here, too, the World Exposition is meant to point to a promising future, which can be reached with the help of technological innovation. People become aware of the fact that progress is inextricably linked to technology. Mr. Wallace, the owner of a candy shop, and his son Bernie are exemplary characters. The reader imagines Mr. Wallace as an elderly gentleman, being enthusiastic about the new technology, but not able to really understand it. He talks excitedly about the "Rocket Ship" (Mamet 1977: 19) shown in the exhibition and even urges Charles Lang to go and see it for himself. Yet, simultaneously, he cannot really comprehend that inventions like these have already been made and can be used.

> MR. WALLACE: You seen that thing that they have over at the Fair at the Hall of Science?
> LANG: What's that, Mr. Wallace?
> MR. WALLACE: The "Rocket Ship".
> …

> MR. WALLACE: Some of the things there, I cannot believe, that they've got in the Future.
> BERNIE: They're not only in the Future, Poppa.
> MR. WALLACE: No?
> BERNIE: Uh-*uh*, they've got 'em *now*. (Mamet 1977: 19)

In spite of this explanation by his son who is talented for mechanics, Mr. Wallace repeats himself shortly afterwards, as if the dialogue with Bernie had not taken place. He does not seem to be convinced at the end of their talk, either.

> MR. WALLACE: The "Rocket Ship"… some of those things in the Future I cannot believe.
> BERNIE: They're not just in the Future, Poppa.
> MR. WALLACE: No?
> BERNIE: Uh-*uh.* They've got 'em *now*, they're right there at the Fair, they've got 'em *now*.
> MR. WALLACE: They do?
> BERNIE: Yes.
> MR. WALLACE: Oh, and what makes you so smart? (Mamet 1977: 20)

Mr. Wallace represents one of many fair-goers who realize that a new, progressive future is linked with all the technological innovations and that the latter are necessary to reach the said future. Yet, he lacks the understanding necessary to become part of that future. Bernie, however, possesses "a good mind for mechanics" (Mamet 1977: 20) and thereby shows a talent which not only allows him to plunge into that future, but also presents him as a precursor. This is indicated by the fact that his father compares him to Charles Steinmetz, a well-known German-American mathematician and engineer, who lived at the beginning of the twentieth century. Merely tinkering with toy airplanes in the beginning (Mamet 1977: 19), Bernie eventually obtains a much bigger responsibility by receiving the construction plans for Lang's water engine via mail (Mamet 1977: 61). Thereby, future and progress, pointing towards a caring for the common good thanks to Lang's invention, literally lie in the hands of a child, Bernie.

Technology as an instrument of power

Besides its function as a criterion for progress, technology serves as an instrument to exert power. The prevailing capitalist system in Mamet's play is represented by patent lawyer Morton Gross, whom Lang seeks out for help in order to get a patent for his engine, as well as his colleague Lawrence Oberman, who finally threatens Lang and, along with Gross, kidnaps his sister Rita. On Lang's very visit in Gross' office, the reader gets an impression of how the lawyer treats disagreeable and "recalcitrant inventor[s]" (Mamet 1977: 13), whom he does not want to help, out of unnamed reasons. Although the man called "Postal Processor Inventor" has already arrived at Gross' business premises, asking the secretary for a personal conversation with Gross, the latter avoids meeting him face to face and has himself excused by his secretary, who seems to be used to getting rid of clients. First, she just makes him wait, then she denies his request to have an appointment. Eventually, she simply ignores his inquiries (Mamet 1977: 13, 16). The lawyer is only able to shun inconvenient clients thanks to technical equipment, namely an intercommunication system which makes it possible for him to have a simple and brusque "no" delivered, without adding any justification and without having to enter the anteroom.

> SECRETARY: (*Over intercom.*): The man with the postal processor is back.[13]
> GROSS: Tell him no. (Mamet 1977: 15)

Later, after Lang's laboratory has been destroyed, the secretary tries to prevent Charles from entering into Gross' office, but he simply ignores her objections and virtually storms into the room (Mamet 1977: 34). This implies Charles' efforts to overcome the given level of power. He subsequently intensifies these efforts by addressing a newspaper reporter in order to have his story published. When it

[13] For Gross, it is indeed important not to know the man's real name. This anonymity makes it possible for the lawyer not to see the man as an individual with his own wishes, problems and an own fate, but to merely turn his attention to the profitability of the inventions. So, Gross can adamantly refuse them as and when required.

becomes clear that he is not able to meet the journalist, Lang looks for another way through which he does not have to accept the prevalent order and finds it by sending his plans via mail. Before this happens, however, Lang and the two lawyers face each other as opposing characters. The protagonist is depicted as a plain, weak worker bowing to the power structures and suffering from them. He is definitely aware of the fact that he occupies a lower position. This is why he wants to compensate for his powerlessness by trying to bind Gross by contract when they first meet (Mamet 1977: 14). Per se, this idea shows that Lang has thoroughly thought about a way to tackle the problem of being inferior and that he knows about the danger of trusting strange people, as well. This is what his sister Rita emphasizes forcefully, "You must be careful. You don't know these people, Charles." (Mamet 1977: 18) Yet, Lang acts in a naïve manner, whereupon Gross even points, "And if you couldn't trust me what good would your contract be?" (Mamet 1977: 14) Thanks to his status, it would be a waltz to break the verbal contract with Lang without having to fear any consequences – and that's exactly how it goes at the end. Instead of helping Lang, the two lawyers not only murder him, but his sister as well. Reporter Dave Murray is only able to give some imprecise information about the murder, and the question of the identity of the two bodies remains to be solved, too. These facts suggest that Gross and Oberman cannot be identified as perpetrators. Nevertheless, when Lang first talks to Gross, he still believes in some basic rules. It does not even cross his mind that these rules might not be obeyed. "There is a way things are," (Mamet 1977: 14) is what he tells Gross. At the end, he is disabused.

Interestingly, the lawyers do not follow the aim to "develop and produce and market [the engine] in as economic and efficient a manner as possible; and in so doing make great profits" (Mamet 1977: 29), which Oberman expresses to Lang. In truth, they fear heavy profit losses and a redistribution of power, should the invention really become public. Therefore, they decide to destroy the water engine as well as the construction plans in order to deprive the society of the knowledge about such an innovation. Withholding this technology forms a kind of suppression, too. Gross and Oberman dispose of Lang and his sister, so the exclusive knowledge about the existence of the water engine remains with them (at least, this is what they think, they do not know about the mail Bernie receives). True to the motto

"Knowledge is power", they hope to keep their superior positions. In doing so, they act in an exceedingly capitalist manner.

The importance of technology in *The Water Engine* also becomes apparent when looking at the historical background of the Chicago World's Fair, which generates a frame around the whole play. In the beginning, the actors get together in order to present a slightly changed and shortened version of the State Song of Illinois[14] (Mamet 1977: 11). After that, an announcer presides over the commencement of the action, welcoming people to the "Century of Progress Exposition" (Mamet 1977: 11). The line "Chicago, 1934. The Century of Progress" (Mamet 1977: 11) follows, telling the reader when and where the play takes place. Thereby, the entire following action is subordinated to the idea of the "Century of Progress", taken from the title of the real World Expo. Although the Fair is alluded to in the course of the events, mainly by Mr. Wallace, it comes to the fore even more when Lang stays there before meeting Gross and Oberman for the last time. Lang meets a barker at the "Hall of Science" and tells him of his invention. This barker, finally, ends the action, uttering the words, "The Fair is closing. Those who wish a re-entry to the Hall at half price, see me for a ticket. This is our last tour tonight. They're good tomorrow, though" (Mamet 1977: 61). Therefore, the Chicago World's Fair encompasses the core of the play like a frame. Since the Fair centers around technology, *The Water Engine* is embedded in this subject matter, as well.

NATURE AND TECHNOLOGY IN THE WEB OF LIFE

Mamet's work clearly criticizes the capitalist basis of growth and accumulation at any cost. Making use of technology for capitalist purposes hinders progress and development that would contribute to an eco-friendly as well as human-friendly future. Looking back to the

[14] The song focuses on the city of Chicago, the place of action in *The Water Engine*. The city is attributed with the features "great and free", which do not appear again later in the text. Rather, it is built on corruption and the abuse of power, so that these words, standing before the main action, can be seen as an ironic meta-comment. It is also interesting that elements of nature are named as well in the song, which creates a connection between nature and city. See Chapter 4 for more information.

very beginning of the play discussed here, namely, the title *The Water Engine*, the interdependence of nature and technology becomes clear. The title already combines both elements. The actual utopian ideal is positioned ahead of the text, even before being incorporated into the contents of it: nature and technology go hand in hand. Surely, there is no place for superior and oppressive concerns in a utopian society connecting nature and culture, so they can be seen as losers in this new social order. Technology itself, however, is not affected by this. Mankind can profit from further development, gaining insight into aspects hitherto unknown. Culture would change insofar as the common welfare, instead of profit, power, and suppression, would be at the center of interest. Such a cultural sphere would leave room for nature, too, because it would be respected and protected.

The invention shows that a deeper connection with nature, like the one Charles and Rita dream of, can only be reached by making use of technology. The siblings think that the water engine will make factories redundant and that it will provide them with the opportunity to own a farm in the country (Mamet 1977: 23). The engine, a technological innovation, is fuelled by hydrogen, a natural component. Lang's first words in the play already point to a relation between nature and science,

> LANG: The techniques of chemistry should not be difficult. We are all made of chemicals. We are the world in this respect. … All things come from hydrogen. They all come from the earth. As we do. We are made of molecules. We are the world in this respect. (Mamet 1977: 11)

Due to this realization, Lang is able to construct the water engine. As "[a]ll things come from hydrogen" (Mamet 1977: 11), energy can be generated by it, too. Lang himself is the one fusing nature and technology. Lang's antagonists Gross and Oberman are only interested in technology and his sister Rita only focuses on nature as a place of refuge, but Lang really sees a potential for improving technology with the aid of nature – and for helping nature by applying technology. Still, he is not able to fully let go of the old thinking in binary terms, tending towards nature as an opposite to his urban life instead of accepting both elements as combined in the web of life. He thereby functions as a link between "the civilizational system and its

exclusions" (Zapf 2016: 114) which are brought together by literature "in new, both conflictive and transformative ways" (Zapf 2016: 114). "This symbolic reintegration of the excluded into the cultural system … sets off conflictive processes and borderline states of crises and turbulence" (Zapf 2016: 120), which, in the case of *The Water Engine*, leads to Charles' and Rita's deaths. A connection between the "basic ecological dimensions of nature and culture" (Zapf 2016: 114) is reestablished, but it cannot (yet) be put into effect and therefore remains stuck at a theoretical level.

The fact that Charles Lang possesses an extraordinary role becomes even more evident, bearing in mind that he breaks the chain of the chain letter that reoccurs as a voice-over throughout the play. Brenda Murphy sees the "chain letter as a metonym of the American dream" (2011: 71) due to the "idea of something out of nothing" (Roudané 2001: 46) the letter promisingly spreads. Surely, this is one of the traits attributed to the chain letter. As Lang does not pass the letter on in its circulating function, it is suggested that the protagonist fails to fulfill his American dream. By addressing it specifically to Bernie instead of passing it on to "the person whose name appears at the top of the list" (Mamet 1977: 23), Lang suspends the circle of the chain letter. Therewith, the latter fails to fulfill its purpose of making the American dream possible in a permanently circulating manner. At the same time, the chain letter takes on a structuring function by reappearing throughout the text, interspersing the fictional story about the water engine with real elements in order to proclaim closeness to reality that, in fact, does not exist[15]. All in all, the letter links the events around Charles Lang with the "urban legends circulated by the Chainletter" (Callens 2005: 41), as the story itself finally becomes part of the chain letter and therefore constitutes such a legend, as well.

The fact that the alternative energy source is water and the technical medium is an engine hints at another commonality. Water is

[15] The chain letter, for instance, draws on names like Stanford White and Charles Lindbergh. Both men experienced a sad and cruel fate. White was murdered, Lindbergh lost his son, who was first kidnapped and then killed. In the play, it is said that "[b]oth broke the chain" (Mamet 1977: 13), which is, of course, a fictional truth only. Yet, it is interesting to notice that Lindbergh really got blackmail letters, which constitutes a rather morbid parallel to the chain letter in the play.

part of a natural cycle, which recurs over and over again, never ceasing. Combustion engines work in so-called cyclic processes, too, as "in the technical world, nearly every form of energy conversion takes place in certain kinds of processes called cyclic processes" (Labuhn and Romberg 2011: 151). The utopian ideal that is proclaimed should have no ending, so that the better world can endure, like in a cycle. Yet, at the moment, capitalist thinking gets in the way of establishing a future which Charles and Rita would also embrace as worth living. As long as representatives like Gross and Oberman only try to accumulate their wealth, neither caring for their fellow human beings, nor for the planet and environment they inhabit, both nature and technology are caught in the web of a capitalist system bound to exploitation and suppression.

CONCLUSION

Nature and technology are clearly linked in *The Water Engine.* It has been shown that each of the two displays its own characteristics. Technology, for instance, is a necessary criterion concerning progress. In order to illustrate this function, the historical background of the play, the Chicago World's Fair in the years of 1933 and 1934 with its motto of technological innovation, has been explored specifically. A reference to the future lies in the "technologically minded boy Bernie" (Price 2008: 30) who receives the construction plans for the engine which is also the title of Mamet's play at hand. What Bernie makes of them, however, is not part of the play anymore. Moreover, technology is to be seen as an instrument of power, making it possible for the "industrial concerns" (Price 2008: 30) to act in a suppressive manner. Here, the roles of the lawyers Gross and Oberman have been examined. The influence technology exerts on daily life is underlined by the fact that the World Exposition frames the whole action of *The Water Engine.* Nature, on the other hand, is idealized and, in connection with Rita, mystified. The vague conception the reader gets of nature corresponds to the vague impression Rita leaves. Here, it also fits that nature is portrayed as a utopian sphere since such a utopian vision is normally out of reach and therefore never fully imaginable. Reaching the utopian ideal of a better, fairer society in the future would still only be possible through a non-capitalist cooperation of nature and technology. This is at present primarily

dreaded and prevented by the big corporations, as they fear to lose power and profit. Capitalism, at the moment, weighs far more than the problems and sorrows of individuals, and also than concerns in environmental issues. The failure at the end, however, "should not entirely be blamed on the world's ostensible forces of evil [since] Lang's invention represents a naïve belief in illusory solutions and as such figures as one of the urban legends circulated by the Chainletter" (Callens 2005: 41). A complex re-thinking would be necessary in order to achieve a real change within society. *The Water Engine*, in all its own complexity, offers an impulse for this.

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