Reyner Banham once claimed that he had learned to drive in order to read Los Angeles in the original. In 1935, Pravda correspondents Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov drove an almost complete circuit around the United States, in search of the ‘real America’. That this meeting of future irreconcilables should seem unusual is somewhat anachronistic. Consider, for instance, the inception of the very term ‘Leninism’, not to mention its codification into a recognisable doctrine in a series of lectures delivered by the Bolshevik General Secretary in 1924 to the young technocrats brought into the party in the posthumous ‘Lenin Levy’, later published as *Foundations of Leninism*. In amongst the more expected disquisitions on party practice and morality, or appeals to the saintly leader, is the enshrining of a curious and under-investigated element of the Leninist corpus, namely what was occasionally called Taylorism or Fordism, but more simply Amerikanism. This was not limited to the ruling clique of the USSR, some sort of statement of intent of the nomenklatura; in his 1926 *Culture and Socialism*, Trotsky was claiming that the ‘Soviet system shod with American technology will be socialism’ – a conjunction that would define the new society: ‘it will transform our order, liberating it from the heritage of backwardness, primitiveness and barbarism’. It is with this conjunction in mind that we should appraise this republishing of a frequently rapturous travelogue, written from inside a Ford and photographed with a Leica. Indeed, by 1935, it might have seemed like the USSR was the true harbinger of modernisation, with the USA languishing under the Depression and the USSR ‘dizzy with success’ at its forced industrialisation.

**A stomach of stone and iron**

The accepted view of Bolshevism and ‘Americanism’ as eternal enemies, coloured by the red scares and most obviously by the Cold War – the suicidal race where militarily and economically the USA is the adversary to be ‘overtaken and outstripped’ – is encapsulated by a little book published by Moscow’s Foreign Languages Publishing House in 1949. Wrapped inside a cover which depicts a poker-faced New York City cop, truncheon in hand, grimly defending an elevated railway and the looming Rockefeller Centre while disconsolate proletarians hang their heads in the background, Maxim Gorky’s *In America* is a reprint of a series of articles written in 1906 on a sojourn in New York by the young Bolshevik playwright and novelist. Gorky was not impressed by New York. The skyscrapers did not move him. In the most memorable of the essays, the apocalyptic maelstrom of ‘The City of the Yellow Devil’, Capital’s inhumanity is underlined by a furious fairytale

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1. Stalin 1941, p. 112.
anthropomorphism – high-tech industrial capitalism is personified as a dragon, a dinosaur, or as an exotic and terrifying beast, consuming and spitting out the worker for its own self-perpetuating jouissance. America here is irredeemable, a lesson only in abject mechanised brutality and the depths to which bourgeois society has sunk.

Before we move onto some rather more nuanced American travelogues, it is worth immersing ourselves for a while in Gorky’s corrosive scorn. Here, the ‘ichthyosaurs of capital’\(^3\) preside over a landscape both prehistoric and futuristic: ‘Dark soundless skyscrapers, square, without any desire to be beautiful . . .’. Here, we have Capital with its mask off, forcing into its maw every level of human life, much as in the personified Moloch of Lang’s *Metropolis*, itself inspired by a trip to New York. The proletariat is ‘nourishment for the city monster’,\(^4\) which harvests it in an enormous mechanisation of the human body:

> thrusts and pushes thousands of sounds into their ears, flings fine biting dust into their ears, blinds them, and deafens them with a long-drawn out, unceasing howl . . .

There is no emancipatory potential here in advanced technology, merely a mass mechanical slavery. Gorky notes that the American proletariat seem oddly unknowing of how horrible this fate is, going about their daily business unperturbed.

To connect this to proselytising on behalf of ‘Leninist Taylorism’, we could consider how Jean-François Lyotard’s *Libidinal Economy* suggests a kind of assent between the machines and the workers, a co-operation in this remaking of the body that so terrifies Gorky. The Taylor system demonstrates a total and precise remaking, a rationalisation at the level of the minorest bodily functions rather than the excrescences of Gorky’s yellow devil, becoming the ‘object of intelligence and decision-making at the level of the labourer’s “body”’.\(^5\) In this sense, the transition between Bolshevik humanism and futurism can be read in terms of the jouissance of industry suggested by Lyotard with reference to the English proletariat:

> in the foundries, in the factories, in hell, they enjoyed the mad destruction of their inorganic body which was indeed imposed on them, they enjoyed the decomposition of their peasant identity.\(^6\)

When this is taken up by those in mainly rural countries facing a similar confrontation with the machine, the response is not so much resistance as infatuation.

Though Lenin had described Taylorism in 1914 as ‘Man’s Enslavement by the Machine’ in an eponymous *Pravda* article, post-Revolution we find him advocating ‘the study and teaching of the Taylor system and systematically trying it out and adapting it to our own ends’.\(^7\) On the artistic front, in 1921 we have the ‘Manifesto of the Eccentric Actor’, proclaiming not that Soviet Russia turn East, but turn yet further West; Europe was dead, and only a harnessing of the USA to the USSR held out any hope:

\(^3\) Gorky 1949, p. 11.
\(^4\) Gorky 1949, p. 12.
\(^7\) Lenin 1970, p. 663.