

Bruno Latour. *Aramis, or the Love of Technology*. Translated by Catherine Porter. (Harvard University Press, 1996) reviewed in *AMERICAN SCIENTIST* 85 (March/April 1997): 196.

In his latest book, Bruno Latour offers the reader a high-technology murder mystery. “Who killed Aramis?” he asks. Quickly, we are immersed in the intrigues of modern-day Paris. Communist ministers and Gaullist mayors, private executives and subway bureaucrats, all proclaim their innocence and good will. The backdrop includes the famous state-driven technologies, Concorde, Ariane, Airbus, TGV. In time, we confront the technical intricacies of nonmaterial coupling schemes and multi-centered control systems. Aramis began life in some identifiable form in 1970, and was terminated in October 1987. There was a dead body, but it is not a human one. The death Latour reports on is of a high-technology project, an “arrangement in automated trains of independent modules in stations.” In the French acronym, Aramis.

From the 1960s onward a scheme for personal rapid transit was a compelling vision. Forget traffic jams, tight parking, ill-tempered drivers. Instead, enter Aramis at any one of numerous convenient stations, board a small enclosed car and punch in your destination, then sit back and let the automated control system take over. Along the way, your car might temporarily join with others, boosting the carrying capacity of the line. Other cars in your virtual train branch off. Your car arrives, without stopping and without transfers, at the destination you chose. This vision of Aramis, we now can see, physically embodied the network concept of “packet switching,” but then it was an original, brilliant conception. Transportation planners, executives of a leading French military contractor, the Paris rapid transit agency, and a legion of engineers all sought to realize this vision. But a vision it remained.

Was Aramis then a futuristic concept, a politics-laced R&D project, or just an old-fashioned boondoggle? Latour professes agnosticism. At the least Aramis was not an incremental improvement but a fresh idea demanding radical technical innovation. How would the 600 driverless cars know where they were and how to proceed? Vaulting this technological frontier appealed to the principal contractor, Matra, a French high technology company with expertise in military systems, telecommunications, and automobiles. Aramis also promised a series of handsome R&D contracts while Matra struggled to commercialize another, simpler automated transit system. The Paris rapid-transit agency hoped Aramis might help it regain from the upstart provinces its technological leadership. For a time, before plans for the 1989 World’s Fair in Paris were shelved, city officials promoted Aramis as a dazzling technological centerpiece, another Eiffel Tower. Still, one by one its promoters fell by the wayside, and the technical problems persisted longer than the budget, some half billion French francs (say \$100 million) over fifteen years. When it appears this effort may yield only a set of well-designed seats, one of Latour’s voices offers the damning epitaph: “The most expensive armchair in the history of technology.” [p. 277]

In breathing Aramis to life, Latour aims not only to offer lessons to the public and policymakers. He also intends to bridge the “separated universes” of culture and

technology, of (as he puts it) our technology-bare intellectual life and our technology-rich existence. To humanists comfortable with interpreting texts, he suggests that adding interpretations of machines will reveal a richer and denser culture. To technicians comfortable with building machines, he suggests that adding awareness of human beings, interacting with and molded by those machines, will foster richer and more holistic thinking about them. But how to achieve these goals? In the epilogue the thinly disguised author-as-sociology professor declares his desire to do a book about Aramis with “no metalanguage, no master discourse” and in which multiple genres -- sociological commentary, bureaucratic dossier, interview transcripts, and fictional dialogue -- are at the same interpretive level. Thus this book deploys four typefaces to distinguish its four voices. (Five if you include the voice of Aramis itself, declaiming lines cribbed from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.) For those of postmodern humor, Latour’s *Aramis* will entertain and delight. His witty, irreverent, and oddly passionate style will draw readers to his earlier books, especially *Science in Action* (1987), *The Pasteurization of France* (1988), and *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993). There they will find Latour as sociologist, historian, and philosopher presenting in more orthodox style the ideas and methods embedded in *Aramis*.

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