The Gothic cathedrals of Medieval and Renaissance Europe were designed to inspire awe in churchgoers and make the congregation feel closer to God. The cathedrals served an important cultural purpose in directing the way people thought about the authority behind them and encouraged a reverent attitude from all those who saw them. Constructing the cathedrals with their high ceilings, open halls, and windowed walls was a significant engineering feat. It required innovations such as the pointed arch, ribbed vault, and flying buttress to create a sturdy yet spacious structure.

In much the same way, the North Korean regime uses their military arms as a cultural display. Like the ancient cathedrals, North Korea’s weapons are meant to be a public spectacle that inspires awe in their populace and reinforces the authority of the regime behind them. In order to accomplish this, the Korean government carries out carefully-planned elaborate military parades, and uses the testing of new arms as an occasion for national celebration. The purpose of North Korea’s arms is only partially utilitarian. Their repeated celebrations of clearly unsuccessful military tests and parades of outdated missiles show that the government is much more concerned with creating the desired image, than they are concerned with the actual usefulness of their weapons.

Cities in Europe would compete to build the largest cathedral in order to establish their reputation, just as North Korea feels the need to build up and show off its weapons as a means of establishing legitimacy and respect in the international community. Additionally, the cathedrals did not all represent a new engineering innovation. Once the pointed arch, for instance, was first used in Europe, it quickly spread across the continent and became widely used in cathedrals. Likewise, North Korea’s military weapons are not innovative, but they are an importation and adaption of a current technology.

Andrew, I agree that music boxes are similar to the automata described in the reading. Both serve a rather frivolous purpose meant solely for passing entertainment. I think that the appeal in both of them lies in their whimsicalness. Neither a music box nor the automata described by the reading are particularly useful, but yet people are still fascinated by the intricate workings of both devices. Both are of a somewhat fantastical air and conjure up images of magic and enchantment. I think your reference to modern soda and beer taps is also interesting. The soda guns that some restaurants are investing in appeal to people delight for technology as much or more than their purely utilitarian advantages.

Shelby, I agree that the displays put on by the hosts countries of the Olympics games are a great example of engineering used as a cultural display. The London Olympics, like the Beijing ones, used the latest in theatre and special effects technology to create a display for the purpose of impressing visitors as well as those watching on television. Likewise, the Olympic village created purely for the enjoyment of tourists is specially designed to create the desired atmosphere and to impart the desired image to those watching from around the world. Hosting the Olympics serves as an important opportunity for countries to gain publicity and influence their image worldwide.

Kory, I like how you compare boat manufacturers’ efforts to outdo each other to the European towns’ efforts to build the biggest or tallest cathedrals. I suppose it is the same way in any industry where manufacturers come out with new model every year, such as the automobile and computer industries. The manufacturers are always looking for small changes or improvements that they can make and market in order to get a small edge over their competitors. They rarely come up with breakthrough innovations and usually don’t make major changes to their designs, but are always making small changes that cumulatively add up to substantial differences over time.

James, your comparison between cars as a personal status symbol of affluence and gothic cathedrals as a symbol of a town’s prominence is very interesting. I was mostly thinking of the question in terms of a cultural display for an entire society. However, I like how you thought of it being used as a display for an individual. It certainly seems true that people do use cars in order to show off and are looking for the latest models or features for to one-up others. It’s often silly little features that we latch onto the most simply because we are able to talk about how unique they are.

Tyler, your comparison to the space initiative seems spot-on to me. The space race between the United States and the Soviet Union is akin to the implicit competitions between neighboring towns to build the largest and tallest cathedrals. The space program was definitely a cultural display meant to impress and frighten the people of the Soviet Union while reinforcing Americans’ confidence in their government. It also was absolutely a feat of engineering because the space program required developing new technology and employing large amounts of engineering man-power for the sole purpose of advancing the race between the US and USSR. There was not a very large utilitarian purpose to the space initiative and it seems doubtful that so many resources would have been devoted to it if not for the cold war.

Robert, I enjoyed your post about the Olympic stadium and the use of fireworks in particular. I agree that the Olympics serve as an important opportunity for the host country to show off and affect its public image globally. I suppose the games themselves also allow countries to show off through the capabilities of their athletes. Fireworks seem like a particularly strong example of engineering as a cultural display because a lot of technical effort has to go into designing the pyrotechnics of a fireworks display just for a show that lasts only on the scale of minutes. At least other displays such as architecture or statues last for years or centuries, but a fireworks display exists only in the moment.