Better Than a Plant

In Wendell Berry’s “Why I Am Not Going to Buy A Computer,” the prospect of shifting from pencil to digital is contemplated, although from only one side of the spectrum. If using computers constitutes a “rape of nature,” by using that same logic, we may as well sleep on a dirt floor to mitigate the detrimental effects that our fellow human beings bring forth. It is true that new innovations are creating a divide between our family, friends, and everyday interactions, along with the fact that they aren’t improving and promoting the economical and political atmosphere that Berry wishes for. Despite that, the list of standards that Berry has comprised sets the bar entirely too high for anything but a plant to achieve. As a farmer, this makes sense. Although it would be folly to “fool” ourselves into thinking that technological innovations bring humankind closer, it reveals many fallacies in Berry’s mindset due to the fact that his expectations are simply not about efficiency.

Berry, in his nine-point list, walks us through his standards for what is considered innovation. He talks about how a “new tool should be cheaper than the one it replaces” (Berry 32). New tools aren’t always cheaper because it is better than the previous model so it makes sense that it should be more valuable, since newer models are more efficient. He also talks about how a new tool “should be repairable by a person of ordinary intelligence, provided that he or she has the necessary tools.” Not a lot of people know about a new item when it comes out so not everyone has the item. Therefore, if there is a fewer percentage of the population who owns the item, then the intelligence to repair the item is also not as widespread.Efficiency does not seem to be what Berry’s standards are after.

To be fair, it is agreeable that TVs and computers do not quite meet Berry’s list of standards. The use of innovations, especially in war, usually don’t bring peace. In the movie *WarGames* by John Badham, the computer was able to gain a level of human intelligence which was capable of replacing the “old model,” (32) but not capable of gaining the same emotions as a human. However, if placed in the right hands, technology could bring about a kind of peace. For example, in the hands of Mahatma Gandhi, a widespread diffusion of his anti-violence preachings would occur. This equates to more people reading peaceful things.

Berry’s argument states that the idea of technological innovations making his writing “demonstrably better” (32) is foolishly flawed, but he fails to add the efficiency of these technological advancements into the equation. Vegetation is the only thing able to live up to his standards. By using a computer, his works, edited by his wife, are still his own; it is simply created more efficiently. To even marginally improve in his craft, Berry must acknowledge the professional benefits computers hold for composing a unique writing style.