1 Homo Faber

1.1 The plot

In the 1930’s, Walter Faber, who works at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH Zurich), meets the art student Hanna. She is partially a Jew. The two become lovers. Hanna gets pregnant. Faber does not seem to like responsibility and refers to the unborn baby as your child. Faber asks Hanna to marry him. But Hanna can not forgive him for saying your child. She refuses. Then his travels start. Before they part they decide that she would abort the baby. He also has a close friend (at that time) who was a learning mate name Joachim. He asks Joachim to look for Hanna. Hanna, that is half Jewish can not stand Joachim at start, since he is a German, even though Faber assures Hanna that Joachim is not a Nazi. As typical for Faber throughout, he does not keep in touch neither with Joachim nor with Hanna. Reflecting back he thinks it was not practical to marry because he earned little money. And he held a lucrative offer from Bagdad, but Hanna wont come with him to this city.

Faber worships technology and tries to control all aspect of his life using it. Even when strange things happen.

Faber: I dont deny that it was more than a coincidence which made things turn out as they did, it was a whole train of coincidences. But what has providence to do with it? I dont need any mystical explanation for the occurrence of the improbable; mathematics explains it adequately, as far as Im concerned.
Faber flies to Baghdad and he and Hanna split up. Hanna is the one that nicks names him *Homo Faber*.

As Faber who dislikes art says: *I called her a sentimentalist and artsy-craftsy. She called me Homo Faber.*

In one of his plain rides from New York to Mexico, the plain makes a stop in Houston. Faber does not feel well, looks pale and sick and does not want to continue the ride. His vision is blare. He tries to hide but a lady flight attendant finds him and makes him board the plain. This is in fact the first part of the book (the story about Hanna comes later). In the way to Mexico city one of the engine falters. And then another one (out of four). They are forced to crash land the plain in the Mexican desert. He meets a German man called Herbert. In this stop Faber describes his ideology. He can use technology in order to plan any aspect of his life.

In an amazing coincidence, Herbert, the man who he befriended in the desert, turns out to be the brother of Joachim, Faber’s friend from school days. It turned out that Joachim was married to Hanna in the past. She overcame the fact that he is German. Faber had not heard from his friend since 1936 (it’s 1957 now). The planetarium where Joachim works does not answer any message by Herbert for ten days. Is it a failure of technology? They decide to go and check.

They need to get inside the jungle. They arrive to some village and wait for a car that will take them to the planetarium, where Joachim works.

Faber complains about the hit. He dislikes the primitive rituals of the Mayan tribes, especially when the celebrate the full moon. The waiting is exhaustive. It’s hot and humid.

At the end a car arrives but there are no roads leading to the planetarium. So its terribly hard to get to it even with a car. Unfortunately, they find that Joachim had hanged himself, Herbert decides to stay and continue the work of his brother. Faber goes back to New York (rather than heading to Mexico). He has a lover Ivy that wants to marry him, but Faber refuses. Ivy is married herself.

Looking to escape their relationship, Faber takes an unplanned cruise to Europe. On this journey, he meets the young art student called Elisabeth whom he falls in love with. He calls her Sabeth since she deserves a special name. This name sounds similar to Sabat, the holly day for the Jews. Faber actually proposes to her but she refuses.

Coincidence strikes again. Faber and Sabeth meet again in Paris, Faber, against his nature plans an art tour in Italy and Greece. In the second trip their relation becomes sexual. Faber even calls the trip their ”honeymoon”. They create a game related to art. Sabeth is better at the game, Walter tries. Art requires imagination and Faber is not great in that.
Faber asks Sabeth for the name of her mother: Hanna. Faber thinks that Hanna aborted their child. But in a great shock, it turns out that Sabeth is his daughter. I was very startled at the age of 16 with a story about a father sleeping with his daughter. They decide to visit Hanna that now lives in Greece (before that she escaped to Paris).

They do not go directly to Hanna. They visit the ocean first. In Greece, where Hanna now lives.

Sabeth stands on a small hill, and Faber walks out naked from the water. A snake bytes Sabeth and this with the surprise of seeing naked Faber makes Sabeth fall on her back from the hill. She fractures her scull in the fall.

She is rushed to the hospital by Faber. There he meets his former love Hanna again. A very annoying coincidence happens: Sabeth is cured from the snakebite. However she suddenly dies due to an untreated fracture. Faber never told Hanna on the fall that Sabeth took. Faber feels guilty.

Stricken by grief and stomach cancer, Faber realizes the beauty he has missed and finds redemption in Hanna. It is not to be. Faber is in a hospital facing an operation for his stomach cancer; he optimistically calculates the probability for his survival, and makes his last journal entry. But even though the probability that he will live seems to have been quite high, he dies.

2 Some remarks

2.1 Technology versus humanity

The meaning of the title is:

*Human beings are able to control their fate and their environment as a result of the use of tools.*

Walter Faber is almost more like a machine than a human. Here is what he says on relationships. *Being alone is the only possible condition for me since I don’t want to make a woman unhappy, and women have a tendency to become unhappy. Being alone isn’t always fun, you can’t always be in form. Moreover, I have learned from experience that once you are not in form women don’t remain in form either; as soon as they are bored they start complaining you’ve no feeling. Feeling is not the strong suit of Faber.*

In fact the way Faber thinks elevates technology more than anything: In the desert he says:

Faber: *I’ve often wondered what people mean when they talk about an experience.* Faber states here that he does not understand when people feel strongly on something
Faber: I'm a technologist and accustomed to seeing things as they are. I see everything they are talking about very clearly; after all, I'm not blind. I see the moon over the Tamaulipas desert—it is more distinct than at other times, perhaps, but still a calculable mass circling around our planet, an example of gravitation, interesting, but in what way an experience?

Again Faber feels nothing when he sees the moon.

Faber: I see the jagged rocks, standing out black against the moonlight; perhaps they do look like the jagged backs of prehistoric monsters, but I know they are rocks, stone, probably volcanic, one should have to examine them to be sure of this.

He ignores the beauty of stones and give a scientific explanation of those stones.

Faber: Why should I feel afraid? There aren't any prehistoric monsters any more. Why should I imagine them? I'm sorry, but I don't see any stone angels either; nor demons; I see what I see—the usual shapes due to erosion and also my long shadow on the sand, but no ghosts. Why get womanish? I don't see any Flood either, but sand lit up by the moon and made undulating, like water, by the wind, which doesn't surprise me; I don't find it fantastic, but perfectly explicable. I don't know what the souls of the damned look like; perhaps like black agaves in the desert at night. What I see are agaves, a plant that blossoms once only and dies. Furthermore, I know (however I may look at the moment) that I am not the last or the first man on earth; and I can't be moved by the mere idea that I am the last man, because it isn't true. Why get hysterical? Mountains are mountains, even if in a certain light they may look like something else, but it is the Sierra Madre Oriental, and we are not standing in a kingdom of the dead, but in the Tamaulipas desert, Mexico, about sixty miles from the nearest road, which is unpleasant, but in what way an experience? Nor can I bring myself to hear something resembling eternity; I don't hear anything, apart from the trickle of sand at every step. Why should I experience what isn't there?

Another long speech against emotions.

The main theme of the book is the reliance on technology as philosophy. The belief that technology allows people to control all aspects of their lives. Technical breakdowns fill the story and Walter's life. By coincidence he visit many places with hardly any technology such as the Mexican Desert and a low technology planetarium in South America. Hanna says that Faber uses technology as a trick to insulate himself against the world.

When in the desert, Walter argues that as a technologist he is able to look at the world clearly, without being influenced by emotion or imagination. Similarly, he claims several times that he does not understand art, and it inspires no feelings in him. The time in the desert he films what happens, and plays chess with Herbert.
2.2 Fate versus coincidence

The series of events in the book borders on the amazing. Since Max Frisch is the creator (of the book) he can teach Walter Faber that there is such a thing as fate and not only coincidences, probability and math. That suppressing your emotions brings terrible results. That not liking art is subhuman.

What is the chance that in the middle of the desert he will find the brother of Joachim his old friend? That Joachim married his old girl friend Hanna? That after all efforts they made to find him, he killed himself? Why did he kill himself anyway? What is the chance that he will meet his own daughter? What is the chance that he will fall in love with her, part ways, and then meet her again by accident in Paris? And the terrible bad luck in the ocean? Why would there be a snake near the ocean?

What is the chance that Sabeth will die? If only they would have gone directly to Hanna in Greece (and not to the ocean) Sabeth would have been alive.

At the end of the book Faber himself dies. So many death. The author thinks its fate.

2.3 Travel as a way of life

The theme of travel plays an important role in the novel. Using many modes of transportation, Walter is constantly on the move, visiting several continents, and truly many countries, and important cities. His travel allows him to ignore the passing time, a thing that he is afraid off.

Walter has no family, no real home, and no country. Even though he proposes marriage twice in the book. He uses travel to make sure he has no responsibilities, or long term relations. And very few people know him. In fact Faber thinks very seriously on the way he lives during the book. He is kind of a philosopher. He thinks a lot. For example in Cuba he ponders the worship of youth in the USA (time again).

The author surely thinks that mechanical humans are dangerous for humanity. Walter speaks like a machine. He narrates and he does it will an excess of facts and numbers.

For example: We were leaving from La Guardian Airport New York, three hours late because of snow storms. He writes it in a journal. He complains about the wasted time.

Walter Faber, the Swiss engineer. is traveling to Venezuela on behalf of UNESCO. For a technological project. Traveling is his life. But his life will be unravels throughout the book.

Another example of the way he thinks:
Towards evening, just before dusk, the promised aircraft arrived, a sports plain, circled around for a long time before it finally ventured to drop the parachute three sacks and two boxes that had to be collected from a radius of three hundred yards we were saved. CARTA BLANCA, CERVEZA MEXICANA, good beer, even Herbert, the German, had to admit as we stood around with our beer tins in the desert, a social gathering in brassieres and underpants with another sunset, which I took on colored film.

The problem is that all the book is narrates by Walter and we can not get the feeling of other people.

2.4 The relation to the Nazi regime

Faber recalls the Nazi past many times.

Walter questions Herbert about Hanna. Herbert tells him that she is alive and that during World War II she emigrated for Paris. And that she was married to his brother. A half Jew married a German. Walter considers his past relationship with Hanna, and he remembers clearly that he did not marry her only because he was not making enough money to support her—and because she did not actually want to marry him. The story with Hanna is clearly related to the Nazi time. Hanna is half Jewish. The Nazi are in power. They become lovers inn 1936. He wants her to marry him, mostly to make her safe. The personal life of the author plays here. Switzerland remained neutral during World War II, and it is highly likely that Frisch hated that. Frisch was an active pacifist. Hated fascism and racism; Switzerland benefited from its ability to deal with both the Nazis and with the Allied Nations. This part may show some guilt by the author.

2.5 The meeting with ancient tribes

Faber experience in waiting for the ride of the plantation (in south America) is terrible.

He speaks in a surprise about what the Mayan built, without inventing the wheel. The moon was nearly as important as the sun to the ancient Maya. Mayan mythology associated the moon with a maiden, an old woman, and/or a rabbit. The primary Maya moon goddess was Ix Chel, a powerful goddess who battled with the sun and made him descend into the underworld every night.

But Faber has nothing but contempt to the rituals of the Mayan when the moon is full. He calls all the tribes he meets Indians and they scare him.

The need to arrive to a place in the jungle, makes him suffer considerably.
Waiting in the hit for a car. It is a primitive place as Faber himself says. When they see dead Joachim he notices that his death makes no impression on the primitive tribes there. For them death is not the end, like in our culture. Faber surprisingly also says that the jungle being a primitive place is related to birth. It may be that the life of tribes, with no technology seems better to Frisch than the modern life, and their altitude to death, seems better to Frisch to ours.

The book is a warning against looking at technology as the supreme tool, and calls for a return to nature. Nature was part of us to a big extent one time. As the ancient tribes show. We should go back to this, at least to a certain extent. This is the message of Frisch.

2.6 Citations

The author hints to some canonical work. To the garden of Eden by the snake and the fact that Faber is nude when he leaves the sea. Clearly, the Oedipus myth. The book talks on blindness and Faber loosing his sight temporarily, several times relating it to the Oedipus story (he removes his eyes after he understands what he did). *Homo Faber* is like a Greek Tragedy. A man is punished because of his vanity. And Greece (the place Hanna lives now) is central to the book. It is also the place Sabeth dies in.

2.7 Faber describing details on time

Faber does not want to cope with his death and simply does not think about it. Faber tries to ignore time. As a strange method to cope with death. He does not use what most people use to cope with death, namely either faith or art. It is no accident that the book jumps in time, many times. In the desert he slowly learns how to cope time. But so many entries in his journal are on waste of time. On details. On details on Herbert. He writes meaningless observations frequently and feels like an obsessed person.

The number of deaths in such a short book is quite large. Joachim, Sabeth and Faber himself. It makes it harder for Faber to ignore death.

2.8 Does Walter Faber evolve?

Is the name *Homo Faber* that Hanna gave him, is his fate? Its hard to know, but I think Faber would have evolved at the end, if not for his unfortunate death.

He is a logical person. He must recognize that if he only would have kept
some relation with Hanna or even Joachim, he would have never slept with Sabeth and she would have been alive at the end of the book.

It's not only important to change. It is also important not to delay this change for a very long time.