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Let's not allow contemporary Luddites to denigrate cultural innovation

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Martin Scorsese has doubled down on his claim that Marvel movies are “not cinema” in a recent op-ed in The New York Times, an argument which previously receiving support from fellow filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola. Coppola claims they are “despicable.”

As I sit and write I am not going to compare “The Godfather” with “Avengers: Infinity War. But if The Godfather Part III” taught us anything, it was that Francis Ford Coppola is incapable himself of creating a cinematic universe like that of Marvel.

We can ridicule the latest successful round of popcorn flicks all we wish, but just as “The Sopranos” relaxed the constraint on the complexity and length of plotlines for television, cinematic universes are relaxing the constraint that we can only watch characters as they exist in the boundaries of a handful of linear sequels. Maybe we should see where relaxing that constraint takes us.

Scorsese and Coppola, of course, aren't the first entrenched interest to complain about new, successful competitors who do things differently.

As Bill James has documented, literally every generation of baseball players complains about the one that follows. Outfielder Jayson Werth, as he was stepping away from professional baseball in 2018, complained about “super nerds” ruining baseball, this despite today's players are working more and more closely with team analytics to improve themselves. Or, you could tune in to the relentless complaints of Hall of Fame pitcher John Smoltz about baseball today during his color commentary of last month's playoffs.

We have a word for those opposing technology and progress: Luddism, named after 19th century factory workers who were concerned that new machines would take their jobs, and responded by destroying the machines. The workers benefited in the short run by keeping their jobs, but it was at the expense of society overall.

In a chapter from my forthcoming book, “Markets against Modernity,” I argue we should recognize the non-violent form of Luddism practiced by those like Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Jayson Werth, and John Smoltz as Social Luddism. Social Luddites act anti-socially as well.

Other examples abound. Ray Bradbury's intention in writing “Fahrenheit 451” was not to decry censorship. It was to complain about the competition his books now faced in the form of television. Elsewhere, as has been widely reported, expertise in drinking wine is a “skill” that

does not actually exist when it is subjected to double blind testing, but don't ask the wine experts themselves about that.

More provocatively, why is it the case in every field of human achievement — from film to philosophy to whatever else you can think of— its highest peak supposedly occurred decades or centuries ago? If we think about it for a second, to the contrary, there are more people today pursuing greatness in virtually each and every one of those fields of achievement, often with the benefit of modern technology.

Why aren't these fields improving? Whenever we can actually measure whether something is improving over time, as a rule, it is. Think of the accuracy of physics, or Olympic record times.

Perhaps cultural pessimists are Social Luddites personally invested in the importance of the past.

Consider this from another vantage point. For every opioid crisis or new civil war we hear about, there are far more examples of things getting better in the world, as documented by a variety of data-literate sources, such as Steven Pinker's *Enlightenment Now* or the Cato Institute's humanprogress.org. For the overwhelming majority of social indicators, if we can measure it, it is clearly getting better, overall.

It would take a bizarre conspiracy orchestrated by the universe if whatever we can't currently measure directly is getting worse, even though the vast majority of social indicators, from GDP per capita to infant mortality rates, is improving.

Those who have the loudest cultural voices, like Coppola and Smoltz, may be blinding us from enjoying the wonders of the world in 2019, for the simple reason that they stand to personally profit by denigrating what is new. Don't let them.