The rationalizing of society can be conceptualized as the pursuit of efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control through technology. But rational systems inevitably spawn a series of irrationalities that result in the compromising and perhaps even the undermining of their rationality.

Fast-food restaurants, which epitomize the rational model, proffer the fastest means of getting from a hungry state to a sated one, without surprises, at low cost, in a carnival-like setting suggesting that fun awaits the consumer at each visit. The wholesomeness of the food seems an insignificant consideration. Whereas in the past, working people were prepared to spend up to an hour preparing dinner, they now are impatient if a meal is not on the table within ten minutes. (For their part, some fast-food restaurants have developed chairs that become uncomfortable after about twenty minutes, to ensure that diners do not stay long.)

Fast-food restaurants have preferentially recruited adolescent help, at least until recently, because this age group adjusts more easily than adults do to surrendering their autonomy to machines, rules, and procedures. Few skills are required on the job, so workers are asked to use only a minute portion of their abilities. This policy is irrational from the standpoint of the organization, since it could obtain much more from its employees for the money (however negligible) it pays them. These minimal skill demands are also irrational from the perspective of the employees, who are not allowed to think or to respond creatively to the demands of the work.

These restrictions lead to high levels of resentment, job dissatisfaction, alienation, absenteeism, and turnover among workers in fast-food franchises. In fact, these businesses have the highest turnover rate of any industry in the U.S. The entire workforce of the fast-food industry turns over three times in a year. Although the simple, repetitive nature of the work makes it easy to replace those who leave, the organization would clearly benefit from keeping employees longer. The costs of hiring and training are magnified when the turnover rate is extraordinarily high.

The application of the rational model to the house-building process in the 1950s and '60s led to suburban communities consisting of nearly identical structures. Indeed, it was possible to wander into the residence of someone else and not to realize immediately that one was not at home. The more expensive developments were superficially more diversified, but their interior layouts assumed residents who were indistinguishable in their requirements.

Furthermore, the planned communities themselves look very similar. Established trees are bulldozed to facilitate construction. In their place, a number of saplings, held up by posts and wire, are planted. Streets are laid out in symmetrical grid patterns. With such uniformity, suburbanites may well enter the wrong subdivision or become lost in their own.

Many of Steven Spielberg’s films are set in such suburbs. Spielberg’s strategy is to lure the viewer into this highly repetitive world and then to have a completely unexpected event occur. For example, the film Poltergeist takes place in a conventional suburban household in which evil spirits ultimately disrupt the sameness. (The spirits first manifest themselves through another key element of the homogeneous society—the television set.) The great success of Spielberg’s films may be traceable to a longing for some unpredictability, even if it is bizarre and menacing, in increasingly routinized lives.

1. The author’s argument suggests that the primary motive of employers who make humans work with machines is to:

A improve the quality of their products.

B reduce the cost of wages and benefits.

C avoid seeming to be behind the times.

D increase the uniformity of procedures.

2. A common thread in the discussion of fast food and the discussion of suburban housing is that people today:

A are increasingly resistant to the regimentation of life.

B expect their needs to be met at the lowest possible cost.

C allow themselves to be treated as interchangeable.

D are unable to discriminate among products that differ in quality.
3. **Information in the passage suggests that a rationalized travel agency would emphasize:**

A  planned tours to popular attractions with accommodations at large hotels.

B  computerized systems to provide low-cost customized itineraries.

C  personnel trained to make reservations but with little experience as travelers.

D  procedures that encourage problem-solving initiatives by managers.

4. **Suppose that the employee responses to working conditions in fast-food franchises (paragraph 4) also apply to entry-level assembly line workers. In light of this information, the author’s main point in mentioning these responses is:**

A  weakened, since the fast-food industry is not unique in suppressing creativity.

B  weakened, since the monotony of work is not necessarily related to employee dissatisfaction.

C  strengthened, since predictability and employee turnover are associated in another context.

D  strengthened, since low wages and job dissatisfaction are associated in another context.
Answer Key
1. D
2. C
3. A
4. C