

ALEXANDER B. JOHNS

Ubergutenberg: Literary Language and the New Media.
(Under Direction of CARL RAPP)

The purpose of this investigation will be to take a deep look at some of the things that are unique to print language, in particular, to literary language. In addition I will explore some of the most prevalent ways that narrative has been or is being subsumed into new media (TV, Radio, and most importantly Computer technology). Given these factors I will then consider what will likely be the fate of our language, and ourselves as we are shaped by it, in an electronic age.

INDEX WORDS: New Media, Literary Language, Literature, Computer,
Electronic Age.

UBERGUTENBERG: LITERARY LANGUAGE AND THE NEW MEDIA

by

ALEXANDER B. JOHNS

A.B., The University of Georgia, 1995

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in

Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GA

2001

© 2001

Alexander B. Johns

All Rights Reserved

UBERGUENBERG: LITERARY LANGUAGE AND THE NEW MEDIA

by

ALEXANDER B. JOHNS

Approved:

Major Professor: Carl Rapp

Committee: Jonathan Evans
William Provost

Electronic Version Approved:

Gordon L. Patel
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
December 2001

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This piece of writing is a sort of culmination of two, very welcome years of reading and writing, of wonderfully enriching guidance and instruction, and very enlightening discussion. My encounters with the Great Literature have been a blessing, which can never be quantified, one which has led me to this particular thesis. These two years of graduate study have been a distinct privilege, one for which I am deeply thankful to my wife, my family, my teachers, and God, who is the Source of all this goodness.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
CHAPTER	
1 THE LINGUISTIC KALEIDOSCOPE.....	1
2 ESSENTIALS OF TYPOGRAPHIC LANGUAGE: THE GUTENBERG GALAXY.....	6
3 SVEN BIRKERTS AND THE LITERARY SELF	17
4 NOW AND FUTURE TECHNARRATIVE	26
5 THE KALEIDOSCOPE TURNS	36
BIBLIOGRAPHY	47

CHAPTER 1

THE LINGUISTIC KALEIDOSCOPE

You are currently reading a text, an assemblage of alphabetic symbols into words, each word carrying either a partial or complete meaning, largely depending on the placement of the other words around it. Sentences will be formed from these elements of meaning, these sentences then arranged into paragraphs, and those into chapters. As these verbal blocks are piled, hopefully not too precariously, upon each other, it is my desire that a sound and thorough structure of meaning will be established, a distinct, unified, individual set of ideas, all based on a central theme. Along the way I will do my best to adhere to certain rules and guidelines of effective language use. I might also try my hand at adding a bit of my own style to the work. This structure is also an act of communication: the expression of a particular group of ideas, held by a person, me, for the purpose of another person's understanding. My plan is to have produced eventually a well-crafted, permanent, and thought-provoking composition which will offer some edification to those who choose to read it.

This may seem patently obvious and an unnecessary preface to a paper, but I fear my presuppositions concerning the processes of reading and writing may no longer be held by as many others as they once might have been. More unsettling is my fear that fewer and fewer people now see the importance of literate expression as a distinct and high form of communication, and fewer still regard it as a necessary element in the development of a functionally educated American. According to the National Council for Educational Statistics, the levels of reading comprehension and retention and writing proficiency in the elementary grades of our public schools have gone nowhere but down since

1980. According to the Heritage Foundation, "Over ten million American students have reached the 12th grade without having learned to read at basic levels and only about one in ten high school graduates can write a reasonably coherent paragraph."

But there are many factors at work here. It isn't just that schools are failing, or that our nation's parents just aren't caring or engaged. We cannot simply blame the powers in Hollywood, though they certainly can make no claim to be advancing the cause of literacy. No, there are so many changes occurring so quickly, it is difficult even to discern what cause is producing what effect. In this kaleidoscopic atmosphere of contemporary western society it seems that a definite factor contributing to the constant shifting and the mood of instability is this unprecedented explosion of communications technology. The era between Johannes Gutenberg's printing press and the telegraph seems to our scale of change to be an eon, that between the telegraph and the radio many lifetimes. Who living now in Europe or America can realistically conceive of a world without television or telephone? What would happen to us if all the microprocessors went on strike? Indeed, our tools are profoundly changing us. More and more they are altering the aspects of our lives and the way we view the world around us. In no uncertain terms we depend on them for our survival in this culture both economically and interpersonally. We can now, through our palm pilot, find out the weather forecast, the "world news," how much we are currently worth in any currency (and possibly alter it), check our e-mail, and purchase a plane ticket, all in a matter of minutes. Time is money indeed, and whoa to those who can't keep up with the pace of exchange. Somewhere in the past we touched off a chain reaction of interaction that now threatens to overwhelm us.

What is it about the western mind that has led to the pursuit and development of these media? The foundation of our civilization it seems is communication, and not only this, but a certain type of communication. For the western man mere oral tradition was, for some reason, not sufficient. He sought to preserve the highest expressions of his language through writing. Perhaps this grew from his distant connection to the ancient Hebrew people, one of the first to keep a meticulous history of their development. He has uttered the words on scrolls and codices solemnly in his halls of government, education, and worship for all of, well, *written* history. The permanence of an idea as it is rendered in print creates the possibility for it to encounter a kindred spirit who determines to build upon it or an enemy who is bent on destroying it. It is the nature of printed language to be containable, transportable, and influential, and it is the nature of western, alphabetic language to subsume other forms of language. Our phonetic alphabet, in reproducible, distributable form, is the foundation of applied knowledge.

Our time of manifold transformation is a result of this, because one of the things we have used our applied knowledge to create is the ability to distribute knowledge more rapidly and widely. Is this a good thing? Have the centuries since Gutenberg's press led us closer to utopia or dragged us further towards apocalypse? Has it been a bad thing? Has our dependence on print kept us from a richer, more spontaneous and heartfelt kind of discourse?

It seems as if these questions may become moot, as a relatively unforeseen tidal wave of change in presentation and exchange of information has swept over Western civilization, and subsequently, the world. I will not waste time with descriptions of the technologies that quietly, yet furiously, stretch their reach around us, but I will simply say that we find ourselves in a rare time in history where the inventions of man seem irrevocably out of his control. What is unique

about our new communications technologies, though, is that they effect us not through an immediate threat of atomic, chemical, political, or mechanical forces, but in a current which is carried through all of these: that of *language*. As we shall see later, how we communicate is organically tied to our world view, our view of each other, and our view of the future, and how we communicate is fundamentally changing. A recent study conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project observed that seventy-five percent of Americans between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine are regular users of the internet, eighty-two percent of college graduates are online regularly, and that on any given day at least fifty-eight million Americans use the internet. The last half of the year 2000 saw sixteen million new subscribers in our nation alone, and these numbers are only growing. Americans currently watch, on the average, about four hours of television a day. That's down from closer to twice that many a decade ago, due mainly to the growth of the internet. Still, that's the equivalent of a day out of each week spent in passive, sedentary reception of rapidly diffused information.

Are these concerns extreme? Is the Western spirit resilient enough to weather this storm of change and emerge stronger? Until recently we looked to our literature as an indicator of how advanced we were as a culture; it is now problematic to say what we will look to, even in the very near future. However, we can assume that, for the foreseeable future, an increasing majority of us will look to a talking, luminescent screen. Naturally, our society seems unsure in this regard, and we haven't yet come to peace with these changes. As has been the case in recent centuries when an uncertain evolution has occurred, debates have escalated within the academy concerning these potent developments. Within the perhaps dinosauric humanities departments of our rapidly restructuring universities, we currently hear the observations of two voices with regard to the emergence of new media. For the purpose of this study we'll call them the

utopian and the antiutopian camps, in as much as they deeply consider the potentialities of new media as it is certain to affect our linguistic, and in particular our literary, experience.

So, as I work to build this verbal edifice I will draw from the designs of others, more master craftsmen, if you will, as they consider the ideas at stake.

First of all, I want to explore the linguistic foundation of print language as it relates to new media. I will then seek to identify what are the most crucial qualities of literary language as displayed primarily in the canon of works, which have, until recently, gone unquestioned in their importance. Thirdly, I will examine some of the broad characteristics of emerging forms in new media and consider how they might evolve, both in positive and negative ways. What I hope to arrive at is an informed and fairly balanced conclusion as to how the “language of the book” is likely to be affected in the post-codex era of mass communication.

CHAPTER 2

ESSENTIALS OF TYPOGRAPHIC LANGUAGE: *THE GUTENBERG GALAXY*

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the unique characteristics of print as compared to other types of communication, as well as to begin considering some effects of its passing, I will turn to Marshall McLuhan. *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, his compelling and in depth history of the rise and now the fall of the typographic mind, offers, among other things, a thorough exploration of the effects of alphabetic language on the life experience of its users. Though he strives to consider as many factors and potential effects of his findings as possible, McLuhan eventually comes down, I believe, on the utopian side with regard to our new and emerging communication tools. While retaining as complete a consideration of his ideas as I can, I will also try to point out some areas where he may seem overly optimistic or overly general, where certain potentialities or aspects may have been “left out of the mix.” I certainly do not suppose to be in any way getting the better of this obviously brilliant scholar, but I simply want to build with the best materials possible. At any rate, this book is an invaluable source for acquiring an understanding of the western mind, especially as it functions in communication.

McLuhan does this in part by attempting to identify the characteristics of what he calls non-literate societies and what makes their experience of the world different from ours. It should be mentioned that what he generally means by literacy in this sense is not simply having a written form of communication but having an *alphabetic* form of writing. He sees the writing of certain Asian societies, for example, as functioning in a way completely different from western

writing. The Chinese ideograms each speak to a concept or a distinct, relatable moment, not merely a phonetic one, as is the case with English. In addition to representing a sound or group of sounds, they are meant to illustrate an experience that the reader will have an understanding of, though it may be bound to that particular culture, and even the sound will often be a sort of conjuring of that experience. In this way they serve a purpose similar to that of the emblems of Elizabethan England, conveying a wisdom, not merely an "ingredient." They are rooted ultimately in priestcraft and proverb, making their purpose one of great importance to their culture. This is obviously very different from the comparatively "ambivalent" medium of an alphabet. Societies like these seem to have remained essentially unaltered by the introduction of a written linguistic form.

McLuhan finds a great help in a study by J.C. Carothers which looks in particular at the communication and narratives of Africans. He observes in Africans what McLuhan believes to be a more holistic communication, which effectively involves more of the senses. The essential difference seems to be manifested in the spatiotemporal experience of the users:

...a child in any Western milieu is surrounded by an abstract explicit visual technology of uniform time and uniform continuous space in which "cause" is efficient and sequential, and things move and happen on single planes and in successive order. But the African child lives in the implicit, magical world of the resonant oral word. He encounters not efficient causes but formal causes of configurational field such as any non-literate society cultivates. (McLuhan, p. 28).

McLuhan believes that, through our ambivalent, alphabetic form we have taken the power or the "magic" out of our language. We have removed it from the oral

and aural, perhaps gestural, ground in which it grew and made it ordinarily visual. What he is referring to seems to me to be in part what the Greeks sought to foster in their rhetoric, and indeed Plato himself expresses concern that the emergence of written language in his time will remove the words from the context and intentions of their source, opening them to being misunderstood or to the manipulation of their intended meaning. Print inevitably removes the word from the apt moment, as it were, and renders it static, cold, and almost exclusively visual. A truer communication, as McLuhan sees it, is an interplay of all the senses. We visualize what we hear spoken. We express feelings in terms of taste or smell. We and our words live in the moment, as organically connected as breathing and heart rate.

No merely nomadic people ever had writing any more than they ever developed architecture or "enclosed space." For writing is a visual enclosure of non-visual spaces and senses. It is therefore, an abstraction of the visual from the ordinary sense interplay. And whereas speech is an outing (utterance) of all of our senses at once, writing abstracts from speech. (McLuhan, p. 57).

McLuhan seems to betray his quiet yearning for the freedom and energy, the open and honest nature in the communication of Carothers' Africans. He believes that the development of the alphabet, followed by the proliferation of print, quenched a spirit, so to speak. It eventually altered our experience of the world, because it has taught us to experience life almost completely through the eyes.

Another of the so-called oral societies which he explores is that of the Russians. McLuhan uses them as an illustration of many of the same qualities he

observes in the other non-literate societies he studies, especially as their responses to mass media and the power of communication are concerned.

...in a society so profoundly oral as Russia, where spying is done by ear and not by eye, at the memorable "purge" trials of the 1930's Westerners expressed bafflement that many confessed total guilt not because of what they had done but what they had thought. In a highly literate society, then, visual and behavioral conformity frees the individual for inner deviation. Not so in an oral society where inner verbalization is effective social action. (McLuhan, p. 30)

What is curious about this study is that Russia has communicated through alphabetic language for roughly a thousand years. Cyrillic is no more hieroglyphic nor symbolic as a form than the English alphabet is. It is a strictly phonetic medium, finding its roots in the same Greek from which our letters come. At the time of its introduction the people of the region were in the process of conversion from paganism to Christianity, not unlike the Celtic people to which much of our society traces its roots. They also began to make use of print not long after we did, and their arts, music, and literature flourished. In more ways than not it seems that the Russian linguistic experience has been parallel to our own. Is it not possible that these confessions of guilt arose from a belief that evil or any transgression need not be carried to its full extent to be considered *done*? If so, would this not likely be more rooted in the well-established Russian Orthodox Faith than merely in the Slavic linguistic experience? Here is where McLuhan's distinction between literate and oral societies becomes a bit confusing. He isolates some interesting aspects of cultures other than our own, but at times he seems to do so at the neglect of other linguistic qualities that are quite similar. Though McLuhan's exploration is helpful in pointing out some of the particulars of our mode of being, it seems to me impossible to truly

understand the mind of another culture simply by “studying” it. Even according to his own conclusions, we would be fated to an incomplete understanding, because our language, and therefore our world view, are restricted to certain, overly visual, western ways.

In *The Origins and Development of the English Language*, the linguist, Thomas Pyles, emphasizes that writing is not language but is simply a vehicle for it. He stresses the ultimate similarity of purpose and adequacy of all writing and the absence of any advantage held by a particular linguistic tradition over another. Pyles insists that the written forms of cultures, in and of themselves, have no effect on their development.

Names, like all other words, were in existence long before anybody ever wrote them, and the way one writes them is purely and simply a matter of tradition. Had the Russians long ago settled upon Chinese ideograms as the basis of their writing system, their language would have had precisely the same development which it has had...When, in 1928, Mustafa Kemal Pasha (later Kemal Ataturk) as president of Turkey substituted the Roman alphabet for Arabic in writing Turkish, the Turkish language changed no more than time changed when he introduced the Gregorian calendar in his country. (Pyles, p. 14)

Pyles points to a deeper, more primal source from which language emanates, and he believes a culture, though it may be shaped through language, remains unaltered by the kind of written form through which its words are carried. Great literature of any language results not from the superiority of the language itself but from the mastery of that language in its written form, and that is not unique to English, Latin, Greek, or any other form. Ultimately, I think McLuhan reduces the societies he calls literate to exclusively American and Western European culture, those whose linguistic origins are Indo-European, and obviously, that is

the societal mind through which he processes and utters his own ideas. Any others might be considered oral or non-literate, if only because they don't seem outwardly as dependent on an alphabetic mode of communication. Pyles illustrates, however, that many other languages in the world ultimately share the same, semitic origin, and that, essentially, their various evolutions of writing have done nothing to change their experience of meaning.

The evidence that McLuhan offers for our visual bias as a culture is compelling, though. He points out that even in the supposedly anti-literary fields of science, the interface between Man and his often invisible subject of study is visual (meters to indicate levels of activity, knobs to control energy and levels of amount, graphs, charts, etc.). What I am resistant to is the idea that this is completely the result of something unique to the west that was largely fertilized by typography. I hope I'm not being too brash in saying that I think many of the world's cultures other than our own have generally been more visual in their experience than auditory or tactile. It is not insignificant that Christ, being quite eastern by comparison to us, teaches, "The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light." Though they may speak to a different understanding of space and time, as McLuhan points out, cave paintings, druid circles, pyramids, etc., illustrate even an ancient understanding of vision as a way to communicate beyond the "moment." The Mayans encountered their god not in ecstatic states brought on by hypnotic drum beats and dance, but in the serpentine illusion brought about by the sun slowly passing over a perfectly calculated monolith. Though the nomads of Afghanistan may not have created an alphabet, they have developed war rugs, in which the woven images of tanks, helicopters, and jets are believed, in addition to telling the story of their experience, to actually give the otherwise helpless people power over these menaces. Most cultures' names for things in

their environment are based in the appearance of those things. Vision is still the preeminent sense for most people. It's just that it happens to be the first sense that we, as an arguably unbalanced society, have used to bombard each other with.

McLuhan effectively illustrates that part of the evolution of language in the West was the divorce of writing from sound and movement and its subsequent independence as a form. In the wake of the printing press, poetry would eventually move away from music, and reading would become a largely private activity, whereas it had previously been carried out publicly. Through an increased availability of print and thereafter an increased literacy, story-telling became not so much the role of the bard or minstrel as the author, and this caused a wholesale change in our idea of a story. More than this typography made specific stories, ideas, discoveries, etc. containable, permanent, portable, and above all reproducible and available. Writing then developed on its own without the other elements of sound, gestures, music, or environment affecting the reader's response. All of these were, in a sense, swallowed up into the medium, in part because through it they could be "imitated" or represented.

As we know certain regulations of language began to emerge as a result of print. It was no longer reasonable to produce texts without word separation and little to no punctuation, which had worked just fine when manuscripts were made largely for the purpose of being read aloud. Since works were being produced that would be widely read, it was important for the language to be as accessible as possible. Formalized spellings and grammar naturally grew from this need. Martin Luther, being one of the first "print-conscious" writers seemed to anticipate this:

Luther made a language which in all domains approaches modern German. The enormous diffusion of his works, their literary quality, the quasi-sacred character which belonged in the eyes of the faithful to the text of the Bible and of the New Testament as established by him, all this soon made his language a model. Accessible immediately to all readers ...the term employed by Luther finally conquered, and numerous words used only in medieval German were finally adopted universally. And his vocabulary imposed itself in so imperious a fashion that most printers did not dare to diverge from it in the least. (McLuhan, p. 275)

One can easily see how, in this way, print would radically alter our language, both in the written and spoken form. Not only did we begin to think of language in terms of "correct" usage, but we must certainly have lost some, probably well-developed, system which made much greater use of things like pitch, gesture, and inflection. Authoritative language was the inevitable result of the emergence of literary skill, as certain writers developed a distinct voice in the new linguistic medium. In the same way that a good orator might have excelled at this earlier system, a good writer would master, and perhaps expand upon, these new formalizations.

This phenomenon has certainly shaped our considerations as we approach print language. First of all, we had to develop a measure of trust with regard to the source of the information on the page. Until recently no one would go to the trouble and expense to print the toutings of a suspected snake-oil salesman. It was crucial that the provider of the information to be printed be in a particular way authoritative, and one of the main criteria we learned to apply in determining the validity of an author was his or her command of language use. Also, as is the case with any trade, certain publishers became known for setting forth quality writing, and a sort of nobility evolved. Eventually an aura of

authority began to surround that which was published. Something that was worthy of being committed to print was worthy of being read and considered.

One of the most fascinating things McLuhan illustrates is the connection of typography to the process of invention. He traces this development from the middle ages to our time, pointing to print as the real juggernaut. McLuhan holds up the printed book as a glowing, historic “first fruit” of modern invention. He writes, “Typography as the first mechanization of a handicraft is itself the perfect instance not of a new knowledge, but of applied knowledge.” Citing Abbott Payson Usher’s *History of Mechanical Inventions* he elaborates:

The entire achievement embodied in the printed book with illustrations presents a striking example of the multiplicity of individual acts of invention that are requisite to bring about a new result. In its entirety, this accomplishment involves: the invention of paper and of inks made with an oil base; the development of engraving on wood and...of wood blocks; the development of the press and the special technique of press work involved in printing. (McLuhan, p. 185)

Print was both an early product and a proliferator of applied knowledge. As a result both of the spiritual and moral neutrality of the phonetic alphabet and the transportability of any codifiable ideas through books, a shockwave went out. Western Man could now think and act collectively, building one idea upon another, irrespective of the prior hierarchical constraints of Church and King. This was the real mother of invention.

Interestingly enough, McLuhan connects this to the “flattening” of language that resulted from an increasing dependence on print communication. The manner that eventually took hold was not that of “wits or scholars” but that of artisans, merchants, and “countrymen.” This more “mathematical plainness” of language occurred naturally as literacy grew, and had the effect of connecting

many of the areas of society that had been previously isolated from one another. This would be the impetus of both science and nationalism, as much greater numbers of people of either similar or dissimilar disposition could communicate their ideas in a common vernacular. This was our first peek through the kaleidoscope, so to speak.

It seems that the essential purpose of this book is to anticipate the advent of a new communication, which McLuhan believes will result to a great extent from the fruits (or symptoms) of print. Our interconnectedness and standards of intercourse have produced countless scientific, technological advances, some of which were themselves new media for an expanded and altered communication. These media, as McLuhan points out, have allowed for other factors of human (not just Western) interchange to effect us. What he foresees is, in part, a return to what he calls the "Africa within," a more all-encompassing language, which will make use of the more tribal linguistic aspects of sound, tactility, image, etc. and will surely, as language cannot help but do, revolutionize our understanding of the world and each other. What is truly amazing about this book is that it was published in 1962, eons ago by our standards, and yet it announces the very explosion of technology that we are currently witnessing. When McLuhan speaks of new media he means essentially television, radio, and telephony. Personal computing, wireless communication, the internet, and who knows what else will show up next week, were yet to be imagined. However, McLuhan has shone the light on the dynamic touched off by print, from which all of this has come.

So what elements unique to print language have taken root and grown in the Western Consciousness? *The Gutenberg Galaxy* offers to us a deeply historical study into this question, and I am convinced of a few things. First of all, language is a force as much as it is a tool. It shapes a society as much as a society

shapes it, and McLuhan has profoundly illustrated that ours is a language of conquest. This has become possible as a result of its phonetic and ambivalent nature combined with its portability. Alphabetic print can swallow almost any language. Most cultures can at least roughly fit the sounds of their language to an alphabet, whereas it is almost impossible for us to form ideograms for our individual words. English is the new lingua franca, and therefore the ideals which have become interwoven into it cannot help but have an effect on the rest of the world. Also significant is the assumption of authority that we have learned to project upon print. Centuries of habit have burned this into our being as Westerners. This is certainly why the Freedom of the Press was considered an important right in our Constitution as a check against other powers in the nation. Related to this is the subtle assumption of the permanence of the printed word. That which is pressed, bound, and shelved seems somehow established for Mankind. Is this not a fundamental attribute of the library, to be an archive of our most important achievements for use by future generations? Obviously, there is also the fact that print as a medium is completely visual, though I'm not sure I see this as being the debilitating thing that McLuhan seems to. At any rate, some understanding of these attributes of Western language will help us as we look to their deepest expressional form, the book, and subsequently the influence of "printless" communications upon them.

CHAPTER 3

SVEN BIRKERTS AND THE LITERARY SELF

Isn't this the most elusive and private of all conditions, that of the self suspended in the medium of language, the particles of the identity wavering in the magnetic current of another's expression? How are we to talk about it?...What is the connection between the reading process and the self? (Birkerts, p.78)

One of the more urgent and effective voices for rethinking the viability and necessity of new media is that of Sven Birkerts. Admitting a deliberate avoidance of the new tools, he shows a keen awareness not only of their capabilities and their limitations, but also of their potential dangers and advantages. In a similar approach to that of McLuhan, Birkerts ultimately comes to his conclusions about new media by pointing out what they are not or what they cannot be. Seen by many as a traditionalist, especially where the processes of reading and writing are concerned, Birkerts does not pretend to be impartial. He constantly reminds his readers of the fundamental necessity of the act of reading for fruitful thought and communication, and unlike McLuhan, he often uses his personal experience both to support and to refute his own presuppositions. Through a style that is intimate and personal, disarming yet engaging, Birkerts serves to remind his readers of the uniqueness and power of print. His approach supports his message, in that, though we may have no knowledge of Birkerts' appearance, voice, countenance, or personal history, we are influenced by certain "rhetorical" devices as we read his work. What I hope to gather from Birkerts is a critical consideration of where we might be going as a post-literary society.

In *The Gutenberg Elegies*, Birkerts looks deep into the act of reading and what it does to and for the human person. He then considers how this might be effected by the use of new media. It is obvious that Birkerts is, in no uncertain terms, a huge fan of reading, and perhaps this should be cautiously kept in mind as we consider his ideas. A distinction should be made, with regard to this book, between how reading affects reading enthusiasts, such as Birkerts himself, and how it effects those for whom reading is a mere necessity, a bore, or a non issue. Still, for many of us this is a very timely work, because it seeks to convince us that this very prevalent linguistic form, which we may have through thoughtlessness or presumption fallen into taking for granted, may now be “literally” at stake.

...language and not technology is the true evolutionary miracle. I have not yet given up on the idea that the experience of literature offers a kind of wisdom that cannot be discovered elsewhere; that there is profundity in the verbal encounter itself, never mind what further profundities the author has to offer; and that for a host of reasons the bound book is the ideal vehicle for the written word. (Birkerts, p. 6)

This work points out for us some other important aspects of written language as well as of new media, though it does so in a more passionate tone, and it also helps us to begin to place the two in the same mix, so to speak.

Birkerts uses some interesting devices to help us to consider more seriously what exactly is happening when a reader reads, and though he doesn't lay out a chronology of the act of reading, as it were, I think it is best to follow this in a step-by-step way. At one point he presents to us an image of a woman reading a book in a garden. He then begins to describe various aspects of the scene, and he comments that the woman, though she is surrounded by a

beautiful garden is, in a sense elsewhere, in an imaginative place. He eventually “zooms in” on the book itself and then begins a bit of an exposition:

It is unmarked, unidentified - a generic signifier. But it does not belong to the ordinary run of signifiers: It is an icon representing an imagined and immaterial order. The book, whatever it is, holds dissolved in its grid of words a set of figments. These the reader will transform into a set of wholly internal sensations and emotions. These will, in turn, prove potent enough to all but eclipse her awareness of the surrounding world. (Birkerts, p. 78)

This begins to illustrate the first component of the act of reading that print has engendered, that of “coming away” from sheer reality into a different state. For Birkerts there is something important in the act of consciously leaving the real world and entering into that of the narrative. We go to the book actively, and we enter the story both mentally and spiritually through a physical act. In this way it is not unlike attending a certain kind of worship service. The worshiper chooses to enter the temple, to leave the “world,” and to seek an encounter with God, a transcendent experience. One might argue that the same essential thing can occur when going to a film or switching on the TV, and in the merely physical sense, and that fact that one is seeking diversion through a narrative, Birkerts might agree. However, what one “goes to,” especially through a novel, is fundamentally different for him. As we begin to read we “start up a memory context.” Then, if we continue willingly we become somehow transformed. Birkerts is particularly interested in this unique condition of the human experience, accessible only through deep reading. He continues:

The woman looks up from her book. She looks not at the garden but through it. What she sees, at most, is a light-shot shimmering of green, nothing more. Of the bench she is entirely oblivious. (Birkerts, p. 78)

I have experienced exactly what he is describing, but I would wager to say that not everyone in our society has, at least not as a necessary result of the process of reading. Regardless, something very unique, even mysterious is manifested here. When we read, especially something that is written in a manner somehow captivating to us, we undergo a sort of transformation. We willingly, though gradually, dissolve from one state of consciousness into another, from a more physically and environmentally aware state to one more ethereal and imaginative, yet one arguably just as “real” to us. Birkerts is deeply concerned with this phenomenon as being one connected exclusively with the reading of a codex. It is not comparable to our encounter with a film, because it serves to develop an aspect of the self which involves an active creativity.

The writer may tell us, “The mother wore a shabby, discolored dressing gown,” but the word canisters are empty until we load them from our private reservoirs. We activate our sense memories and determine the degrees of shabbiness and discoloration, not to mention the styling of the gown. (Birkerts, p. 83)

While we are engaging in this unique type of intercourse, we are fertilizing an important part of our person. As sexual relations can be a nourishment to a marriage, Birkerts believes the act of reading can be a nourishment to the soul.

The state of immersion unique to reading is one which Birkerts believes the self is capable of growing with. It is a sort of spiritual state, likened to those achieved by mystics through meditation or prayer.

In this state, when all is clear and right, I feel a connectedness that cannot be duplicated (unless, maybe, when an act of writing is going well). I feel an inside limberness, a sense of being for once in accord with time - real time, deep time. Duration time, within which events resonate and *mean*. When I am at the finest pitch of reading, I feel as if the whole of my life - past as well as unknown future - were somehow available to me...as an object of contemplation. (Birkerts, pp. 83-84)

Though this seems very exciting as a possibility, I cannot share knowledge of this very deep level of immersion with Birkerts. Yet this does illustrate something very profound about the act of reading: that it can be *contemplative*. Because they are shackled to time as a medium (usually no more than ninety minutes) and largely control their viewers' sense of it, films, for example, cannot allow for this kind of association, nor can audio narratives. The reader of a codex is free to pause, perhaps hearken back to a powerful memory in his or her life, which may have been stimulated by an event in the narrative. This may even serve to shape that reader's image of the characters and setting and to, in a mysterious way, free them to involve themselves in the story. In this sense I can relate to Birkert's experience. We are not ushered through a text by anything but our own desire, memory, and experience, and the kind of chemical reaction, for lack of a better term, that occurs between our self and that of the author is a curious, yet undeniable, experience. There is a strange merging of ourselves with an author's creation, with the author's self, in a manner only possible in literature. The author and the reader have both contemplated in their creative act, and they both, to a greater or lesser degree, have transcended the reality outside of the narrative experience.

The writing process is of equal importance to that of reading in this sense. When a person writes, especially a story or a poem, they are using many of the

same faculties. One of the most important of these, which makes text narrative unparalleled as a form is that of memory, as it is both active and *activating* as a writer writes.

Let us say that we are writers and that our aim is to describe a certain setting - an old wooden dock at a lake, for instance. We know, from some composite of our own experiences, the impressions that we are after: a morning silence, the air over the lake like a transparent membrane, the springy give and take of the boards as we walk toward the end of the dock, the sensations of peeling paint and damp, furred wood against our bare feet, the creaking sound, and so on.

To locate these images, these particular nuances, we research our sense memories, applying our attentiveness inward with the same diligence we would apply to the reading of a difficult text. And it's true, we are in some ways treating our experience as a text and setting about to work our way through it. We must, for we cannot have all of the images and sensations we need at our command at once; memory works by association, by accumulation, and by unconscious reconstruction. (Birkerts, p. 111)

I am struck by the fact that, as I read this passage, what immediately "jumps into my mind" is my own personal experience of walking out onto the dock at my wife's parents' house in the early morning. Because of this directly relative occurrence in my own life, Birkert's descriptive language fits the association perfectly. However, it is likely that he has a completely different image in his own mind. But is the mutual experience of us both having been on a dock in the morning necessary for this transaction to occur? I have never been on a spaceship, yet I am able to form a similarly believable association through Frank Herbert's writing. This is due to a combination of impressions from memory with a subconscious creativity, which assembles the scene. We might as writers

even choose the challenge of forming characters, images, and events beyond our personal realm of experience, and with literature we have that freedom.

Another important “blessing” to the self which comes from literature, though I am not sure that it is unique to literature, is that of coherence. Birkerts believes that, through a life of reading he has developed certain expectations about the way life works. One of the most important to him is that it has an order, and he is convinced that he has learned this, in large part, from regular exposure to coherent narratives. His beliefs in linear time, cause and effect, right and wrong, heroism and cowardice have been nourished by his “experience” of them in reading, “The physical arrangements of print are in accord with our traditional sense of history.” One might find the same narrative concepts at work in the movie, *Star Wars*, or to a lesser degree in a cartoon or sitcom. What is different about this as a literary experience, though, is that the reader can project personal experience and image association onto the situation at hand, perhaps even going so far as to see in the villain’s eyes those of an acquaintance or to view the setting of a traumatic event as similar to one’s childhood home.

So the processes of reading and writing are for Birkerts a sort of exercise for the self (as soul, not as mere material), and are therefore indispensable. Through them we leave the world of space and time and enter that of memory, association, relation, and creation. There is a kind of patience required by the medium, as we must experience the narrative as our comprehension and association allow. These are largely contemplative acts, which need the desire and attention of both the reader and the author in projecting themselves in order to be experienced and appreciated. Both reading and writing are private acts, as “the contents pass from the privacy of the sender to the privacy of the receiver.” The state of immersion that we can enter through these acts is one which is nourishing to our mind and soul. They keep our memory well-oiled and,

therefore, our emotions, sentiments, and convictions as they are “pricked” through association. Lastly, they are able to foster in us a coherent world view, one that includes linearity, purpose, meaning, and closure. Birkerts has helped to identify some of the distinct aspects of the print medium not as broad theoretical concepts, as is often the case in McLuhan’s approach, but as very personal, and therefore crucial, “friends” of the self.

This shift is happening throughout our culture, away from the patterns and habits of the printed page and toward a new world distinguished by its reliance on electronic communications.

(Birkerts, p.118)

Given the very high level on which Birkerts has placed the book as a form of language, it will aid our investigation to now briefly consider some of the characteristics he observes in electronic media:

The electronic order is in most ways opposite. Information and contents do not simply move from one private space to another, but they travel along a network. Engagement is intrinsically public, taking place within a circuit of larger connectedness. The vast resources of the network are always there, potential, even if they do not impinge upon the immediate communication. Electronic communication can be passive, as with television watching, or interactive, as with computers. Contents are felt to be evanescent. They can be changed or deleted with the stroke of a key. With visual media impression and image take precedence over logic and concept, and detail and linear sequentiality are sacrificed. The pace is rapid, driven by jump-cut increments, and the basic movement is laterally associative rather than vertically cumulative. The presentation structures the reception and, in time, the expectation about how information is organized. Further, the visual and nonvisual technology in every way encourages in the user a heightened and ever-changing awareness of the present. It works against historical perception,

which must depend on the inimical notions of logic and sequential succession. (Birkerts, pp. 122-123)

It would be difficult to sum it up more concisely than that. In this one excerpt Birkerts has illustrated his essential problems with new media. Obviously, he sees them as being set up in complete opposition to print. Though called "information technology" they are indeed the very enemy of patient, critical, and sensible exchange of information. He is convinced that at least three dangerous trends have already begun and are rapidly accelerating: erosion of our language, a flattening of historical perspectives, and a move away from a concept of a private self. He points that now around one hundred million people form their ideas about this land and the world from the "same basic package of edited images," something quite horrifying if we pause to consider the potentialities (which we will do in the last chapter), and he acknowledges that it is, in a sense, too late. As we find that "our students are less and less able to read, or analyze, or write with clarity and purpose," we can see that those growing up before the screen are living by its ethics, and their lack of exposure to print with all of its self-nurturing qualities will soon begin to slither in them as well. Birkerts has witnessed the extinguishing of the "civilizing energies" of great literature, and he pleads with us to reconsider where we are going.

CHAPTER 4

NOW AND FUTURE TECHNARRATIVE

Now: Hypertext Narrative

The lauded and dreaded new media are here, in ever increasing use and influence, and furiously developing. The linguistic Mind that gave them birth is certainly being, in turn, affected by them. It is now! All of the speculations and theories about the blessings or cursings the tools will bring are currently being put to the test. Many of the humanists who foresaw their emergence have now found themselves directly in front of them, forced to wield them, ambivalence being no longer an option. Some of those who have taken these tools to hand have found them to be liberating and full of marvelous potential, both in the experience of using them and in the possibilities, particularly for narrative communication, that they set closer to our reach. A consideration of the ideas of some of these excited scholars will help us to see some of the positive characteristics of the new forms as they function, as well as the directions in which they might develop. J. Yellowlees Douglas will offer an exploration of interactive narrative as it compares to traditional literature, and Janet Murray will provide a sort of view into the crystal ball with regard to how technologies now under development are likely to effect narrative.

In *The End of Books - Or Books without End?* Douglas challenges the warnings of Birkerts and others, as he seeks to illuminate what are to him the welcome and refreshing experiences found in new narrative forms. Though he acknowledges that we are witnessing only the first fumbings of interactive

narrative, he believes he can identify some characteristics which are likely to be indicative of how it will develop. He would certainly fall into the utopian camp for the purpose of our study. However, he does make a solid attempt at anticipating a critic's response, and at face value, he even seems to agree with some of Birkerts' essentials for good narrative. Douglas aids the reader through descriptions of the narratives as he experiences them, as well as through images (screenshots) of some of the "pages" of these works. He seeks to identify the unique qualities of interactive narratives as they exist today, in much the same way as Birkerts has with print, and to "hold them up" against the book. He ultimately seems to believe that the best of both worlds will emerge.

Understanding that Douglas is essentially utopian, I think it is best to isolate the essential attributes of the new narrative forms which he explains and deal with them individually. First of all, it should be mentioned that *hypertext* narrative, the form which he seems most concerned with, seems to be fizzling within only a few years of its advent. There is actually more criticism written about it than there are true examples of it, and in the last chapter we'll consider why it hasn't seemed to catch on as a narrative form. A majority of hypertext narratives so far function as a sort of sophisticated "choose your own adventure" game, as readers are given small pieces of text at a time and then offered "links" to others. In this way any of a multiplicity of possible "stories" emerge as the reader chooses from many various options. The flow of the events in the narrative is not necessarily sequential. His favorite example seems to be *Afternoon, a Story*, by Michael Joyce. This narrative opens with this segment of text: "I want to say that I may have seen my son die this morning," and from there leads off into any of many different directions as the narrator, you, seeks to learn what has or hasn't happened to his ex-wife and child. This work is quite typical of a hypertext narrative in the way the reader interacts with it.

One of the criticisms he anticipates concerning hypertext is that it often lacks the essential literary element of *linearity*, and Douglas is quick to challenge what is actually meant by linearity of sequence. He points out that many, more modern works of fiction have broken from a strictly chronological telling of events. A simple mystery story, for example, will often open with a murder, then have multiple “flashbacks” to prior events, as the detective seeks to pin guilt on the butler. He describes many of these interactive narratives as being not nonsequential but *polysequential*. Any number of shorter, individual sequences can occur, depending on the reader’s choices. However, these fragments of narrative still occur linearly; it’s just that they don’t flow together in a regular, repeatable sequence. He believes that a chronology will inevitably be experienced by the reader, because most people who read still view life in chronological terms, and the exciting thing about hypertext is that the reader can participate in the same self-generated time, in which he or she reads a traditional codex. He dismisses Birkerts’ concern for the loss of linearity by insisting that this is an intrinsic quality of our mental process, not something taught to us through reading. We impose it upon our reading experience. At any rate, Douglas means to point out this real time, polysequential possibility as being an advantage which this type of narrative has over traditional print.

Related to this is the idea of *closure*, and Douglas again defends hypertext with a similar type of argument saying, “we can call upon our knowledge of narrative conventions to hold our reading of the text together.” Ultimately, we will assume certain conditions about it. A character won’t inexplicably metamorphose into another, for example. Given this, closure can be merely “displaced,” or brought more under the reader’s control, and it is, in fact, not merely nonexistent in hypertext. We still read with the “anticipation of

retrospection.” He describes the experience of recognizing what he is really expecting through four separate, self-conscious readings of *Afternoon*:

What triggered my sense of having come to some closure, my sense that I did not need to continue reading *Afternoon*? Most obviously, I became conscious of my readings having satisfied one of the primary quests outlined in the narrative: what has happened to Peter’s ex-wife and child? (Douglas, p. 101)

Douglas explores this experience more deeply and comes to some conditions of encounter with the narrative that lead him to this sense:

1. The text does not default, requiring that I physically alter my reading strategy or stop reading.
2. This particular conclusion represented a resolution of the tensions that, initially, give rise to the narrative.
3. The conclusions represented a resolution that accounted for the greatest number of ambiguities in the narrative. (Douglas, pp. 102-105)

So, closure, though it does exist in this form, seems to be far more in the control, albeit subconscious at times, of the reader than the author. For Douglas this is a positive development, an empowerment, if you will, though it might prove a hindrance to the reader who wants to “hear a story” and would rather not participate in its creation and recreation.

This brings up a crucial element of hypertext not found in traditional narrative. Douglas observes, “Readers of interactive narratives can proceed only on the basis of choices they make.” This is really the crowning characteristic of

hypertext: a shift from authorial control over the narrative toward the reader. It is not as if authors has given their influence, they have simply dispersed and disguised it in smaller elements of the "story." One of the most interesting interactive narratives that Douglas works with is the CD-ROM, *Douglas Adams' Starship Titanic*. What makes this particular work so interesting is the use of "bots," or characters which are actually computer programs, created to simulate human behavior and conversation. This is achieved through a list of possible responses, which are activated by certain criteria: what your character says, does, chooses not to do, etc. Anyone who has read Adams' strange brand of science fiction would find it difficult to resist a try at this. As the "reader" moves through this loose narrative, he or she must be proactive, opening doors, speaking to characters, even making ethical decisions, all leading up to "a single endgame sequence that ratifies the reader's success in having solved the story's central puzzle." The author's contributions include all of the over ten thousand possible verbal responses, though they occur based on the words of the "reader," the individual scenarios, the layout of the virtually three-dimensional spaceship where the action occurs, probably the physical characteristics of the characters and scenery (it is largely image-driven), and the overall scheme of the thing. The "reader" is essentially in control of what happens within the parameters set by the author. In short, this is an elaborate video game with interactive dialogue.

So, the reader is the necessary participant in the action of the narrative, and what he or she chooses to do or not to do is fundamental to the final outcome of the thing. The reader has at least the illusion of real control over the action. For Douglas this is a stirring development in new media. No longer need we have the elements of the story dictated to us, as we do both in print fiction and in film. We dictate them to the other "living elements" in the story and they respond as they are programmed, whether it be a character being no longer able

to see, because mine turned out the lights, or a character eliminated, because mine killed him. Douglas believes that the fundamentals that make narrative worthwhile can still be there after we move from codex to screen

...the technical specifications and look of these (narratives) will morph and evolve during the years ahead. What will not change are the things that have always engaged us: the strings of cause and effect; generalizations about character and motivation we accrue from our study of outward dress, manner, tics; the dense weave of micro- and macroplots; and, always, underlying all of it, words, words, words. Contrary to the convictions of Sven Birkerts and other Luddite critics, technology and interactivity nudge us no closer to the extinction of *le mot juste* than we were before the invention of telegraph, telephone, television, or computers. (Douglas, p. 171)

We will return to this conviction in the final chapter.

Douglas is probably correct that these advances in narrative are in their infancy, and in the same way that early television shows were largely an adaptation of vaudeville, interactive narratives have, so far, been an unsure attempt to fit literature into the formerly more mathematical realm of computing. What is most exciting to Douglas is not what has been done with new media nor what is being done. He is most energized by the unforeseen possibilities which new media will surely bring with regard to the creation and experience of narrative. This is where the imaginings of Janet Murray come in handy.

The Future: *Holodeck* Narrative

Her book, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, explores the technologies currently under development and how they might serve to shape our narrative experience, even in the very near future. The term, "Holodeck," comes from the *Star Trek*:

Voyager science fiction television series, and refers to a “universal fantasy machine,” a device which allows the user to be, as it were, fully immersed in a narrative environment, where all five senses participate in an interaction with all but real characters. This is, for Murray, the ultimate narrative possibility imaginable, one where we participate in the very scene, dialogue, and action, actually tasting food, feeling textures, etc. It is a true virtual reality, one which changes in response to the user’s actions, and one which is indiscernible from true reality, except for the fact that the user has volunteered to enter it. If you have seen the not terribly well-acted film, *The Matrix*, you have seen an identical idea, save for the fact that the users have not volunteered.

Murray traces the development of narrative from print through radio and film and into the various advancements upon film (3-D, IMAX, Movie rides at Disney World, etc.), pointing out the narrative aspects of these media. She describes the many story-based interactive video games on the market today, and points to the connection, mainly market-based, between the various media in use: “See the movie! Ride the simulator! Play the Game!” This trend serves to subtly direct the participants toward the greater hope of a more realistic experience. They find themselves, for example, “lost” in the thrill of the new *Spiderman* ride, feeling the sensation of falling, seeing the ground rapidly approach, then feeling relief as the 3-D animated Spiderman swings in front of them and seems to break their fall, just at the last second. According to Murray, some of the most “literary” of the uses of these media have, so far, been in adventure games, which contain distinct characters, a plot, antagonism, and a goal, *closure*, if you will. She describes one of these games in which, at a crucial point in the “story,” the player’s robot partner, Floyd, rushes courageously into a dangerous room to get a crucial piece of equipment. After he retrieves it he emerges “bleeding oil and dies in your arms.”

The death of Floyd is a minor milestone on the road from puzzle gaming to an expressive narrative art. It demonstrates that the potential for compelling computer stories does not depend on high tech animation or expensively produced video footage but on the shaping of such dramatic moments. (Murray, p. 53)

Two of the technologies which Murray has researched are, she believes, the furthest advancements toward a “holodeck experience” that are currently available. One is called *Placeholder*. This is an improvement on VR (Virtual Reality), designed by two women at Interval Research Corporation, which “follows the changing full-body positions of people who move around in a natural way.” The users wear VR helmets with a 3-D visual display and body sensors, which recognize the user’s movements and respond accordingly in the display.

One inside the Placeholder world, they can enter the bodies of virtual animals and move as they move. For instance, a woman in the crow’s body spreads her arms, she sees her crow wings extend and her perspective changes as her crow body lifts off the ground. By swooping and banking appropriately she can take an exhilarating flight along a waterfall. Placeholder uses visual and sound motifs from the world of mythology to encourage collaborative imaginative play between pairs of interactors. (Murray, p.61)

Another development is the creation of the ALIVE project at MIT’s Media Lab. This “magic mirror” is a twelve-foot computer screen in which a person sees his or her reflection beside virtual cartoon characters called “intelligent agents.” These elaborately programmed “creatures” actually respond to the interactor. If he or she jumps toward one of them, they might recoil as if startled, or if the interactor kneels down as if to feed one of them, they might cautiously approach.

They are computer-based characters with complex inner lives who can sense their environment, experience appetites and mood changes, weigh conflicting desires, and choose among different strategies to reach a goal. They are persuasively alive because their behaviors are complicated and spontaneous. (Murray, p. 61)

This is truly something amazing. Though we know that these characters aren't actually alive, could enough exposure to creations that actually converse with us, respond to us and to their environment, especially if coupled with a realistic, three-dimensional, and auditorily stimulating virtual environment, possibly begin to rival reality?

So far, however, these capabilities have not produced epic tales. How will "stories" be told through these media? How will we bypass the temptation to merely create scenarios of sex and violence? Murray foresees the advent of what she calls the "cyberbard," an expert at the creation of interactive environments, who can subtly balance authorship with the freedom of the participant and provide a satisfying story which is aesthetically rich. This new kind of artist will have to master "a concrete way to structure a coherent story not as a single sequence of events but as a multiform plot open to the collaborative participation of the interactor." Though we might feel that new media threatens to scatter narrative off in a thousand different directions, Murray, like Douglas, believes the cyberbard will be building upon the same basic literary foundations on which every culture's great myths, legends, novels, and dramas are based. She quotes Ronald Tobias' list of twenty "master plots" found in all of literature:

Quest, Adventure, Pursuit, Rescue, Escape, Revenge, The Riddle, Rivalry, Underdog, Temptation, Metamorphosis, Transformation, Maturation, Love, Forbidden Love, Sacrifice, Discovery, Wretched Excess, Ascension, and Descension. (Murray, p. 186)

These, she believes will continue to be a part of all great narrative, even that which is computer-based. Interestingly, she parallels McLuhan in the expectation of a partial return to the storytelling system of the oral bards, one which relied on repetition, redundancy, and cliché. This will be especially true as thematic elements, "a common base of formulas," are concerned.

For instance, since within the conventions of a mystery story it is already customary to send the detective to a mystery bar, CD-ROMs already include bars and the interrogation of bartenders. A refinement of this convention might mean offering well-lit booths and dark corners for the detective to choose from. A well-lit table might be safer in confrontation, whereas a dark corner might invite more revealing disclosures. Or we might discover in a more domestic story that bringing breakfast to a lover or a box of crayons to a child will deepen a relationship and move the plot forward. Patterned activities like these could grow into new thematic units (like making friends or winning trust or showing loyalty) in new genres of electronic stories that focus on textured relationships rather than on puzzle solving and gunfights. (Murray, pp. 192-193)

It is easy to see why Murray calls the hypertext which so excites Yellowlees Douglas a mere "gimmick," just an additional twist or two added to otherwise regular storytelling. She expects a great deal more to develop and soon. It is also not difficult to observe that Murray is an optimist. She seems to take it on faith that we will somehow eventually "do the right thing" with new media, and neither she nor Douglas consider very deeply the potential dangers thereof. The once independent fields of Literature and Artificial Intelligence, Art and Engineering, Computer Programming and Sociology are already merging with the common goal of creating a convincing and exhilarating new reality. But aren't there important points of view not being considered in this, Man's greatest attempt, it seems, at rebuilding Eden?

CHAPTER 5
THE KALEIDOSCOPE TURNS

I used to think the brain was the most important part of the body. Then I thought, "Well look what's telling me that!"

-Emo Phillips

We don't have to look far to see the quickly creeping influence of communication technology. This very piece of writing has been largely dependent upon it. From research done over the internet, to the word processing program through which it is being composed, to the convenient format in which it will be uploaded to one of the the University's servers, new technology has altered even the creative approach to its production. At times I have trusted the programmers at Microsoft Corporation to have assembled a decent Thesaurus and spelling function. I have not as carefully planned out the whole paper as I once had to do when typewriting demanded such great accuracy. No, I can "cut and paste" entire sections of text with a quick "drop-and-drag." I can quickly see how many times I have used the term "new media" and, though it is difficult to avoid, try to prevent redundancy. Is this all good though? Does it not encourage me to be, perhaps, a bit less contemplative in the writing process? I no longer must submit to a slower process which requires me to fully think through my message before committing it to type. Instead I am free to change my mind at any point and simply alter that particular portion of text. But does this not possibly alter *what* my message will be and how it will come across, as well?

Not having to approach a piece of writing with a well-thought out plan, because I can always revise as I create, obviates the need for me to "meditate" on

my subject. The connections and organizations of ideas that once took place in the mind and soul of the writer have now become possible through a visual interface. A process that was once beneficial as much for its self-educating qualities as for those which educated others now requires much less depth of thought. And this has occurred for many other creative fields, as well. Audio production is now done largely through a visual interface which displays the soundwaves, the volume and equalization levels, etc. as characters on the screen. The same "cut-and-paste" editing capabilities are there as well. How does this affect music? Well, for one, supermodels who can't sing a discernible note can be faked into fame and fortune. Is McLuhan wrong? Are new media making us, in fact, more visual in our communication experience? Considering more deeply our experience with them may shed some light.

Looking up from this paper we can see the Academy around us increasingly submitting itself to the influence of new media. In less than a decade the University of Georgia has gone from the traditional, paper intensive registration, maintenance, communication, and submission processes to a very digital format. Students communicate with professors via e-mail, this thesis will mandatorily be submitted in an electronic format, over the internet. I have had entire classes conducted in a MUD (Multi-User Domain), where the teacher discussed the information with the students from a far away town, while they sat at computer screens, viewing a camera image of him. In *Avatars of the Word*, James O'Donnell utopianistically welcomes these new capabilities for their unhindered, unmediated usability.

Imagine an online resource where the course lectures are available not in 50 minute chunks, but in 2-5 minute video segments closely matched to a paragraph of a textbook and a video of an expensive-to-duplicate demonstration, with problem sets right at hand. (O'Donnell, p. 187)

Though there are many conveniences that come with these capabilities, a healthy, skeptical “street wisdom” might come in handy. The Academy seems to be blindly giving up its independence to the providers of these tools. In an article called, “Digital Diploma Mills: The Automation of Higher Education,” David Noble explains some effects of these changes. The ability to quickly produce interactive CD-ROM and web-based “courseware,” for example, has led many schools to “contract” professors, require them to compile their knowledge into these forms, and then send them on their way, now that their expertise has been put in a distributable and repeatable format fit for “interactive learning.”

... untenured faculty have been required to put their courses on video, CD-ROM, or the Internet or lose their job. They have then been hired to teach their own automated course at a fraction of their former compensation. The New School in New York now routinely hires outside contractors, mostly unemployed PhD's, to design online courses. The designers are not hired as employees but are simply paid a modest flat fee and are required to surrender to the university all rights to their course. The school then offers the course without having to employ anyone. And this is just the beginning. (Noble)

Noble goes on to illustrate the hugeness of this very commercially-based shift across the Western university landscape and the ability for the boardroom to directly influence the classroom, as new and untenured faculty are pressured, through the hierarchy of the academic structure, to capitulate.

It seems as if technology has given some tools to humanists that they had not, until recently, imagined having to use. And isn't this a somewhat tragic statement in itself about the condition of the Academy and Her collective Mind? Many of Western Man's great technological achievements came about as a result of a great creative mind, or group of minds, struggling to find a way to bring

their new ideas into form. The great minds of our time are, in this sense, not the humanists. They are the “left brain” people who don’t ask, “What will be the outcome of my work?” or “Is this good for Humanity?” They are largely those who are simply concerned with questions like, “Can this be done? Can I generate a realistic, three-dimensional environment with characters who look exactly like perfectly formed human beings. Never mind what others will want to see themselves doing to those, almost, humans.” They are the entrepreneurs who care not for truth, the mind, or the soul but merely for the profit margin.

Now, there may be those who resist, those for whom traditional methods and an emphasis on deep reading and a unified form of writing are key. But sadly they seem increasingly “old school.” There is already a generation who are being raised before the screen and speaker, for whom these new ways will seem quite normal and comfortable. A “wired” university will, in its experience, be simply an extension of their bedroom. In fact, they needn’t actually go to a campus at all, though many in our day still do.

Many schools, public and private, are already “meeting the kids on their level,” by teaching more and more through slickly-produced and stimulating “edutainment” video presentations. Politicians promise, “a computer in every classroom.” This ability to rapidly generate and present snippets of information, disguised as fun, cannot help but encourage an already widespread acceptance of the short attention span in those deeply exposed to it. There is now so much “out there,” so much available, that to delve too deeply into one subject is simply to stop in the middle of a stampede. One kind of information is in competition with another for exposure, and as it stands the “coolest” one wins. Traditional reading takes too long, and if a picture is worth however many words, then a video with sound, well, need I say more? Likewise, the sheer volume of information, combined with the ability for anyone with a personal computer to

produce and distribute media will certainly destroy any concept of there being valid and invalid opinions about anything. This democratization includes everyone in the information exchange, and that means the bigotted, the sinister, and the stupid. How will we retain any semblance of acceptable, of truthful, information in this new environment? What will those who “learn” in it be like? How will they communicate? Again we need not look very far.

Choose any random e-mail, even now, and you are not likely to find an eloquently written salutation. No, you will see something more akin to a verbal ejaculation, “dude chek this mp3 out,” or “what time are you getting to the house ill be at bills” (punctuation absent on purpose).

I would like to pause here to mention, quite tellingly, that I just tried to use the letter “I” on its own in the lower case in order to make a point. The program, however, will not let me. What does this say for authorial authority?

A crowning characteristic of new media is *speed of delivery*. The makers of these tools are in a race to increase processing speed and to decrease the amount of time taken to send and receive data. We are growing more and more accustomed to larger amounts of information, be it in video or audio form, being available to be experienced, manipulated, and distributed. Patience is a vice, so to speak, because a break in the transfer of data can mean a missed trade on the NASDAQ or an ineffective teleconference. This is already showing in our marketplace speech.

Contrary to Douglas’ convictions, I think text is becoming less and less important in new media. Hypertext didn’t catch on, because to put it bluntly, it’s boring. For the interactive and user-empowering aspects which he finds so liberating, a well-programmed video game will do just nicely. For the literary aspects of it, a good novel is much better, and the two don’t meet. I must confess an experience similar to Birkerts’ “immersion” while playing a certain video

game. The fantastic, surreal, three-dimensional landscapes and the fluidity of omnidirectional movement led me to, for a moment, be completely unaware of anything else. This kind of virtual environment combined with the ability to experience movement within it and manipulation of it, quickly tempts most of us away from the comparatively dull, puzzle of event snippets that is most hypertext narratives. But here is something neither of them can do:

The swede-field in which she and her companion were set hacking was a stretch of a hundred odd acres, in one patch, on the highest ground of the farm, rising above stony lanchets or lynchets - the outcrop of siliceous veins in the chalk formation, composed of myriads of loose white flints in bulbous, cusped, and phallic shapes. The upper half of each turnip had been eaten off by the live-stock, and it was the business of the two women to grub up the lower or earthy half of the root with a hooked fork called a hacker, that it might be eaten also. Every leaf of the vegetable having already been consumed, the whole field was in colour a desolate drab; it was a complexion without features, as if a face, from chin to brow, should be only an expanse of skin. The sky wore, in another colour, the same likeness; a white vacuity of countenance with the lineaments gone. So these two upper and nether visages confronted each other all day long, the white face looking down on the brown face, and the brown face looking up at the white face, without anything standing between them but the two girls crawling over the surface of the former like flies.

This passage from Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* beautifully illustrates the many different dimensions of human experience that can be "relived" in the act of reading. The setting is palpable, at the same time symbolic, and if you have read this novel, you have by this point developed deep convictions about the characters, convictions which are spoken to by the landscape and the subtle event therein. If Birkerts' exercise of describing the dock touches off a distinct

mental process in the attentive reader, this caliber of writing is able to communicate beyond the reader's mind and memory into the soul. Even this virtually eventless scene can evoke a mysterious and sublime response from us, but only if we have submitted ourselves to Hardy's linearly developed presentation of characters, setting, and events.

I'm afraid this type of "high" use of language will only be found in the book, because no other medium can combine the author's imposed coherence, direction, and creative thought with the reader's freedom of association, choice of pace, and imagination, all in a form that conforms to parameters of length and language use. What is heartbreaking is that, if current trends continue we will no longer need text, apart from mere utilitarian purposes or as an augmentation of other forms, because we will always be able to speak in a virtual "face to face" way through a merging of internet, wireless, and digital imaging and audio technologies. This capability is just around the corner. If McLuhan is correct that language is a powerful shaper of culture, what will happen when that language is reduced further and further by the ability to communicate ideas through what have become, essentially, the engines of pop culture? Birkerts sounds the alarm for the kind of language we see emerging as a result of increasing exposure to our less literary forms.

Simple linguistic prefab is now the norm, while ambiguity, paradox, irony, subtlety, and wit are fast disappearing. In their place the simple "vision thing" and myriad other "things." Verbal intelligence, which has long been viewed as suspect as the act of reading, will come to seem positively conspiratorial. The greater part of any articulate person's energy will be deployed in dumbing down her discourse. (Birkerts, p. 128)

This is quite a horrifying pronouncement to the lovers of learning. McLuhan did not have the cultural shifts of the 60's era, the advent of personal computing, the ever more racy and gory carnival of TV programming, gangster rap, and the very lucrative pornography and gambling organizations of the internet to consider when he wrote his book. He neglects to effectively consider *what* we will communicate through our tools. Proliferability of information has shaped the ugly entity of Western pop culture, which now turns and, as he believes our language does, increasingly shapes other societies into itself. Rap music is already making "phat" cash in South America, Europe, and Asia. Resourceful Iranians have recently set up satellite receivers and charged admission to see episodes of TV's breasty *Baywatch*.

Some points should be raised concerning our move toward a holodeck type of narrative experience. If we come to the point where our narrative reality is indistinguishable from true reality from the standpoint of the senses, will our choices made in that reality be real choices? Will cybersex be adultery? Will cyberkilling be the atrocity we at least used to think killing was? Sure, the victim may or the seductress may not be real, but the process of arousal or ferocity which is stirred in us is real. Even now, watching others play video games, I have observed them jerking and shifting their weight, while racing virtual motorcycles, seeming to subconsciously believe that these movements will give them the advantage they would in a real race. They are "immersed." The recent controversies concerning the often gory "first person shooter" games, enjoyed regularly by the killers at Columbine, point to a potentially chilling trend. The popularity of violence in film, music, and TV parallels the same in interactive narrative and in our nations's streets and schools. Perhaps the "self" which Birkerts sees as being nourished through exposure to coherent and meaningful narrative is being sickened by increased exposure to its narrative opposite. If a

young person has the immersive experience of honorless violence and loveless sex before they have had any real, consequential experience in the real world, how will they have any healthy understanding or be equipped for actual relationships with others? Murray has hope that ultimately a less sinister use will be made of these narrative tools, but just look around us. The “language” indeed seems to be shaping the culture, which in turn shapes and redefines the language again.

Here is a peculiar problem with the new media. It hasn’t arrived “in the fulness of time,” so to speak. It seems that the very point at which we have an unprecedented power to communicate is the one at which we have the least meaningful things to say as a society. Spend five minutes flipping through the channels on your television. As you observe the snapshots of “plastic” people who likely look nothing like you and you loved ones intermingled with “uncut” scenes of human brutality and barely clothed younger and younger women, you are bound to hear the words “sex” and “murder” numerous times. What is your average evening news broadcast essentially composed of, if not, “War,” “Disease,” “Rape,” “Political Protest,” “Terrorism,” “Intrigue,” “Natural Disaster,” and “Unnatural Disaster,” punctuated only by ads for devices which promise to add some meaning to it all.

Here is McLuhan’s Africa within, an impulsive, knee-jerk, unthinking, and carnal mass-message. It seems to be a sort of neoNeanderthalism, a propaganda of emptiness which is now free to be shouted around the globe. But this isn’t the fault of the tools themselves, is it? Surely they aren’t intrinsically bad. Murray must be right that they have the potential for truly amazing and exciting creation. When TV arrived on the scene it served, beyond being a medium for information, to bring families together in the living room. There must be a way for some “soul” to enter our peculiar new language.

Perhaps there is some way to combine the best achievements of the Humanities into some sort of neoTraditional course of study, which would include a deep immersion into the “time-tested” music, art, and literature of the world, coupled with a controlled use of media. Students might learn to discern art from logo design, music from market propaganda, and literature from political manifesto and mere narrative diversion if they were given an instructive exposure to each. Who knows, if they were “caught” early enough in their development, they might even learn to choose the better of them.

Naturally, this type of thing would require a very unhip and *post* postmodern admission of authority, a submission to a program, and other dying virtues of our once effective philosophy of education. But a balanced use of media, which also insists on a familiarity with the book and its benefits might foster the healthy combination of inspiration and self-health necessary for Murray’s cyberbard to arrive. The problems with new media cannot ultimately be blamed on the technology itself nor can those like Birkerts expect the codex to be the salvation of Humanity. I’m afraid these disruptions in the linguistic realm are merely symptoms of a deeper illness and confusion in Humanity. It seems that it is, indeed, that which comes out of us that defiles us.

So, I’m sorry that my verbal edifice, teetering as it already may be, has also been spired with a mostly dismal tower. But it does say something good that there is still a standard to which it was required to be built. I remained, as a result of it, more or less conscious of the process throughout, even though I may have used power tools instead of a hammer, and I believe I learned a great deal about my actual abilities as an assembler of meaning. Though this self-revelation may have been somewhat humiliating, I believe it is also invaluable to the

development of my mind and soul. It is my sincere hope that, somehow, students of the future will have the same privilege.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Birkerts, Sven. *The Gutenberg Elegies*. Boston & London: Faber and Faber, 1994.

Douglas, J. Yellowlees. *The End of Books - Or Books without End?* Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000.

Hardy, Thomas. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Edited by Juliet Grindle and Simon Gatrell. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Heritage Foundation. <<http://www.heritage.org>> 2000.

Kernan, Alvin. *The Death of Literature*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1990.

Kernan, Alvin, editor. *What's Happened to the Humanities?* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962.

Murray, Janet. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. New York, London, Toronto & Sydney: The Free Press, 1997

Noble, David F. "Digital Diploma Mills: The Automation of Higher Education." 1997.

National Council for Education Statistics. <<http://nces.ed.gov>> 2001.

O'Donnell, James J. *Avatars of the Word: From Papyrus to Cyberspace*.

Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press, 1998.

Pew Internet and American Life Project. <<http://www.pewinternet.org>> 2001.

Pyles, Thomas. *The Origins and Development of the English Language*. New York, Chicago, San Francisco & Atlanta: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971.

U.S. Dept. of Education Publications. <<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/stats.html>>

Washburn, Katherine and John Thornton, editors. *Dumbing Down*. New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996.