

CULTURE, TECHNOLOGIES: CONVERSANT

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The Culture Technologies Convergence Conference of Ontario and the Four Motors of Europe, organized by The McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology, at the University of Toronto, highlighted a multitude of divergences and ironies within the culture-technology complex. The conference ran parallel to a multimedia trade show, billed as 'Canada's Largest International Communications Event,' which took place at the Metropolitan Toronto Convention Centre.

These two events — the conference and the trade show — were truly parallel, in that their paths never converged. A participant was free to wander back and forth between the two sites; however, upon returning to the conference from a visit to the trade show, McLuhan Program Director Derrick De Kerckhove observed that his usually very high level of energy seemed to be utterly depleted from forays into this parallel space. He speculated that perhaps the reason was that a trade show represented technology without culture. A trade show, as such, would be an expression of the traditional dichotomy or divergence between technology and culture. Alternatively, one might view a trade show as a culture and technology conference without a sense of humour. Exhausting. Thankfully, however, the Culture Technologies Convergence Conference did indeed possess a sense of humour.

From within my general thesis that a culture-technologies convergence is a convergence of the banal and the sublime — a breathtaking opportunity for postmodern excrescences — there are two general remarks that can be made in connection with this event:

1. That the most attractive presentations involved participants in a way that seemed to be profoundly interactive; and,
2. that beyond a certain point, the banalities of human existence seem to limit our access to the sublime.

Toshio Iwai (artist in residence at the Centre of Art and Media Technology (ZKM) in Karlsruhe) and Paolo Paolini (professor of Physics and Computer Science at the Politecnico de Milano) presented radically different sorts of works but nevertheless seemed able to intrigue participants with what I would want to characterize as the possibility of profound interactivity.

Paolini's interactive philosophical library was perhaps the most intellectually titillating presentation, largely due to his personal charisma and remarkable dexterity in manipulating the program. The idea of the programme was to leap frog through an interactive philosophical encyclopedia, with a bantering, brilliant narrative of references resulting from the inquiries and interrogations of the programme. In much the same way as a magician pulls a rabbit out of a hat, or a private investi-



gator finds a suspect hidden at the bottom of a wine glass, Paolini entertained the participants by revealing the name 'Marshall McLuhan' at the end of an esoteric line of questioning that had invoked everything from Plato to the French Revolution.

In a sense, this brilliant presentation displayed the inherent banality of the most sublime aspects of Paolini's two fields: physics and computer science. That is, the results of banal data base research when married to hypertext modelling appeared to be nothing short of miraculous. Nevertheless, the rather magical results of an Alice-in-Wonderland sojourn along a particular data base path was, in the end, (or from the beginning perhaps) already built into the modelling of data and the programming. Thus, Paolini managed to dazzle his audience with the interactive philosophical encyclopedia because he had insider information. With the skill of an artist who has designed the object at hand, Paolini was deeply aware of how to evoke its most glamorous utilization potential. The realities for an ordinary user would probably more closely resemble the slow simmer of a plodding, step-by-step, banal investigational strategy. But what Paolini had shown was just how glamorous and fun and bright the interactive philosophical encyclopedia could be; he showed off for us with such charm that we did not even care that he was 'cheating,' so to speak. The final target had really already been hit before the hunt had begun; but, for just a moment one felt one was in the presence of superior knowledge. Its a bit like getting to know what death is like without actually dying. It was a moment of the 'sublime' as it pertains to technology.

The sort of educational interactivity introduced by Paolini might be viewed as an alternative to unextraordinary educational situations. Greg Roach, head of HyperBole Studios in Seattle, and author of *The Madness of Roland*, said to be the world's first interactive novel, says of teaching that it is like cooking a potato with your brain. How much more appealing would be the quasi-'bombs away' approach of Paolini's romp through rich fields of data, connected in ways that proved to be entertaining, insightful, and even sensuous? The interactive philosophical encyclopedia dumps dry data into a hopper that can disperse the seeds as quickly as an individual's interactivity velocity dictates. Rather than making oneself ill just waiting for the speed of a conventional classroom to pick up, the interactive programme invites the investigator to an enchanted gallop through a dark night of ignorance, past the suicidal hour of the wolf, toward the sublime sunrise of knowledge or awareness. A potato would require no time at all to boil with a bomb.

Toshio Iwai also evoked a sense of the profundity of interactivity from the conference participants. Working in the child's corner of the virtual room of human experience, rather than in Paolini's intellectual corner,

Iwai charmed us with presentations of his reinventions of child-like perceptions and realizations. As a child, Iwai had been intrigued by sketching everyday object sequences in a book, then animating them by flipping the pages. In the flip-book everyday objects came alive. Of course they “moved,” but more than that, something about the sublime nature of an everyday, banal object came through and moved Iwai. Remaining true to his interest in beginnings, in origins, even in the banalities of everyday objects and experiences, Iwai sees in the phenakistiscope (invented in 1832) and the zoetrope (invented in 1883) an early evolution of interactive devices. For example, with the zoetrope, the winding handle speed, controlled by the observer-participant, corresponds to the image speed. Thus, in the childhood of the cinematic art, one finds the childhood of interactivity. Even through the burlesque period of the early silent cinema, with its use of *viva-voce* narration on stage or a live piano player below, there was a sense of involvement of, if not precisely interactivity with, the audience. This progressive stunting of the element of interactivity has been addressed obliquely and internally by films such as Woody Allen’s *Purple Rose of Cairo* and Susan Seidelman’s *The Dutch Master*.

In the Woody Allen picture, Mia Farrow falls in love with a movie character — a character from a movie within a movie. The character from the movie that Mia Farrow repeatedly goes to see, steps off the screen, comes to Mia, and declares his love for her. He says that he has seen her coming to see him day after day. In the Seidelman short film, a young woman who is engaged to be married begins to go to the museum on her lunch hour, instead of lunching with her dental hygienist friends. She is mesmerized by one particular seventeenth century painting and returns to it day after day. One day, as she gazes at the painting, the young woman enters into the world of the painting.

In cinematic terms, the two women in the films become conduits for audience identification. It is not genuine interactivity, even for an audience member who is of that sort of sensibility: a harlequin-esque, sad female figure who wants more out of life than the banalities of her current existence. Rather than engaging in interactivity, such an audience member is subsumed within the narrative. It becomes an act of the imagination, instead of an ‘act’ per se. Thus, ‘interactivity’ might seem to be in some conflict with ‘identification’.

Nevertheless, the example of a character in a film interacting with someone from a movie or a painting within the film, does represent a kind of hybrid midpoint between the interactivity of a zoetrope operator in days past, and today’s computer-television multi-media interactivity. It seems that in the interval between the ‘primitive’ age of technology and the present age (whatever we might wish to call it), the degree of human

participation (interaction) with the situation diminished. But now, Pandora is awake again, lusting to make up for lost time, or at least to make up for slow time. Iwai's inventions are as incisive as they are authentic, primarily due to his attachment to childlike perceptions and wonderment.

For example, in "Ugo Ugo Lhuga LIVE", a Japanese television program for children, there is a section called 'UgoLhu CG Sumo'. In nationwide call-ins, children across Japan can speak with the computer-generated characters. While watching the Sumo wrestlers on their television sets at home, the children scream into the phone; the "side" with the greater volume over the phone lines pushes the opposing wrestler out of the ring.

Other presenters with a focus on what is sometimes referred to as 'virtual reality' at the Culture Technologies Convergence Conference, from Montxo Algora, founder and director of Art Futura, to Philippe Queau, director of IMAGINA, were exciting and imaginative, but also provided participants with a sense of the shadows of irony lurking behind the bright promise of a culture-technologies convergence. . . .

Montxo Algora's Art Futura is an annual art performance and technology event in Barcelona. In 1992, Algora directed *Memory Palace*, the Art Futura performance event based on a text by William Gibson. Algora is intrigued by art such as the film *Blade Runner* and the William Gibson novel *Neuromancer* because, as Algora says, it is "around-the-corner". Algora's sophisticated computer graphics video showed a spaceman riding a great white bird through a canyon into a triangular sun, a sort of eery, glistening, translucent lily. But the video was a pilot for a movie that never got made. Algora also presented *Memory Palace*, written by William Gibson, and scored by Peter Gabriel. The dulcet tones and swirling images represented a place that seemed to be self-destructing. The point here might be that one cannot be 'enhanced' electronically without losing one's 'memory palace'. The self-destructing site of *Memory Palace* seemed to represent the culture-technologies conundrum in which the transformations at the outer reaches of the technologies go beyond what we seem to be capable of epistemologically. If the William Gibson notion of neural implantations, i.e., 'jacking-in', is "around-the-corner", does this mean that any of us might turn a corner soon and possibly find a user-accessible booth, a 'public access' concession where we might either jack-in, jack-out, or perhaps change the channels of electronic neural impulses sent to our brains? More fun than Prozac for the manic-depressive . . . more immediate than rehabilitation for the jailbird . . . not to mention more 'alterity' than the 'local' might welcome.

In *Memory Palace*, the place seemed to be self-destructing. Analogously, as what we currently perceive as 'memory' is superseded by neural implantation channels, then a sense of community, 'globalism' and the

grand marriage of technology and culture, become somewhat bewildering, we begin to wonder who the computer programmers are, and so forth. Yet, we are still able to relate to the Harrison Ford character in *Blade Runner* and the amount of courage required to cast one's future lot with an android who might be human, particularly if one is passionately involved with that android. Similarly, we are able to identify with the entities in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* because their superior electronic capacities do not reach beyond what we can imagine as sort of merely ultra-humanoid. But, — and here lies the rub — to engage in these "thought experiments", in these "lab experiments," we necessarily venture forth from 'memory palaces' which are richly established and intact. The irony is somewhat akin to Zeno's Paradox: we can never reach the newly transformed, technologically enhanced alterity or otherness; because we must always already go half the distance first.

Just as in the case of 'death', we do not really know what lies on the other side; hence, we imagine and we imagine and we imagine. We speak of the decline of community in contemporary life, and of how technology is perhaps facilitating a transformed sense of community through the Net, the World Wide Web, etc., complete with a full spectrum of human-style passions, such as 'flaming', which is a fit of impolite communication between hot-tempered entities over the Net. Yet, here we are, after all is said, if not done: bodies, minds, thoughts, motions, emotions... moving ourselves about, or lying under the covers, as the case may be. The irony at this juncture would seem to be that our experiments are as delicious and inviting as they are malicious and taunting. Talk of community disintegration, whether the scale be global, local, or a community-of-one in a solipsistic universe, seems almost to be the babbling by onlookers. It can seem like this if one is midstream in a virtuality (such as *Blade Runner*, *Neuromancer*, *Mona Lisa Overdrive* or a neural implantation programme simulating a Star Trekkian holodeck). On the other hand, from the point of view of a babbling onlooker, the virtuality-riders may seem to be hi-tech ostriches who are fooling themselves, since what they perceive to be genuinely other is merely illusory escapism.

Jeffrey Shaw, director of the Institute for Visual Media at the Centre of Art and Media Technology (ZKM) in Karlsruhe, spoke of new strategies for interactivity and virtuality. His 1989 *Legible City* allows a spectator to bicycle in a computer-generated virtual urban landscape of words and sentences. Shaw develops visualizations for various kinds of data sites: art, science, archeology, medicine, etc. Shaw introduced EVE (i.e., extended virtual environment), which is a research and development project, an apparatus for artistic expression being used by the artists in residence at Karlsruhe. The VR apparatus, EVE, is going to be housed in a dome with

an omnimax lens — which itself costs more than the whole of EVE — with the idea being that image could be projected over the entire dome.

Shaw expressed interest in the minimalist architecture of the dome, saying it has “a very thin skin,” a skin that “de-materializes once the image hits it...[so that] the images implies a space beyond the skin...” In a curious way, this statement by Shaw is reminiscent of something that has been suggested as a way to differentiate between cinema and painting. The claim is that painting is framed in more ways than one, and that the spectator looks to the painting for a presentation of a composite world, reflected within the frame of the painting. By contrast, the argument claims that a film points the spectator to a “world” beyond the given images. There is no strong sense of a ‘frame’ to the cinematic image, there is instead, the suggestion of a world that exists beyond the screened scene. Looked at along these lines, Jeffrey Shaw’s investigative narrative, could indeed constitute a site halfway between illusory escapism and a genuine alternative.

Another facet of the Culture Technologies Convergence Conference, quite distinct from its William Gibson-style propulsion towards electronically-enhanced humanoids, concerned marketing. This topic was addressed by a panel entitled ‘Design Interfacing Technology’, which included John Tyson, Vice-President of the Corporate Design Group for Bell-Northern Research in Ottawa; Gaetano Pesce, renowned architect and industrial designer based in both Italy and in New York; and Bruce Mau, graphic designer from Toronto. Here again, shades of paradox seemed to hover around the issues. Tyson’s concern to match telecommunication systems with user needs was delivered, indeed, according to his own motto for products and services, at a “new level of profound simplicity, self-evidence and conspicuous value.” Once delivered, however, Tyson’s message seemed to explode, and the panel as a whole gradually disintegrated.

On the ‘simplicity’ issue, Tyson had the following to say: (1) technology is kind, vis a vis employment; (2) technology directs culture; and (3) technology affects, while culture effects. Tyson stated that technology converges at the speed of light; culture converges at the speed of generations. What was he saying? That their velocities were so very divergent, their convergences would ever more be simply limping, out-of-sync parallels? Tyson seemed to be anxious to bring users up-to-speed, so to speak. The ‘user-friendly’ icon of an envelope (i.e., to signify a message) figured prominently in one of Tyson’s demos. In a curious way, Tyson seemed to be a split self. He wished to deliver value to users, but, he also wished they would adapt to, and adopt the value inherent in, the available technology. His application of the concept of ‘convergence’ referred principally to convergence of various technological formats such as computer, video and television. Since users were deemed to be slow and simple,

compared to the rapidity and complexity of technology, there was a sense of frustration regarding the interface of technological design with cultural use and attitudes.

Toronto-based graphic designer Bruce Mau, who works on uniquely imaginative projects with artist such as Claes Oldenberg, didn't really address the issues of marketing or the technology-user interface. Mau capitalized on Tyson's seriousness, saying that since Tyson had done all of that work, he was therefore free to focus on the fluid and the ambiguous, the process-oriented, the sensory, the intuitive and the imaginative. Mau's hypothesis that imagination is device-independent was contested by Derrick de Kerckhove whose position rested on the idea that art is a link between culture and technology. In response to this Mau came up with the almost Crocean assertion that is possible to have an idea without expression, possible to have art that exists within the imagination alone.

Gaetano Pesce criticized Tyson and Mau for polarizing the issue of technology and culture, suggesting that we remember that technology should be regarded as a tool, instrumental in moving toward a better life, and that greater cultural freedom should result from this greater technological knowledge. During the discussion period for this forceful, and unquestionably entertaining, panel an individual whom we might call a 'babbling onlooker' did a bit of 'flaming,' from the sidelines. He warned us all that we should not fool ourselves into believing that technology was being placed in the service of the general population at all; that, in fact, technology was being used to enslave us all. It was not perceived to be within the scope of the panel to elaborate on a moral debate about whether we run technology, or whether technology runs us.

Philippe Queau, founder of IMAGINA, as keynote speaker for the Culture Technologies Convergence Conference, posed the question whether culture and technology really can converge or merge. He characterised culture as directed toward ends; technology toward means. Queau also stated the importance of recognizing the 'revolution' as more than merely technological, but also as 'scriptural'. In other words, the means of representation are shifting. In this regard, the current revolution is potent in a way similar to the Gutenberg invention of the press. It transforms links between abstraction and concrete representation and old distinction must move over — e.g., an 'image' is no longer a fragile 'copy', but a thing-itself.

In the current crucible phase of culture-technologies relations, it isn't easy to see how profound and generic an impact a 'scriptural' revolution may have upon the culture. It is true that if a copy can be an original, then at the very least, some phrases that used to qualify as oxymorons will have to move over. In the end, thought, will much more than a sense of ontology, of epistemology, of privacy, of autonomy, of what counts as an

oxymoron or a bipolarity, be transformed? Some categorical shifts will inform cultural thinking, but will the laws of thought actually change? To be sure, a scriptural shift is a profound event, but it might well be possible that any use of technologies beyond the most banal — of data bases and access possibilities — will become a cultural castoff. The shame is that much delight and insight could be wasted, and all for the lack of an attitude of adventure, or curiosity.

Viewing the relation between culture and technologies as one in which technologies gradually enhance the consciousness of the cultural through its scriptural revolution, is the first step toward looking for a cultural revolution in terms of its metaphysical and ontological dimensions. Analysed along such lines, one can begin to see the William Gibson-style convergence of technology and culture as a possibility. Once our forms of representation shift, the varieties and points of reference do so also almost kaleidoscopically. Virtuality and reality are perhaps indistinguishable from one another, and in any case, not to be placed hierarchically with respect to each other. Presto! We have redefined our metaphysics, because what counts as 'physical' *per se*. has shifted. Presto! We have redefined our ontology, in so far as what counts as 'being' has shifted. Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* would possess a different set of implications than it has in the past.

Who is to say that 'being virtual' is less empowering or substantive than 'being real'? In this context, 'being virtual' is an assumption of an identity or characterization which incorporates electronically enhanced conditions of existence: although it would not necessarily involve neural implantations. Because neural implants, or other modes of electronic enhancement of the individual, may simply be uncomfortable, perhaps whether the scriptural revolution inspires a radical cultural revolution — bringing about a grand, new convergence of the powerful forces of technologies and culture — will ultimately depend on comfort, human comfort.

I cannot immediately imagine that this could be so; but it is a possibility, along with all the other possibilities.