

ASLEEP IN THE STOREHOUSE OF CULTURE

The McLuhan Conference and the Technologies of Remembering

KEVIN DOWLER

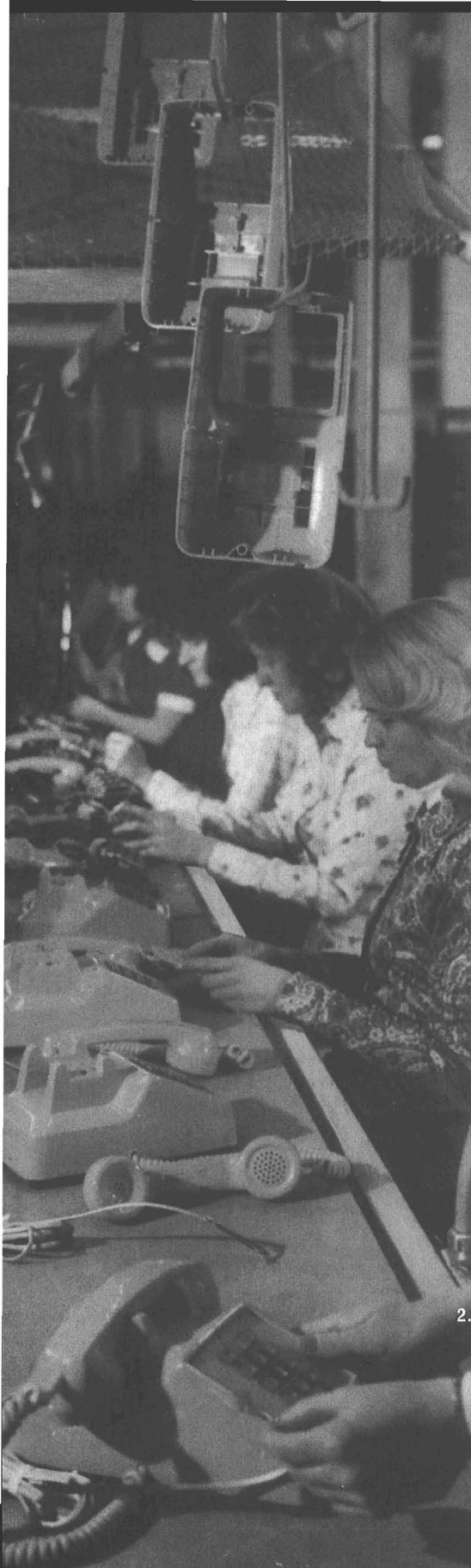
1. Day three of the McLuhan Culture Technologies Convergence Conference, entitled “The Business of Culture,” took place, appropriately enough, in the rehearsal hall of the Joey and Toby Tannenbaum Opera Centre. Whether this rehearsal would result in tragedy or *buffo* had yet to be determined. What was to be operated upon that day was the cultural institution, particularly the museum, in an attempt to transplant new technologies in the hope of revivification.

In a sort of analogue to “the king is dead — long live the king,” the presumption was that the cultural institution (the museum, the art gallery, the library) was moribund, largely as a consequence of inaccessibility. The “new technologies” offered a glimmer of hope for the restoration of the repositories of culture to their rightful place.

In his opening remarks, moderator Robert Fulford referred to museums and libraries as “memory machines,” a phrase that reminded me of Freud’s magic tablet. The *Wunderblock* is a memory machine; it is in the wax itself, underneath the onion skin, that the impressions are registered. The wax tablet is, at the same time, a palimpsest with each memory disfigured as a new one is written over top. The museum, on the other hand, seems less like a palimpsest, and more like an accretion, in which the weight of the top layers does not appear to crush the material below. With the tablet, it is a question of how to recover repressed memories which have been obliterated by subsequent writings; with the museum, the problem seems to be, not the recovery of memory, but making sense of the flood of de-realized images. The problem is not unlocking the storehouse, but finding the key to the code of the objects arranged inside.

If, however, these repositories represent a dead history, it is not immediately clear how the transformation of artifacts into data could reactivate their souls. The notion that they are dead begs the question as to how they died in the first place. Thus, any post-mortem would logically begin with an autopsy inquiring into the cause of death. If the history locked inside these objects no longer serves “the needs of the present”, then it is not at all apparent how the application of new technologies can effect their status.

At the conference, the arias for the new redemptive technologies were rehearsed on a raised dais, performed against a black velvet limbo-curtain backdrop: a black hole that signals the possibility of the erasure of history in favour of the staging and re-staging of an ever-present. The “business” of culture hovered in this darkness like a miasma in a seance, in the form of an ironized *Jetzt-Zeit* (Benjamin’s “now-time”), as if — to mix similes — the wax skin had been permanently peeled off of the *Wunderblock*, the sty-



lus waving in thin air. Black holes, as we know, suck the light out of everything. What kind of ray machine, then, what kind of tractor beam, would be needed in order to illuminate the memory potentials locked inside the museum's store room?

Next to the singers was a large baroque table upon which sat a number of computers. Unlike the image of the black hole, here we seemed to have something more concrete. Of course, since we were in the opera, this was not a real table but a stage table, performing as a baroque table. Even though this pretense made its meaning fragile and confused, the table nevertheless reminded us that, somewhere, furniture is required, both as a cultural and as a material substrate: a computer must rest on something. Again, this poses the question of history, but in a slightly different way. The image of limbo requires us to ask whether new music can be played without regard for that which it supersedes; alternately, the table reminds us that culture does not emerge *ex nihilo*. The latter, however, also leads us to consider what meaning the cultural substrate provides for the needs of the present, if any at all.

We thus begin with three images: memory machine, black hole, tabletop. Each of these images, as will be seen below, invoke other images: images of memory, from memory, of history. My task will be simply to try and build some bridges between these images, in the hopes of provoking, if not satisfying, curiosity about images and their history: through the image, a reflection on the image.

The conference presenters suggested that merely opening up access to the storehouses of memory, replacing the order of the word with the order of the image, would in itself be adequate to empower individual and collective recollection. We have to ask whether this is sufficient. The "new technologies" offer a glimmer of hope in this regard, but nevertheless mediate our experience of the souvenir as problematically as the conventional museum. By offering potentially universal access, the question of history itself is left undisturbed. In the end, it is the damage caused by history that must be addressed, which cannot be redeemed by merely making images of and from history available.

2. According to Marshall McLuhan, "we impose the form of the old on the content of the new."¹ In McLuhan's formulation, new media would act (at least initially) as support for the content of the media it had superseded. This notion is perhaps most easily recognized in the advent of television, which in its earliest days was seen as a medium perfectly suited for the transmission of theatre.² In time, however, television moved from this hybrid period to the discovery of its "specific form," — a process described

*My fate is to live amid varied and
confusing storms. But for you per-
haps, if as I hope and wish you will
live after me, there will follow a
better age. This sleep of forgetfulness
will not last forever. When the dark-
ness has been dispersed, our descen-
dants can come again in the former
pure radiance.*

— *Petrarch, Africa IX*

The past went that-a-way.

— *Marshall McLuhan*

*Museums are the family sepulchres
of works of art.*

— *Theodor W. Adorno*

elsewhere by McLuhan.³ Keeping this in mind, it could be argued that to transpose the theatre onto television marks an imposition on the video medium which, because it is not the stage, requires its own distinct aesthetic form. It is the discovery of a new medium's proper form that would mark the moment when it came into its own. That this was so in the case of television lends some empirical weight to McLuhan's formula. Its value, however, is belied to some extent by being caught within the web of modernity — particularly its aesthetic component — insofar as the negative dimension of his claim rests on a notion of ontological specificity as it applies to each medium. The kind of progressivism that motivates his claim is evident in the implicit devaluation of the old as an imposition on the creative potential of the new.

In a further refinement of this dictum, McLuhan remarks that "In the name of 'progress', our official culture is striving to force the new media to do the work of the old."⁴ This idea of force underlines McLuhan's insistence that new media have different "work" to do. Further, the invocation of the term "progress" takes us to the core of modernity. Expressed again in the form of a negative judgement, this claim is warranted to the degree that progress requires that the past be overcome, obliterated, in favour of the ever-new. The militaristic implications are clear: a battle is to be waged with the old (against "official culture") in order to capture the terrain of the new. Again, this has its aesthetic manifestation in the rhetoric of the avant-garde. The traces of military rhetoric in McLuhan are reminiscent of earlier battles fought on the terrain of culture: we are reminded, not so accidentally, of the "querelle entre les anciens et modernes."

Occurring in the late seventeenth-century, this quarrel was the product of the erosion of the authority of tradition with regard to both knowledge and taste. With the emergence of the subject through Cartesian thought and the empiricism of Bacon, the "moderns" asserted their rationalist claim to superiority over the ancients. According to Matei Calinescu, this quarrel "resulted in the liberation of reason from the restricting fetters imposed on it by the renaissance idolatry of classical antiquity."⁵ The quarrel rested on the tension between a future orientation and one which looked to the past. McLuhan's comments replay this argument in a contemporary setting, and seek to release us, as did the original moderns, from the "fetters" of idolatry of the past.

If we return to our image of the baroque table, however, we observe the relation between the past and the future in a different way. Here, the old supports the new; the table provides a surface for the computer. McLuhan's statements try to evade this, implying that it is the cultural substrate itself — the table — that hinders progress. As Lynn Spigel has

shown in relation to domestic space — again in the case of television — the problem has to do with furniture.⁶ It is not therefore just a matter of old content being imposed on the form of a new medium's software, but also the physical dilemma of where to put the hardware. We thus have a set of material conditions which must be met: the computer provides access to a dematerialized cyberspace which is nevertheless located somewhere in physical space. In addition, it rests on a set of material supports (the table, e.g.) that have been produced within and through a social and cultural configuration.

This leads us to another striking image, attributed to Bernard of Chartres in the early twelfth century, in which we can uncover a direct analogue to our computers on the tabletop. The image is that of "dwarfs on giant's shoulders." In this simile, the dwarves are the moderns, standing atop the giants of the past. The implication is that the knowledge of the moderns is small in comparison to the accumulated tradition of their forebears, but, that by standing astride this tradition, they are nevertheless able to see further than those who came before them.

As Calinescu writes:

Bernard's simile is vivid and easy to visualize, which explains its immediate imaginative appeal; and its subtle ambiguity succeeds in reconciling some of the basic claims of the *moderni* (namely, that they occupy a more advanced position in comparison to the ancients) with the requirements of an age for which tradition was still the only reliable source of value. . . . It was certainly the ambiguity, by which one enjoyed the freedom to stress only one of the two meanings combined in the metaphor, that made Bernard's dictum into a rhetorical commonplace.⁷

This simile poses a very different relationship to the past than that encapsulated in McLuhan's dicta, yet Bernard's simile foreshadows McLuhan's ambivalence through the very ambiguity underlined by Calinescu. What is perhaps most striking is the sense of modesty in relation to the past contained in this figure, as contrasted with more recent acts of hubris. It is perhaps indicative of the hubris of our own *moderni* that Bernard's simile should be nothing but a rhetorical commonplace today.

Here, if we are acute enough, we can recognize the role of the baroque as the mannered vengeance of the modern on the classical. Our table functions as a pastiche, reminding us that the baroque was always-already façade. It also reminds us of the decadent side of modernity, and the problematic potential of spectacle shorn of tradition. This critique, or, perhaps more accurately, this fear of the image, stretches back at least to Rousseau's *Lettre à M. d'Alembert*, if not to Plato's quarrel with mimesis. The images of the baroque and the electro-modern are (over)saturated with the history of this discourse of negative dispositions toward culture.

Here, then, comes our question about furniture: what is furnished; on what do we rest?

It seems that, unlike McLuhan's adage, the content of the old is that of the new; indeed, it is the persistence of particular frames of debate and discourses that is most striking. The old dichotomies of high-culture versus low-culture, old versus new, dominant versus marginal mark the debates as indelibly as they have since the transmission of classical culture became the centre of debate in the Middle Ages. This was particularly true of certain of the conference participants. For instance, Grant McCracken, curator at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, could not seem to get beyond a discussion of what he claimed was an intellectual disdain for popular culture. In contrast, Ihor Holubisky privileged art as the locus of transformative possibilities, dismissing popular culture in the very terms McCracken problematized. The persistent reproduction of the same debates simply marked the reiteration of predispositions in which the production of value remained unexamined.

In the introduction to his lecture, Hans Peter Schwarz, director of the ZKM Media Museum in Karlsruhe, pointed out that within progressive modernity liberation from the myth of nature was replaced by the myth of technological emancipation. Schwarz reminded us that the critique of this myth, in Germany at least, was non-partisan, and could be found in the work of both Heidegger on the right and the Frankfurt School on the left. In the "Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger warns that nature (and therefore humans as well) risks becoming "standing reserve," that is, mere potential energy (labour power in the case of humans).⁸ Likewise, Adorno and Horkheimer emerged with the concept of *Zweckrationalität*, or instrumental reason, which reduced humanity in a similar fashion to a resource in a cost-benefit logic.⁹ Each of these describe, in differing ways, the extent to which technologies — contrary to the myth of liberation — represent further forms of enslavement, indeed the enslavement of nature itself. Hubris enters with the assumption that liberation from nature as symbolized by technologies would imply freedom.

The museum, as a "memory machine," is an interesting case in point. As a technology, the museum is certainly involved in the recirculation of the past. Does it, however, participate in an instrumental logic? If museums are "the family sepulchres of works of art," it would seem that, as a technology, museums produce the death of history. Rather than functioning as the storehouse of memory, they work to suck memory out of culture in order to leave the lifeworld free to become fully instrumentalized. The museum thus re-presents history bereft of meaning, a history in which meaning is overtaken by display value. The question to be posed with regard to new technologies is whether this recirculation promises a

re-membering, or whether it functions more as a dis-membering — a return to the gravitational pull of the black hole.

We must therefore ask, in relation to new technologies, what it means to take up the “challenge,” as the director of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, George MacDonald put it, to digitize “cultural fragments” so that “virtual museums” could function as “nodal points for dispersed ethnicity.” What MacDonald referred to as a “digital resynthesis” of cultural artifacts is proposed as a counter-diasporic strategy on behalf of those cultures desiccated and dispersed by colonial power. In the absence of an *in situ* culture, “virtual ethnicity” emerges as the means by which to reconstitute power lost in the transactions with imperial nations. MacDonald’s proposal is simultaneously compelling and highly problematic. It is easy enough to detect the residues of Enlightenment thinking here, and the temptation to dismiss this as another instance of technological utopianism is seductive. His gambit nevertheless poses the question of the liberatory potential hidden within artifacts which cannot be avoided. Do they act merely as “standing reserve,” understood in the negative sense employed by Heidegger? Or, does this suggest a hitherto overlooked positive dimension to “standing reserve,” in which these artifacts, if properly revealed, have redemptive capacities?

In terms of aesthetic experience, we have certainly treated artistic works as harbouring such potential; theories of aesthetic experience such as that of Hans Robert Jauss are exemplary in this regard.¹⁰ Such theories, however, are rendered problematic by certain modernist aesthetic theories, particularly those emerging from the Frankfurt School, in which affinity to works of art have withered away. Consider this comment by Habermas:

Perhaps it is typical of the ahistorical mode of perception proper to aesthetic modernity that particular epochs lose their own profile in favor of a heroic affinity of the present with the most remote and the most primitive:

The decadent strives to relate itself in a leap to the barbaric, the wild, and the primitive.¹¹

Here, there is nothing but the present (dwelling in the shadow of a forgotten myth of origins) in which the semantic potential of myth itself remains hidden. If any identity remains, it is in a form shorn of historical meaning and consigned to the irrationality of a pure aesthetic, a “cramped optics that render one insensible to the traces and the existing forms of communicative rationality.”¹² Arguably, the recirculation of cultural fragments is undertaken within this perspective — hence the hubris of the assumption that a database could restore the aura of power to cultural artifacts and provide the conditions whereby they might communicate that power.

To suggest that the meanings hidden within cultural objects can be

redeemed is to take the notion of “standing reserve” in a whole new direction. Here, the “dubious continuum of empty time” (as Lutz Niethammer expresses it) is open to the “activation of alternative traditions.”¹³ The hope is that the continuous recirculation of images shorn of meaning can be replaced by a principle that would bring to light the meaning of history and mobilize it in the present. Niethammer is referring to Benjamin, who he claims “was recalling the hopes of redemption stored in the religious tradition, so as to introduce them as a meaning and yardstick into human contact with history — both in reference to the past and for political action in the present.”¹⁴ This, then, would be to treat the notion of “standing reserve,” in a positive sense; that is, as a history in which the religious tradition (embodied in artifacts) can be brought forth as a set of potentials held up as exemplary for present day behaviour. That technology might also reduce culture (as it does nature) to a reservoir of potential energy might just, following MacDonald’s logic, provide the conditions necessary for the reactivation of history and culture. Thus, it may be possible, given the resources of “existing forms of communicative rationality” that Habermas insists are still available, to claim a potential value in the reconstruction of culture via new technologies, rather than remaining in the dismissive stance of continuous negative critique.

The idea that there exists an underlying principle that animates history is clearly central to Benjamin’s thought. In the first of his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin describes “an automaton constructed in such a way that it could play a winning game of chess.”¹⁵ Underneath the chess table, “a little hunchback who was an expert chess player sat inside and guided the puppet’s hand by means of strings.” Here, Bernard’s dwarf reappears, but in a new guise. As Benjamin comments on this machine:

One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device. The puppet called “historical materialism” is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight.

Benjamin suggests that an underlying principle — theology — acts as the resource that would allow history to be put into play in the present. Behind materialism thus stands an important figure which allows it to win the match. The assumption is that in the converse situation — in the absence of theology — historical materialism would be unlikely to win. History thus has no meaning without an activating principle, which Benjamin implies still continues despite its hidden character. Thus, something more than mere analysis is required; what is needed is a way to discover the principle that would activate history and make it real.

Benjamin’s image of a wizened theology can be mapped quite success-

fully onto the contemporary moment. The dwarf here is in fact not the modern in Bernard's simile, but the giant of the past, shrunken almost beyond recognition. Despite its hidden character, the dwarf nevertheless manages to keep the machine running, even though we may no longer realize it. History, like theology, is indeed kept far out of sight in the present, which potentially accounts for the inability for some sort of rescuing critique to ignite the imagination.

3. For McLuhan, attachment to the past was highly problematic. Indeed, his resistance to history leads him to decry our tendency to seek comfort in the familiar:

When faced with a totally new situation, we tend always to attach ourselves to the objects, to the flavor of the most recent past. We look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future.¹⁶

Not only is history to be left behind, but any comfort it may offer is to be disdained. Only the cold warrior is equipped to face the future head-on. In a way, this statement implies a need that is being overlooked: the past may offer some sort of hope because the future looks so bleak. It is thus somewhat ironic to discuss the museum within the context of McLuhan's thought. Its attachment to the past, and its fetishization of objects of memory constitute a restraint. The production of history becomes difficult under this regime.

It was precisely the liberation from history that would be, for McLuhan, the path to redemption. As Arthur Kroker points out, McLuhan "privileges the aesthetic value of creative freedom as the locus of a 'redeemed' human civilization."¹⁷ It is not clear though, what kind of redemption it would produce as its result. To describe McLuhan in this way is to implicate him in what Habermas finds so abhorrent in Nietzsche, namely, the aestheticization of power, in which thought is exiled into value judgements alone. It is also to succumb to a purely negative critique in which redemption is in fact unavailable, given the groundlessness created by the substitution of aesthetic value for reason. This is the aporia into which the Frankfurt School drove itself (as Habermas points out),¹⁸ although unlike McLuhan, as part of an unrelenting attack on the idea of progress itself. For the Frankfurt School, it was the spectre of reason gone awry — in the name of progress — that was destructive; with McLuhan, unreason in the form of enslavement to history was the shadow to be battled with.

McLuhan's image of the rear-view mirror finds its doppelgänger yet again in Benjamin. In the ninth and most famous "thesis," Benjamin describes the angel of history in the following terms:

His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where *we* perceive a chain of events, *he* sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. *This* storm is what we call progress.¹⁹

Again, a similar image leads to an altogether different conclusion. To imagine that historical time unfolds in a linear fashion is an illusion; it is in fact "one single catastrophe." Progress here is a storm which prevents the angel from awakening the dead, which is to say, prevents it from releasing the potentials of history itself. The wind of progress blows with such force that the angel cannot stop itself.

McLuhan insists that we are also blown backwards into the future, or at least, that we constantly look backwards. This is only true in Benjamin's example however, if we identify with the angel itself. Yet, to do so, in the conditions described by Benjamin, would be another act of hubris. This is precisely the act of identification McLuhan presupposes when he recommends that we should wrench our eyes from the mirror and direct them towards the road. Benjamin, however, makes it quite clear that the "we" in this predicament are quite distinct from the "he," the angel. The "we" — us — inhabit an illusion: the idea that progress would lead to freedom. Thus, "the significance" of this image, as Niethammer writes, "involves an opposition between the angel's view (catastrophe) and ours (events, progress)..."²⁰

What is important then, is not imagining that we are the angel, but rather trying to grasp what it is that the angel sees:

He is startled at what he sees, because he cannot console himself with the philosophical promises that future history will indemnify the victims of the past according to a cost-benefit model of calculation. What is swept away by the history of progress piles up at his feet like massed debris of disappointments, defeats, and sacrifices. But the victims no longer have access to the power of religious redemption; for in the raging wind of disenchantment the angel is driven up and away.²¹

4. The promises have been made again and again. The most recent are those claims made on behalf of the new technologies. Again, it is the future that promises to make good on the sins of the past. The reinheritance of one's ethnicity via a database, for instance, is presumed to rectify the dis-

persion of cultural artifacts brought about by colonialism.

Of course, political economy and institutional analyses would provide a pessimistic response to that promise — as they always do. However, recent research on the semiotic potential of popular culture suggests that meaning is not always foreclosed. This at least allows for the possibility that consumption is not merely passive, but at minimum acts to reconstitute the sign-value of popular images.²² The array of signs at least holds out the promise of identity formation as the result of adapting images for one's own use.

The agency that is suggested by this, however, is limited to just that — the manipulation of signs. This identity, although formidable, is also, from an historical perspective, empty. Here, the promise of a politics born from the destruction of aura once yearned for by Benjamin is left unfulfilled.²³ The explosion of aura marks, if anything, the end of the image's power. As Niethammer describes of a character in one of Ernst Jünger's novels:

with the derealization of meta-narrative systems of meaning, history has degenerated into a video archive of past forms and events, whose fascination consoled him for the loss of any meaning in his existence and in the world.²⁴ Video archive, database, what would be the difference? The individual seeking reconstitution through virtual ethnicity is

constantly faced with fragments of the past which alienate him from his own historical situation and subjectivity. They do not make him present to himself, but flood him with the past and thereby allow him to escape from his historical existence.²⁵

It appears, therefore, that the circulation of images of the past serves only to produce more alienation. Ironically, this was to be overcome by modernist art, whose alienating experience would point precisely to the unhappiness — and alienation — of the present. This, however, backfired. The opacity of modernist works of art merely produced more alienation, rather than shattering the hard crust of instrumental reason, as it was presumed to do. Since art was apparently incommunicado until better times, it hardly provided the force necessary to recover the humane values that were supposed to be sequestered inside it.

The question, obviously, is whether the semantic potential hidden within history can be released, or whether it must remain mute; whether it is possible for theology to emerge from under the table and stand to full height, or not. The recirculation of cultural imagery via the new technologies seems to make that promise, but experience suggests that it will not be so.

As a possible remedy, we might return again to the idea of “existing forms of communicative rationality.” Niethammer suggests that the expe-

rience of being flooded with images of the past does not make the subject present to him or herself. We might, however, employ a distinction between kinds of experience, as brought out in German. In that language it is possible to distinguish (philosophically at least) between two types of experience: *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*:

In the context of aesthetics, and specifically within the framework of *Lebensphilosophie*, the term *Erlebnis* has been preferred. Generally translated as 'lived experience', it postulates the primacy of experience over reflection. . . . If reflection is conceived of as *Erfahrung*, it will not stand in an abstract relation to lived experience and become the locus of reification. . . . [I]t is the whole human person, as an empirically existing individual, that is engaged in *Erfahrung*, whereas *Erlebnis* is but the fodder of reflection.²⁶

In this formulation, *Erfahrung* comes to represent the superior term, translating the merely lived experience into the substance for reflection on the self. It would be here that the subject might look forward to the recapturing of the self, by way of a mediating reflection on (the specificity of individual) history.

For Adorno, *Erlebnis* implied a form of unreflective experience, similar to the derealization described by Niethammer. The subject is merely bombarded with images whose meaning remains bottled up, and in which the individual is lost. However, the concept of *Erlebnis* is nevertheless crucial in the way it asserts the intersubjective aspects of experience over against "Adorno's insistence on the radical and never subsumable individuality of each subject [which] prevented any solution to what appears to be a monadic existence for the individual."²⁷ Reasserting the intersubjective dimension of *Erlebnis* "grounds it in a communicational framework within which it becomes possible for individuals to share experience . . . without surrendering, at least ostensibly, the co-primacy of reflection implied by *Erfahrung*." As Jauss points out, Adorno's aesthetic theory "has been purchased at the price of a derogation of all communicative functions."²⁸ The substance of this criticism is that Adorno's version of reflective experience (*Erfahrung*) eliminated any of the intersubjective and communicative possibilities arising from interaction with works of art; these are (for Adorno) held in trust for the future. Jauss attempts to restore the idea of identification by reappropriating *Erlebnis* to represent the communicative and intersubjective dimensions of aesthetic experience. In other words, Jauss argues that the potential exists *in the present* for the reconciliation of work and world, which Adorno denied.

Here, however, we run into the terms of aesthetic experience itself. Modernist aesthetics implied the shrinking of aesthetic experience and the withdrawal of the work of art from direct engagement with the quotidian. Faced with a lifeworld overcome by instrumental reason, art became the

last refuge of another way of being, one which was cut off from the lifeworld by its very difference from it. However, rather than remaining sealed off from the everyday, Jauss insists that the experience of the work of art can mediate our relation to social experience, both retrospectively and with regard to the future; encounters with works of art can revise the experience of situations already encountered, or provide models that anticipate and orient future experience. Identification with exemplary works of art can prompt action leading to a restructuring of the lifeworld. This would overcome the purely "affirmative" character of identification in Adorno's schema, by insisting that identification is not given at the outset, but can be either affirmative, that is, norm-fulfilling, or negative, that is, leading to the critique of norms.

This functions to allay our suspicions vis-à-vis the relationship between aesthetic experience and the everyday, but it leaves untouched the idea of religious power that underwrites the redemptive eschatology of both Adorno and Benjamin. Basically, we are stuck with the same problem with which we began: can the "digital resynthesis" of culture that George MacDonald proposes hope to offer a way out? Both Jauss and Habermas, in differing ways, reach for a concept of communication to overcome the problem of deferral. Restoring or recognizing existing communicative potentials is taken as the pathway by which to speed up the coming of redemption.

Not surprisingly, this takes us immediately toward new technologies, and the expanded possibilities for communication. The consistent reply to the expansion of communication networks has been that we are threatened by oversaturation and desensitization. Against this possibility is counterpoised the ideal of "genuine" communication, usually of the face-to-face kind originally described by John Dewey as the "great community." The breakdown of the social, and of communication, is seen as the product of the very expansion of the possibilities of communication. This conservative view is idealist, and overlooks the fact that all media, as Habermas once put it, are dirty. Any notion of pure communication rests on an idealist assumption.

The absence of a principle, or of a theology, appears to prevent the possibility of restoring relations between historical objects and the present. For those connected with the Frankfurt School, the antidote took form as the "principle of hope," as Ernst Bloch expressed it. More recently, and against the pessimism and messianic tendencies of the Frankfurt School, the principle of communication has come to stand in as the locus of redemption. This presents itself as a theology, as a faith in communication itself. Despite the perils of impure media, the belief in "existing forms of communicative rationality" holds out the promise of shattering

the shell of unhappiness by “break[ing] the spell of mythic thinking without incurring a loss of light radiating from the semantic potentials also hidden in myth.”²⁹

If nothing else, this faith implies a process of restoration and reconstruction — especially with regard to aesthetics. This would mean an overhaul of the essentialism and self-referentiality of modernist discourses. This is precisely what Jauss calls for: overcoming the pure negativity of Adorno by means of identification — with both its positive and its negative potentials. Identification can either “serve as a means of ideological obfuscation,” or “question or break through customary behavioural norms.”³⁰ There is, as Jauss suggests, a continuum of forms of identification stretching between these extremes. The advantage of this is that it leaves open the dual possibilities of affirmation and negation. Rather than staking out the terrain of presumed forms of reception, it implies that responses are open.

5. A combination of the ban on images in the Old Testament and the Platonic fear of mimesis have problematized the relation between ourselves and artifacts, as well as inflecting our discussions of that relation. The negative critique of the image over the centuries has been informed by attitudes formed under the influence of these two ancient dispositions.

It is these attitudes that must be broken open before any discussion of new technologies can occur. We must begin by examining the question of the power of the image, and the fear it provokes. It is not the possibility of image monopolies that is to be feared, except to the extent that the imposition of new forms of circulation merely mark the return of the same. Rather, we might begin by bringing into the light the root of that fear itself, overburdened as it is by the traditional response to the power of the image. This in turn suggests that semantic power still lurks behind images, and that residual traces of their auratic potential can be detected. The fear is that the image may be untrue, and thus misleading. It is, however, an open question as to whether any essential ontological truth can be discovered behind them.

Technology will not tell us the answer to this. The failure of the museum as a technology, as a memory machine, already demonstrates this fact. A dead history cannot be brought back to life merely by reconstituting its residues in another form. We cannot place our trust, therefore, in the future if it will not make good on the past — this would be just further empty time.

The redemptive possibilities of history will not be found in the debris of progress. To recirculate images of the past in a new form only serves to

make the accumulated mountain of catastrophe higher, and risks smothering us. Again our tabletop: the computer makes the promise that we could fly like the angels, another episode in the forgetting of the body, another dream of philosophy. Yet there it is: a computer resting, somewhere, on a tabletop, which in turn might be resting on top of that mountain of debris, forgotten because our eyes are shut. The very core of the problem of *that* history must be researched before the past can be redeemed. Until then, the sleep of forgetfulness continues, and the former pure radiance will not pierce the darkness.

Notes

1. Marshall McLuhan, with Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967),
2. "It was our mission to bring Broadway to America via the television set," stated Fred Coe in 1954 "TV Drama's Declaration of Independence," *Theatre Arts* (June 1954), 31.
3. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Signet Books, 1964), 63.
4. *The Medium is the Massage*,.
5. Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University, 1987), 23.
6. Lynn Spigel, "Installing the Television Set: Popular Discourses on Television and Domestic Space, 1948-1955," *Camera Obscura* 16 (1988).
7. Calinescu, 15-16.
8. Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).
9. See Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1986).
10. Hans Robert Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1982).
11. Jürgen Habermas, "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno," in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T., 1987), 125.
12. *Ibid.*, 129. Indeed, it is this absence that Jauss attempts to address through the restoration of a concept of communicative interaction with works of art.
13. Lutz Niethammer, *Posthistoire: Has History Come to an End?*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1994), 116.
14. *Ibid.*, 112.
15. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 253.
16. *The Medium is the Massage*.
17. Arthur Kroker, *Technology and the Canadian Mind: Innis/McLuhan/Grant* (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1984), 53.
18. *Philosophical Discourse*, 128.
19. "Theses," 257-8. Emphases restored from German original.
20. *Posthistoire*, 111.
21. *Ibid.*
22. The classic in this area would be Dick Hebdige, *Subculture and the Meaning of Style*.
23. See "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*.
24. *Posthistoire*, 149.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Wlad Godzich, "Introduction to Jauss," in *Aesthetic Experience*, p. xvi, xvii.
27. *Ibid.*, xvii.
28. Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience*, 19.
29. Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse*, 130.
30. Jauss, 283, 96.