In other words, if there is an irreducibility to the act of claiming rights, then they cannot simply be given, and the "I" that claims them for itself cannot be given either but must occur only in relation with an other, an other that always implies the possibility of the dispropriation of oneself and one's "rights" and "property," an other whose inevitability is this experience of disproportion, i.e. of language as something other than a system of signs or representations.

—Thomas Keenan

Excerpted from "Deconstruction and the Impossibility of Justice," *Public 6: Violence*, 1992.

Scale

A defining quality of the turn of this century is a new or at least hitherto unknown sense of scale. The verb "to scale" means to "represent in proportional dimensions," to find "commensurable" representations of reality. Whether in the context of technology (how high can a building be built before the proportions of gravity and steel collapse?) or of judgement and ethics (what does it mean to have a sense of proportion?), the human sense of scale has dynamically transformed: coordinates of time and space, coefficients of rate of change, social parameters of normativity. Technologically, the world is faster than perhaps ever before: SPEED is the maxim of the twentieth century. But SIZE in relation to scale has moved in two opposite directions, both "bigger and better," and, especially in the realm of the virtual, "better, faster, smaller." The question is: how does the human body, and its proportions and scale, respond? Where do humans fit themselves, limited by a mere three dimensions of space and the obstinate shadow of death, in a social space/time in which metaphors of velocity, amplitude, and compactness dominate? The "perfect" proportions of Da Vinci's Vetruvian Man, arrayed around his centre of gravity, no longer hold. What is needed, ironically, is a new perspective on scale.

The human's sense of scale is, on one hand, as limitless as her vertiginous imagination. In *The Matrix* (1999) Neo is asked the question, "What do you need?" He responds, "Guns. Lots of Guns." The rush of gun racks and ammunition that are conjured in the white limbo of the film's virtual reality trail into infinite perspectival space: more guns than he and Trinity could ever "realistically" use, but at their disposal nonetheless. This CGI visual effect is conceptually no more complicated than the copy-and-paste command of any word-processing program. Its limit is the physical capacity of computer memory and optical resolution, each of which grows exponentially larger and more refined by the day. The scale of human inquiry, observation, and power is larger than had ever been conceived in earlier centuries whether the field is computer imagery, infinitesimal sub-

atomic particles, or (more materially) the reach of media and other commodities in the globalized economy.

The human sense of scale is, on the other hand, as susceptible and bound as frail bodies are with the limits of corporeal time and space. Even as genetics and drugs and cyborg technologies reinvent the body, and new conceptions of sexuality and gender and race (as Bulworth hopes, everyone fucking everybody until we're all the same colour) liberate the body, certain constants remain: death, the twenty-four hour day, the need for sleep, food, shelter, perhaps even touch. At the (ominous) risk of imposing universal or prescriptive standards of "commensurable" scale, attention must be paid to the limits of mutability of body and mind. As history shows, human adaptability in the name of human survival has consequences for social ethics: the "enormity" of barbarism constitutes another test of scale.

One of the most knotted issues of the twentieth century has been the effect of "the media" on human society. How have increasingly elaborated systems of representation and communication — print, aural, visual — affected the human sense of reality? Hypodermic theories of media influence, favourites of the Right, are reductive: human subjects have always complexly negotiated social discourses, including those of visual media. The students of Columbine High school who massacred their fellow students in 1999 did not see *The Basketball Diaries* (or *The Matrix*) and decide to kill. Given the chance, all humans can potentially distinguish between representation and reality.

As the allegory of *The Matrix* proposes, however, humans may not always be given the chance. One of the most interesting and disturbing buzz words of the North American video game industry (which boasts larger sales than the film industry) is "immersion." The goal of every video game maker is to immerse the player in the world (diegetic, conceptual, ideological) of the game; hooked, the player is a loyal consumer. What happens to the human sense of scale with this immersion? Like the fetal subjects immersed in amniotic fluid in *The Matrix* (or gamblers in the casinos of Las Vegas) humans are invited not to look out and see the dimensions of the world outside the game. Like players trapped in the confines of the labyrinth, the larger picture is obscured; the sense of scale is limited by the perspective inside the maze.

What is perhaps "new" about the human sense of scale at this turn of the century is the intimacy of representations of reality with the body's sense of scale. The amplitude of the media is crushing: the subject of urban technological space is surrounded. The compactness of the media makes it portable and close. Finally, the media offers the prospect of almost endless immersion. Humans will continue always to potentially distinguish reality from representations of reality. But if sixteen out of twenty-four waking hours are spent immersed, surrounded and invaded by representations (the

other eight in dream), the real world effectively becomes defined by the terms of the representation. The psychological effects of this immersion are felt most tangibly and disastrously in psychotics, those predisposed to unclear boundaries between reality and fantasy. But attention must be paid to the effects of immersion in media to human sense of scale. Not only time and space but the ethics of human relations to others are at stake.

—Michael Zryd

Screen

at the source of each emotion, there is an abstraction whose effect is the emotion but whose consequences derive from the fixity of the gaze and ideas. Each abstraction is a potential form in mental space. And when the abstraction takes shape, it inscribes itself radically as enigma and affirmation. Resorting to abstraction is a necessity for the woman who, tempted by existence, invents the project of going beyond routine daily anecdotes and the memories of Utopia she meets each time she uses language.

By beginning with the word woman in connection with Utopia, M.V. had chosen to concentrate on an abstraction of which she had an inkling. From the moment when M.V. had used the generic body as expression, I knew that behind her the screen would be lowered and she would be projected into my universe.

She would have no other choice but to agree. Agree is visible the only verb that can allow verisimilitude here, the transparency of utopian silk/self (in my universe, Utopia would be a fiction from which would be born the generic body of the thinking woman). I would not have to make another woman be born from a first woman. I would have in mind only the idea that she might be the woman through whom everything could happen. In writing it, I would have everything for imagining an abstract woman who would slip into my text, carrying the fiction so far that from afar, this woman participant in words, must be seen coming, virtual to infinity, form-elle in every dimension of understanding, method and memory. I would not have

to invent her in the fiction. The fiction would be the finishing line of her thought. The precise term.
– –
Itinerant and so much a woman. Brain – – – – –
·– – –   memory. Night, numbers and letters. At the ultimate equation. I would loom into view.

Time becomes process in the ultra-violet. I am the thought of a woman who embodies me and whom I think integral. SKIN (UTOPIA) gesture is going to come. Gravitate serial and engrave the banks with suspended islands. I shall then be tempted by reality like a verbal vision which alternates my senses while another woman conquers the horizon at work.

Utopia <u>integral woman</u>

Gesture is going to come: a sign I'd trace, a letter that would reflect me in two different voices I would be radically thinking like a ray of light, irrigating the root, absolute reality. The generic body would become the expression of woman and woman would have wings above all, she'd make (a) sign. Plunged into the centre of the city, I would dream of raising my eyes. FEMME SKIN TRAJECTOIRE. *Donna lesbiana* dome of knowledge and helix, already I'd have entered into a spiral and my being of air aerial urban would reproduce itself in the glass city like an origin. I'd see this manifestly formal woman then inscribe reality, ecosystem.

From there, I'd begin, the woman in me like a centre of attraction. Surely life if life has a <u>term</u> death would be another, concentrated like a neuron, still it would normally be a sign. I am on the side of life if I die in slow motion, I occupy space in Utopia. I can push death away like a mother and a future. Brilliancy, amazement today that energy the lively affirmation of mental territory is a space at the turning point of cosmic breasts. J'EVOQUE. JE CERTIFIE MON ESPOIR. SKIN. Utopia slow vertigo. I work on the context of the already written of our bodies' fluorescence, I perform the rite and temptation of certainty so that it ramifies. I would see a formal woman opening up to a sense because I know that each

image of woman is vital in the thinking organism – – – – gyno-cortex. At the end of patriarchal night the body anticipates on the horizon I have in front of me on the screen of skin, mine, whose resonance endures in what weaves the text/ure t/issue <u>the light</u> when under my mouth the reason of the world streams down. M.V. agreed. In her eyes, it was epidermic this will for serial circulation of spatial gestures which the letter had initiated. Skin.

At grips with the book, baroquing. Sweat beads. Resort to the window to track down sonorities, poetry passes through the millennial quotidian in order to come back to <u>the idea of her</u> I have been following well beyond my natural inclination, she who pre-occupied thought has seen words come like foreseeable attacks and changed their course. She is the one who inhabits me and who familiarizes me with the universe. Scintillates in me. All the subjectivity in the world.

Utopia shines in my eyes. Langu age is feverish like a polysemic resource. The point of no return for all amorous affirmation is reached. I am there where "the magical appearance" begins, the coherence of wor(l)ds, perforated by invisible spirals that quicken it. I slip outside the place named carried away by the thought of a woman converging. Anatomical slice of the imaginary: to be cut off from linear cities to undertake my dream in duration, helmeted, virtual like the woman who gathers up her understandings for a book.

M.V. had straightened herself up, slowly turned her head her gaze caught between the window ledge and the horizon. Le poème hurlait opening the mind

—Nicole Brossard

"Screen Skin Utopia," trans. Barbara Godard. From *Public 12: Utopias*, 1995.

Sexist

An outmoded allegation. Not as bad as racist or feminist.

—Janine Marchessault

Share

mine

—Dorit Cypis

Sleepwalker

Dear J,

Not much has changed. Well, of course it's quieter. And the food is good enough, not too salty, but not really filling either. I got lucky with a south-facing window, so the afternoons are bright. On Wednesdays the book-mobile comes. You have to order two weeks ahead, or you're stuck with whatever's in the van. Westerns, Tom Clancy books, self-help for men, and, believe it or not, travel books. They're all paperbacks, because you can beat yourself to death with a hardcover.

I read, work out, play checkers in the basement with the nurses, and I count things: peas on a plate, stitches on my pants leg, letters per page, because I can't sleep and numbers are everything. We're built with numbers, DNA is just blood math. So like I said, no changes. I'm awful quiet and I'm too fat and I'm up all night. Just like always. Ha ha.

If I'm still night roaming I don't know it. I might get up to take a piss, but everybody does that half awake. If I am doing stuff, they don't tell me. I suppose I'd try the door over and over, maybe, or fix the bed and get into it again. I'd do things that would make sense for my situation.

I was never one of those night roamers who drove all the way out to the airport in pajamas just to get a chocolate bar, or sat up with the oven on making butter tarts. Half that action's just play acting. I think they know it too. I always did sensible things. Rake the yard in the fall, empty the dishwasher. You remember. Did it scare you? I'm sorry if it did. You can't catch it from me. It doesn't pass from parent to child. You'll probably be bald, though. Ha ha, God knows my Dad was at my age.

We're going to the Supreme Court, it's been decided. I'm glad. I don't think I should be punished for something I can't control. The problem is the lower courts don't want to take responsibilty, so they pass the case upstairs. Which sort of means I'm in the right.

I'm glad it wasn't you. I never thought I'd be thankful for the way you behaved, running the road at all hours, coming home when you pleased, but I am. There was nobody in the house but your mother. I always bundled the newspapers for the recycling on Tuesdays, and I suppose it was in my head to do it before I went to bed. That's my guess, anyway, I wish I'd let the cat in that night. You could forgive me for that.
Love, Dad.

—R. M. Vaughan

Smart

Fashion sense as in "smartly dressed"; or intelligence as in "smart bomb." Knowing what to do and when to do it, automatic. Opposite of thoughtful.

—Janine Marchessault

Smart Bomb

> For now, the veil of television will not part. I can't save the Palestinian baby suffocating in its gas mask. I can't find Michael Speicher, the first American airman missing in action. I can't protect the Holocaust survivor stuffed into a sealed room as the missiles fall. I can't hear the screams in Baghdad.[1]

As these comments suggest, there is a high level of sensorial and emotional violence that is perpetrated by this culture as it selectively represses sights, sounds, and smells that threaten to implode electronic distance and undermine a televisual logic with its "lure of a referentiality perpetually deferred."[2]

It is this culture and, in particular, its televisual logic, that poses the most serious questions as to the validity of artistic activity—especially in terms of its self-proclaimed role of critical consciousness and eye of a culture—in an age that is increasingly governed by a military/industrial definition of observation and representation: a definition that amounts to a (re)definition of the very nature of visibility *as* invisibility or, in Paul Virilio's evocative words, an "aesthetics of disappearance"[3] in which clouds of uncertainty serve as the index of exotic new weapons systems in a process that valorizes a blurred presence over a secret absence. In particular, it challenges the ability of artistic practices to make critical and political sense of their own relationships to catastrophic or emotionally traumatic events of the calibre of the Gulf War, events that are ultimately defined by military observation and a similar aesthetics of disappearance. Let us not forget, in this connection, Roland Barthes' insight that "trauma is a suspension of language" and that "the traumatic photograph...is the photograph about which there is nothing to say."[4]

If this appears, in fact, not to have been the case with the media coverage of the Gulf War which floated, televisually, on a veritable sea of words, it is perhaps because there were no truly traumatic images—television's logic being precisely predicated on the substitution of the visual effects of catastrophe for the psychological implosion of a truly traumatic event which, in any case, would have already been distanced through its logic. But the complexities of the relationship of so-called artistic practices to traumatic or televisually catastrophic events goes well beyond the television set to permeate the world of our everyday lives. When considered in

this wider socio-political context, artists and their practices are in danger of floundering in a common political marginality through their inability as common citizens to critically engage the types of powerful perceptual strategies that ultimately pervade a communal domain of vision that stretches from the ordinary to the truly extraordinary.

Paul Virilio suggests, in his provocative study *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, that success in war is now to be measured "not so much in scoring territorial, economic or other material victories as in appropriating the 'immateriality' of perceptual fields"[5] — an observation confirmed by allied tactics in the Persian Gulf and, on the other side of the phosphorescent screen by an inability "to resist the ultimate bait of TV news: being an 'eye-witness to history.'"[6] Virilio's thesis certainly renders intelligible the feeling that many television viewers had, as a consequence of prolonged exposure to the Gulf War, that television news had finally been infiltrated and conquered by "a veritable *logistics of military perception*, in which a supply of images would become the equivalent of an ammunition supply."[7] As the technologies of observation were already in place, it was simply a question of controlling this observation in the name and authority of military security or operational secrecy. This coupling of military strategy and televisual representation confirms Virilio's assertion that since at least 1967 "direct vision" in the context of warfare "was now a thing of the past" because the "target area" had finally "become a cinema 'location.'"[8] Moreover, the military annexation of the perceptual infrastructure of television news reportage produced the distinct feeling that viewers were now also considered to be "extras" on "location" — as Goldstein remarked at the time: "after a night of televisual combat, I feel all the sensations of war, with none of the risk."[9]

Notes

1 Richard Goldstein, "Diary of a War Potato," *The Village Voice* vol. 36, no. 5 (1991): 28.

2 Ann Mary Doane, "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe," *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press/ London: BFI Publishing, 1990), 328.

3 Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1989), 4.

4 Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," *Image-Music-Text*, ed. & trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana/Collins, 1977), 30–31.

5 Virilio, 7.

6 Goldstein, 25.

7 Virilio, 1 (emphasis in the original).

8 Virilio, 11.

9 Goldstein, 27.

— David Tomas

Excerpted from "Polytechnical Observation: An Artistic and Popular Response to Political Events in the Age of the Smart Bomb," *Public 6: Violence*, 1992.

Smoking

Cancer.

—Janine Marchessault

Sorry

They gathered in the town square to say they were sorry. Sorry for the way their government had stolen the Aboriginal children from their homes and put them into schools to train the black[1] out of them, to make them white. Sorry for the lies that had been told. Sorry for the policies of cultural extermination approved by their government. The few people who attended gathered near the war memorial that depicted a heroic young white Australian soldier, gun ready in his hands. Across the road, the War Memorial Civic Centre sparkled in the sun, the crest above the door depicting other white men defending their nation at all costs. The faint sounds of the didgeridoo coming through the sound system competed with the rumble of cars driving by, radios blaring. It was 1 p.m. on a sunny May afternoon at the end of the twentieth century. It was "Sorry Day" in Australia.[2]

The organizers collected solemnly at the front and introduced the important Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal dignitaries. Then, like a Christian church service or religious ritual, everyone was invited to participate collectively in singing songs, reciting group apologies and, finally, a one minute silence of remembering. Individuals in the audience were then invited to speak their apologies publicly. One-at-a-time, white participants moved to the front of the gathering, and falteringly took the microphone for their testimonies. Some told how they had been surrounded by, but ignorant of, the pain and terror inflicted on Aboriginal people. Others recounted how they had never been taught the history of Aboriginal people, and all apologized for the history of pain. Many said it was important to heal the wounds of the past in events such as this so that the country could move into the next century. Finally, to end the ritual, a "Sorry Book" (filled with signed apologies from others in the area) was carried over and presented solemnly to an Aboriginal Elder.

I was a participant in the above event, and was strangely placed as an insider/outsider. As a white Canadian who had arrived in Australia about a year earlier, my life had been, in one sense, distant and removed from the specific local, regional and national events being confronted. Yet, because colonialism is a global matter, and Canada is also a British settler colony which built the nation through the appropriation of Indigenous people's

lands and cultural genocide, a similar history had occurred in Canada.[3] The Canadian government recently apologized to Native people for a similar process which occurred in the residential schools. On a broader global scale, the coming millennium has inspired a flurry of public apologies and attempts at "reconciliation" through truth and apology all over the world for atrocities perpetrated in the twentieth century. Often such public acts of apology are surrounded by debate about the necessity of "healing the wounds" of the past before the millennium so as to "move into the future."

The Australian "Sorry Day," however, left me with a sense of deep shame. How was it possible that a few words of regret and apology (no matter how earnest, remorseful, or passionate) were expected to adequately account for over two hundred years of well planned, state-sanctioned, colonial violence and cultural genocide? But there was more to it than that. At the end of the event, one of the organizers came to the front to thank all who had attended. She said "we" should all be "congratulated" for attending "Sorry Day" because "we" had "given Aboriginal people the opportunity to hear our apology." The implicit "we" she spoke to was white, the same whites she was congratulating as the heroes of the day, whites brave enough to "give" to Aboriginal people, brave enough to confess their sins. How did the heroism of Aboriginal people who survived these decades of terrorism disappear at a ceremony supposedly "for" them? Who was "Sorry Day" really for? How is it that the apologizers emerge, after the ritual, washed clean and innocent, congratulating themselves on their action? How do whites get so much for so little? What is an apology? What does it do? Specifically, what does apology do for the apologizers? Does it imply responsibility for their actions? Or does saying "sorry" erase the past?

Apology is most often seen as an "expression of one's regret, remorse or sorrow for having insulted, failed, injured or wronged another."[4] However, dictionary definitions are not clear on whether an apology implies responsibility or guilt for that action. Such confusion may be because apology, in the past, was also commonly defined as a defence or justification for an action or belief. An example is Turtullian's *Apology for Christianity*, and the later development of a branch of theological thought called "Apologetics" — the rational defence and justification of Christian beliefs. Current dictionary definitions are still ambiguous. Apology sometimes means an excuse, explanation or justification for an action, rather than an admittance of wrong-doing and fault without defence. I find it more useful to see apology in a more anthropological manner: as essentially a diplomatic or political act, a means through which one can "secure one's own interests" by appearing to be sensitive and responsive to the interests of others.[5]

If those who apologize do so out of their own interest, it is important to explore what apologizers receive from their apology. What perturbed me about the "Sorry Day" ceremony is that the act of apology demands so

much from the recipient and so little from the apologizer. A few simple words of regret and apology and the long history of colonial violence—momentarily brought to the foreground through the apology process—is put into the past, even somehow erased. In this way the guilty party requests and demands, the conversion of "righteous indignation and betrayal" into nothing less than "unconditional forgiveness and reunion," and does so in return for nothing more than a few words.[6] Like Catholic confession (and even modern therapeutic forms of the "talking cure"), the words—and the action of speaking the words—enact an immense change in the individual, and in power relations between parties. Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality*, shows how the act of confession transforms the one who confesses: "it exonerates, redeems and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation."[7] The simple act of speaking a few words also transformed the individuals who confessed at the "Sorry Day": they moved from a state of uneasy guilt in the colonial encounter to a state of innocence in which they could congratulate themselves for their good deed of apology.

Apology and confession are also rituals that enact a shift from one's location as an outsider in a particular moral universe (excluded because of an act of transgression) to a position as insider. While all societies and communities have procedures for degrading and demoralizing those deemed to have transgressed its norms, they also have "rituals of restoration, healing, forgiveness and return." Mike Hepworth and Bryan Turner argue that confession, is part of a "ritual of inclusion" through which "deviant members of the community are restored to their normal roles and status through ritualized expressions of sorrow, self-criticism and remorse."[8] Similarly, in Medieval Christian ritual, a sequence of rites, entailing confession of guilt, then penance and reconciliation "marked the progressive reintegration of the sinner."[9]

"Sorry Day" apologies and confessions also may restore the participant's sense of their place in a moral order, and assuage the discomfort of feeling that one (or one's society) may have been morally wrong and implicated in the atrocious history of genocide. Nevertheless, this particular Australian "ritual of inclusion" (if we describe apology and confession as such) has not, as in the religious rites described above, been preceded by a ritual of exclusion. The assimilation policies carried out against Aboriginal people were officially sanctioned by Australian society at large (as they were in Canada), and were often carried out by members of the church. They were therefore not seen at the time as transgressions of societal norms. The perpetrators of those policies have never been ritually excluded or degraded. Therefore, the ritual of confession, healing and reconciliation is not one that re-admits sinners who have been previously cast out, because they have never been cast out. Instead, this form of apology

acts to reclaim and revalidate rights and obligations that the apologizer enjoyed before the transgression. It is an attempt to restore "an antecedent moral order" by "expunging or eradicating the harmful effects of past actions."[10] The Australian apologies thereby enforce a form of forgiving and forgetting, and act to restore the world to the way it was before the transgression was recognized as a crime. The simple act of apology, therefore, does a lot for the apologizers. They receive a large dividend for very small investment of a few words: nothing less than the ability to construct themselves as innocent, to feel redemption, and to return to an antecedent moral order in which they are seen as innocent. Apology, "reconciliation," and nation building.

Apology is part of a broader official government program of "Reconciliation" in Australia that is integral to the project of nation-building. The first major report of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation noted that reconciliation was an opportunity for all Australians to be "participants in a worthwhile nation-building exercise."[11] Further, the stated goal of the Council was not justice for Aboriginal people first, but begins with the goal of "a united Australia" and then continues, "which respects this land of ours; values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage; and provides justice and equity for all."[12] Reconciliation, here, is not a program of justice or equality or even critical history. Rather it entails a limited recognition of Aboriginal "heritage." This is precisely what national mythology needs to narrate the move forward into a rosy twenty-first century future: a cleaned-up and reconciled past. National unity is the primary goal of reconciliation, and in it the nation of Australia once again has priority over the needs or demands of Aboriginal people.

This version of apology, therefore, fits into a very ambiguous model of reconciliation.[13] While the term reconciliation, on one hand, means all parties reconciling with or to other parties, it also means in practice that one party, namely Aboriginal people, work the hardest and pay the most for reconciliation, because it is they who must reconcile themselves to the nation's colonial past,[14] and, as we see here, to its supposedly post-colonial future.

"Sorry Day" exacerbates and symbolically reproduces Aboriginal people's historical and ongoing victimization at the hands of the settler nation. Such ceremonies, no matter how well-intentioned, are primarily concerned with the construction of white innocence, with producing unity for nation-building, and with cleansing the past to move into the future.

Further, within the broader political context, they demonstrate that reconciliation requires Aboriginal people's resignation to the settler project of nation-building, especially at the outset of the twenty-first century. "S" is not only for "sorry," but also for enforced silence, submission and surrender to the nation's twenty-first century future.

Notes

1 Unlike North American Aboriginal and Indigenous people, Australian Aboriginal people are often called "blacks."

2 At that moment in Australia many saw it as particularly important to gather for public apologies because the Prime Minister, John Howard, had refused to apologize to Aboriginal people on behalf of the nation, arguing that the people of the present generation could not be held responsible for the sins of the past. The "Sorry Day" was seen as part of a "people's movement" of "reconciliation" (for a more in-depth discussion of "Sorry Day" and apology see Eva Mackey, "'As good as it gets?': Apology, Colonialism and White Innocence," *Olive Pink Society Bulletin* 11.1 (1999): 34–40).

3 Australia had a National Inquiry into the "Stolen Generation" [Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (Sterling Press/Commonwealth of Australia, 1997)], and Canada had its *Report from the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, Final Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, (Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1996), which described attempts to assimilate Native children through the Canadian Residential School System that were very similar to Australian policies.

   The release of these reports meant that both settler nations were faced with the task of confronting their pasts, pasts that, counter to official national self-images of tolerance and pluralism [cf. Ghassan Hage, "Locating multiculturalism's other: a critique of practical tolerance," *New Formations No. 24* (1994): 19–34, and Eva Mackey, *The House of Difference: cultural politics and national identity in Canada* (London: Routledge, 1999)] were based on the institutionalization of racial and cultural superiority and the cultural genocide of First Peoples. The main difference was that the Canadian government made a public apology, and committed $350 million dollars to what they called a "healing fund." The official apology and the funding have been the subject of much criticism by many Native people and organizations in Canada. The Canadian apology occurred less than six months before Australia's first "Sorry Day" in 1998, and caused a flurry of discussion in the Australian media, some people arguing that if Canada could apologize, so should Australia. The Prime Minister's refusal to apologize on behalf of the nation was one reason why people organized the national "Sorry Day." By participating in the event, they were, with all good intentions, actively resisting the government and showing their solidarity with Aboriginal people.

4 *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of The English Language* (New York: Dilithium Press, 1989), 70.

5 Letitia Hickson, "The Social Context of Apology in Dispute Settlement: A Cross-Cultural Study," *Ethnology* 25.4 (1986): 290.

6 Nicholas Tavuchis, *Mea Culpa: A Sociology of Apology and Reconciliation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 35.

7 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 61–62.

8 Mike Hepworth and Bryan S. Turner, *Confession: Studies in Deviance and Religion* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 22.

9 Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 99.

10 Tavuchis, 31–35.

11 Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, *Addressing the Key Issues for Reconciliation: Overview of Key Issues Papers 1–8* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1993), ix.

12 Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, *Walking Together: The First Steps: Report of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation to Federal Parliament 1991–1994* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1994), 1.

13 Fiona Nicoll, 1993. "The Art of Reconciliation: Art, Aboriginality and the State," *Meanjin* 52.4 (1993): 705–718, and J. Hoorn, "The lie of the land: Joseph Lycett and Terra Nullius" *Modern Times* (August 1992).

14 J. Hoorn, "The lie of the land: Joseph Lycett and Terra Nullius," and Julie Marcus, "The Erotics of the Museum," paper given at Sussex University, March 1996.

—Eva Mackey

Sovereignty

Once state sovereignty is defined as a centring of power/authority within a given territory, the way is open for emphasis on other things, like justice and law, freedom and social progress. In this context, concern with sovereignty is expressed in three primary forms: as the procedures of defence and diplomacy required to maintain the geographical frontier—the outer limit—of a society; as a technical legal problem, especially in the construction of constitutional and institutional politics; and as a concept always in uneasy motion between power and authority, and thus between state and civil society, or state and nation. This latter form has been of particular interest to political theorists. For although the concept of sovereignty provides a constitutional account of the state as somehow (abstractly) synonymous with society, there remains the difficulty of determining exactly how the relationship between power and authority is to be specified or achieved in practice, a difficulty that has provided one of the core themes of European political thought since the age of social contract theory. Thus attention shifts to other dilemmas, notably those concerning the cultural or national content of the space contained within state boundaries and the precise democratic procedures that might permit some convergence of sovereign state and sovereign people. The claims of state sovereignty themselves recede into the background, into the silence of received wisdom and legal convention. All that is needed are the appropriate constitutional and institutional arrangements to ensure a practical continuity over time and the clear affirmation of a spatial limit beyond which democracy and nation cannot trespass: matters that can be left safely in the hands of lawyers and soldiers as the twin guardians of sovereign enclo-

sure. Though the weapons may be pointed out, the effects are clearly felt within.

Viewed in this internal context, the problematic character of the principle of state sovereignty takes two primary forms. The first involves continuing tensions between power and authority and between sovereign state and sovereign people, tensions that have come to be resolved either through binary distinctions between state and civil society or through unitary claims to national identity. While these resolutions continue to be of crucial importance as pressing aspirations in many places, they also continue to be put in doubt by the continuing recourse to various forms of authoritatian state and the demands of an increasingly global capitalist economy. From this direction, claims about state sovereignty have come to be identified not only with the increasing strength of the state measured in terms of the state's capacity to coerce civil society, but also with an increasing weakness of the state in relation to the global structures in which it has become embedded.

—R. B. J. Walker

Excerpted from "Sovereign Identities and the Politics of Forgetting," *Public 9: Reading Our Rights*, 1994.

Spa

#1   #2   #3

—Lynne Cohen

Space

There used to be a bar in Washington on 7th Street called "D.C. Space" which made the argument that "Space is the Place." IF the subject had anything to do with it and if I counted as one at the tender age below which, intoxicated, with teen bewilderment and a willingness to behold wonder, amplified as luck should have it by a vibrant location, THEN what placing space meant was that this was it, this space was there to be, to be personally claimed (a bar, restaurant, dance club, and theatre), to be occupied by persons wishing to be, to be here, and also for some to be everywhere. Can we now be everywhere without a place or in a place that is only a section of space?

—Peter Trnka
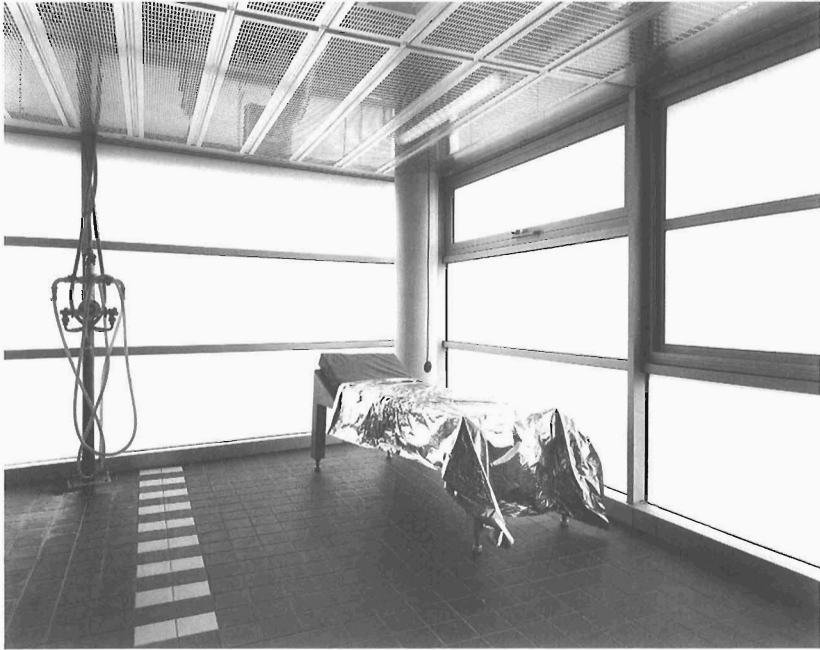
2001: A Space Odyssey

Only a work like Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* that puts its mind around time periods, locations, and ideas so vast and at the border of our imaginations, can really embody the indescribable nature of this past century. Its presentation of advances in technology and the dark side that comes with it; the omnipresence of violence and fear; and the overriding will of humankind toward a more perfect transcendence, seem all too germane as one looks back over this century. Kubrick's film not only stretches commercially produced filmmaking to a point that few (arguably) have taken it since, it also presents a cultural meditation on the future and still tells us a great deal about human nature at present and how we have come to be the way we are.

—Dominic Molon

Speed

Yes.

—Janine Marchessault

Spontaneous

"It is possible through mindfulness practice, to bring about some kind of orderly observation of the phenomenology of the mind and to produce a poetics. From that instant by instant recognition of thought forms comes a notion of spontaneous poetry which Jack Kerouac and Gertrude Stein practiced. And that form of poetry is an Oriental form that is composed on the tongue rather than on paper. It is also a Western form, a very American form. Blues and Calypso poetics were always made up on the spot. There always was a formulaic structure as in all Bardic poetics but it was dependent on the Black blues singer to get it on and make up on the spot all the rhymes and all the personal comments, all the moaning, empty bed *samsara* lamentations of the moment while singing. So that Tibetan poetics and American poetics are based on the spontaneous. The key to this is that you have to accept that the first thought is the best thought, you have to recognize that the mind is shapely. Because the mind has a shape, what passes through the mind is the mind's own, so that it is all in one mind, it is all linked connectedness and consequence. Observe your mind rather than force it, you will always come up with something that links to previous thought forms. It is a question of trusting your own mind finally and trusting your tongue to express the mind's fast puppet...spitting forth intelligence without embarrassment." {Allan Ginsberg}

—Janine Marchessault

Excerpted from audio-recording, April 13, 1987 *Writing Workshop*, OISE, University of Toronto.

stubborn-couple

n. 1. a unit of engagement

Once upon a time in the future, a stubborn couple lived next door to a very generous couple. When this generous couple moved into the neighbourhood they brought over three pieces of cake to this stubborn couple. This stubborn couple loved the cake so much that after consuming one piece each, each wanted the third piece all to themself.

It would have been so easy to just share this third piece but nothing less would do for this stubborn couple so they decided on a bet.

Whoever kept silent the longest would win the third piece of cake.

So this stubborn couple just sat there watching each other, keeping silent and staring at the cake.

Suddenly, a thief came into the house and started to steal everything.

The thief was suprised at first to see this stubborn couple but decided that they were deaf, mute or blind, or all of the above.

As soon as the thief left, one of them blurted out, "Some one stop that thief!" and that is when the other one said, "The cake is all mine now!"

—Jinhan Ko

Sublime

The century that is now coming to a close, will probably have been sublime (as will most likely be the one that is about to begin). It will have aroused in us mixed emotions, feelings of terror and enthusiasm. As it has been defined in the origins of modernity, by Burke in particular, the sublime feeling is indeed a feeling of terror experienced in front of spectacles that evoke "pain, sickness and death," a threat to the spectator's existence.[1] The sublime is thus "the strongest emotion the mind is capable of feeling."[2] But, in some cases, this feeling of terror may be accompanied by pleasure: "when danger or pain press too nearly, they are (...) simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, (...) they are delightful,"[3] "they are capable of producing delight; not pleasure but a sort of delightful horror."[4] For Burke, spectacles that cause this "delightful terror" are numerous and varied: obscurity and darkness, vacuity, solitude and silence, vastness and infinity, magnificence and disorder, power and, generally speaking, everything that evokes an excess or a privation. "The opposite extremes operate equally in favour of the sublime."[5] Similarly for Kant, everything that suggests an "infinite magnitude" or an "infinite might," everything that appears to be immense or irresistible, may be an

occasion of the sublime. But Kant's analysis is somehow different. Here, such spectacles not only occasion a conflict between the subject and the object, but also, within the subject itself, a conflict of faculties, between "reason" that conceives of the sublime idea of infinity, the idea of an absolutely great or strong, and the "imagination" that is incapable of presenting such an idea, of offering a corresponding "intuition." According to Kant, upon reflection, such a conflict between nature and ideas, between imagination and reason, manifests the very finiteness of the subject, the limits of knowledge and power, the weakness of imagination and of the human body, and thus arouses in us a feeling of pain. But at the same time, such a conflict reveals the infinite ambition and power of reason, which is capable of conceiving, beyond intuition and all possible experience, the "supra-sensible," and thus it arouses in us a feeling of pleasure, "the feeling of our supersensible vocation," writes Kant.[6]

"For although we found our own limitation when we consider the immensity of nature and the inadequacy of our ability to adopt a standard proportionate to estimating aesthetically the magnitude of nature's domain, yet we also found, in our power of reason, (...) a superiority over nature itself in its immensity. In the same way, though the irresistibility of nature's might makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical impotence, it reveals in us at the same time an ability to judge ourselves independent of nature, and reveals in us a superiority over nature."[7]

The twentieth century will have produced many sublime spectacles, often unprecedented. With social, political and economic transformations, scientific and cultural revolutions, many advances have been realized and many enthusiasms nurtured, but also of course, new kinds of disasters created and new terrors aroused. Already, new infinities have been opened—in space, beyond the starry sky, the most faraway planets and the Milky Way, as well as inside matter, beyond molecules, atoms and quarks; in time also, backwards, before the Big Bang, as well as forward, after the Big Crunch—new infinities certainly conceivable, but which remain forever imperceptible, even unimaginable, as the end of the world will always be. But also, new powers have been unleashed--nuclear power for example, with its uncontrolled chain reactions, or genetics, which transforms the nature of nature and, especially, human nature.

But in this past century, some spectacles which had not previously been so, became sublime. The human body—the inside of the body and the dead body in particular—became one of the most fascinating and disturbing spectacles: with the decline of religions and of their rituals and the development of medicine and its technologies, the body has become an object, not merely an object to be despised and kept at a distance, but a fetishized object, incessantly manipulated, at once entirely visible and forever strange, almost incomprehensible. Capitalism also, with its expanded

world market, is a most sublime spectacle, as nature was in the eighteenth century for the pessimist: an infinite power, but merely mechanical and particularly blind, blind to human interests.

But the most sublime will remain the spectacle of history itself. And the spectator who today stops for a moment to contemplate, in retrospect, the time that has past, the century which is ending, still asks the same question, that of the purpose of history: isn't all this merely sound and fury, a nature abandoned to itself, or can one discern, beneath this apparent disorder, some order, an intention, progress even? Obviously, the contemporary historian does not often believe in finalism, the doctrine that a divine will, some "invisible hand," is at work in history, in order to fulfil its purpose, its humanist purpose. But that history may have been deserted by God does not prevent progress, in human societies at least, through the actions of human beings. But is this really the case? Is the history of humankind a progression, a regression or a stagnation? But how can we know? And could we ever know? As Jean-François Lyotard reminded us, after Kant, in order to know this with certainty, the historian would have to be able to contemplate all history, the origin of history, the whole of history, and history to come—which is obviously impossible: history is always incomplete, fragmented and often contradictory. It is thus difficult to draw lessons from the twentieth century; as some historical events have nourished many a hope, so others have ruined many a utopia. As Lyotard has remarked:

> In the course of the past fifty years, each grand narrative of emancipation—regardless of the genre it privileges—has, as it were, had its principle invalidated. All that is real is rational, all that is rational is real: "Auschwitz" refutes the speculative doctrine. At least this crime, which is real, is not rational. All that is proletarian is communist, all that is communist is proletarian: "Berlin 1953", "Budapest 1956", "Czechoslovakia 1968", "Poland 1980" (to name but a few) refute the doctrine of historical materialism: the workers rise up against the Party. All that is democratic is by the people and for the people, and vice versa: "May 1968" refutes the doctrine of parliamentary liberalism. Everyday society brings the representative institution to a halt. Everything that promotes the free flow of supply and demand is good for general prosperity, and vice versa: the "crises of 1911 and 1929" refute the doctrine of economic liberalism, and the "crisis of 1974–1979" refutes the post-Keynesian modification of that doctrine. The investigator records the names of these events as so many signs of the failing of modernity.[8]

But, as Lyotard noted, if the spectacle of history itself cannot assure us in any way of the "progress of the human kind," the feelings that it inspires

may well provide, if not a proof, at least a sign of this progress: the terror and the enthusiasm that this sublime century will have aroused in many of us, reveals at least a sensitivity to moral ideas, and may thereby be witness, better than history itself, to a certain progress. This century will not have been in vain, if some hope remains.

Notes

1 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, [1958] 1987), 38.

2 ibid, 39.

3 ibid, 40.

4 ibid, 136.

5 ibid, 81.

6 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis; Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 115.

7 ibid, 120–21.

8 Jean-François Lyotard, "Missive on Universal History," *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982–1985*, ed. and trans. Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas (London: Turnaroud, 1992), 52–53.

—Olivier Asselin

Sun

Cancer.

—Janine Marchessault

Switches

Do you ever wonder what a life, your life, would have been like before automobiles, before anesthesia, before gunpowder, or—by a greater stretch of the imagination—before clocks, agriculture, or writing? Each of us enters human history with a specific and limited range of tools, devices, and practices at our disposal. The life span of the individual corresponds to a position within an independent history of technology which can be constructed retrospectively (rather like a life) through various series of events of differing orders of implication and significance. Some technological events assume such political or economic magnitude that it may seem pointless to consider the experience of individuals, as opposed to entire societies, encountering the engines of transformation. Indeed, any thought of a particular person living through significant technological change is likely to assume a comic form, a sign of the difficulty of adjusting to technology, even as a memory. Imagine yourself reacting to the invention of the wheel; the scene might well acquire a Flintstone-like quality.

To attempt to identify the dominant technological forces and agents affecting one's own life is as troublesome as identifying one's own ideology and the sphere of its influence. Technologies and ideologies collude. Certain grand orders of change overwhelm the individual imagination as it attempts to focus on whatever social transformation corresponds to a particular technological innovation. If I were to identify nuclear energy (especially its vast destructive potential), telecommunications (the limitless dissemination of information), and the microchip (with its rapid processing of data and programming of operations) as the dominant forces of technological change affecting my own society during the latter half of the twentieth century, would I be correct in doing so? Do I understand how an individual changes in response to these forces? I try to imagine my life in terms of a collective past: perhaps nuclear power and its foundation in a science of atomic elements bears to me the relation that the "elements" fire and water—both sources of power and destruction—did to the ancient Greeks. Perhaps telecommunications and the microchip, given their potential to regulate and standardize life on a global scale, correspond in significance to early mechanical clocks or, reaching further back in our collective imagination, to the invention of writing. I know that in many respects the computer has changed the shape of my society within the span of my lifetime, but how, if at all, has it changed *me*?

To be sure, personal recollection may serve the biographer and autobiographer, but it is far from the preferred mode of documentation and argumentation for histories not centered on individuals. Historians, ecologists, anthropologists, and social theorists normally look beyond local concerns. If technology factors in their accounts, they imagine its great advances—irrigation, metallurgy, electronics—as having had profound, but general, consequences. Technology can be as good an explanation as any for the rise, fall, or reorganization of great cultures.

A different type of historian—the critic Walter Benjamin will be my example—works on an intimate level, yet still manages to offer hypotheses generalists recognize. Benjamin's passing remark on an advance in telephone technology is a case in point. He used one of life's little details to characterize the conditions of modernity as experienced during the 1930s. Benjamin was struck by the feel of the dial telephone; to lift the receiver, an "abrupt" action, was already to initiate the calling process, almost instantaneously. This new type of telephone differed from the older crank-operated model, which required a gradual, "steady movement" to begin operation.[1] The switch to the newer apparatus—a change the critic experienced himself, a marker for his generation just as the push-button or touchtone model might be for mine—represented more to Benjamin than an advance in the efficiency of interpersonal communication. "Dialing" drew that communication ever further away from its being coordinated with familiar bodily movements,

which were themselves associated with older technologies and practices. Disjunction of the physical body from the conscious mind's means of communication: this is a serious matter, a transformation or reorganization of the organism itself, understood as a sensorium and a psychology. The speed and the very nature of telephone connection via the dial system might jar the individual's sense of life's natural rhythms. If Benjamin's observation on the telephone strikes us as odd, it is only because the push-button model, today's standard, is yet again more disruptive. In contrast with percussive touch-tone dialing, rotary dialing no longer seems abrupt but smooth and fluid, a reversal of its phenomenological significance.

Telephones and their various switching mechanisms—manual in the case of cranking and the operator-controlled switchboard; automatic in the case of the dial system—lead me to think of simpler types of switches. Children of twentieth-century industrialized societies encounter switches as a basic feature of their home environments. As for myself, I grew up understanding that the binary on-off character of switches (such as the most common type of light switch) roughly corresponds to the mechanical actions we might call "push and pull." A toggle switch is either pushed up or pulled down (or "flipped" or "flicked"); its variant, the rotating switch, is either turned clockwise or counterclockwise. To operate the toggle's main alternative, the button-type switch, one pushes inward and then, in order to reverse the result, either pushes again, releasing the button and allowing it to resume its original position, or pushes some other button.

At some point—it would be difficult to recollect precisely—I became aware of the substitution of electromechanical and electronic switches for more purely mechanical ones. The electromechanical "push-push" type of switch can be distinguished from the mechanical toggle or "push-pull" type in that it solicits only one kind of touch. Touching the push-push button will activate either whatever procedure negates its predecessor, or that procedure which is programmed to follow in a predetermined sequence. With push-push switches, neither mechanical nor spatial orientation differentiates "on" from "off." No ordinary physical barrier needs to be crossed when moving from one state to its alternative; the two states merely follow one another arbitrarily. Some push-push switches may have distinguishable "in" and "out" positions (like the "Shift" key on a standard computer keyboard); but others (like "Number Lock") move only to alter whatever function they control, immediately afterwards resuming their initial state. Still others are activated merely by touching and do not move at all. The push-push switch, especially the single-position and stationary varieties, suits the age of semiology and the simulacrum: it has no origin, ground, or fundamental orientation; it establishes nothing but difference. If a switch is activated while in an "on" mode—not a "position" (up, down; right, left), but a "mode" (on, off; positive, negative) —then one can only bring about an "off" mode with respect to the switch's

initial state. The switch itself, as well as its operation, signifies a general "change" or "alternative" rather than any one specific change.

If the push-push switch generalizes and perhaps disorients one's experience of change, still another type of electromechanical device, the heat-sensitive or thermal switch, generalizes the use of the body's otherwise differentiated sensory systems. For anyone accustomed to associating switches with touch, pressure, and the application of a small amount of force (and to associating this in turn with our most mundane experiences of weight, momentum, resistance, and gravity), heat-sensitive operations mystify because they require no pressure. Rather, they make use of the other, usually hidden, factor involved in every human touch—body temperature. Heat-sensitive switches are particularly common in elevators, where they illuminate rather than move when touched. Such illumination merely indicates that the "touch" or command has been registered. This visual signal is arbitrary, since in its place, for example, a tone could sound. People are unlikely to be aware that they are operating heat-sensitive switches until their finger's ability to "touch" is compromised: if a person presses an elevator button with a gloved hand on an unusually cold day, the chilled glove prevents the body's warmth from reaching the hand's outermost "skin." This touch then fails to convey temperature sufficient to register the command in the required way. As a result, the button does not illuminate, and the elevator does not move. Such an experience causes a person to feel suddenly insubstantial, and incapable of leaving a physical trace on the world. In this instance the heat-sensitive switch dematerializes the living experience of touch; it de-physicalizes the body because of a mistaken sense—difficult to avoid—that the body lacks weight and substance. Pushing the button harder will make no difference.[2]

Notes

1 Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1939), *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 174.

2 Heat-sensitive switches, naturally enough, repond to the warmth of breath as well as to touch. They respond, in other, words, to the most telling signs of life—breath and body heat. Despite its weight, a corpse cannot activate this type of switch.

—**Richard Shiff**

Excerpted from "On Passing Through Skin: Technology of Art and Sensation," *Public 13: Touch in Contemporary Art*, 1996.

System

"System" really means any articulation of propositions. It was imported into English from Greek (and probably French) at the beginning of the seventeenth century to signify "the whole scheme of created things, the

universe."[1] This bolstered the theological tradition through the authority of both ancient Hellenic music and modern up-and-coming sciences. In these sciences system came to mean either a set of objects and/or (a fundamental confusion!) a set of principles, a scheme or method, which shapes and informs a department of knowledge or belief that deals with such a correlative set of objects as an organized whole. By the mid-seventeenth century, this was immediately applied to a comprehensive exposition of some subject, a written work claiming to be as total and authoritative for that particular "branch" of knowledge as the Book or books of any among the rival theologies claimed to be for the universe as a whole. Moreover, this horizon carried overtones of a harmonious whole that Plato had called *mousike* (clearly grounded in politics) and which had had a *systema* to organize it. At the end of the seventeenth century, the ideological vanguard department of both knowledge and scientific belief was Galileian physics including astronomy, which delineated the solar system and various mechanical systems of using force and gaining power from manipulations of gravity, wind, optical knowledge, etc.

During and after the eighteenth century the notion of "system" began to grow much more extensive but also more rigid. It extended first to biology where system came to mean a set of organs or parts of the same structure or function, as rendered visible by the meshing of new ideological and technological ways of looking, for example, the nervous or the sanguine system apprehended by dissection and the microscope. Eventually any department of knowledge (geology, geometry, architecture…) could have one or more systems in the sense of an organized set of objects—again, both really "out there" and validated by a science that had these objects for its object. But simultaneously, the meaning of system jelled into schemes of formal classification, perhaps most famously the Linnean system for living beings, to be joined later by the Mendeleev system of chemical elements and other triumphs of taxonomic organization that became the fundament for whole sciences and their sweeping advances.

The ideological dominance of system also meant the setting in place of a deep topological structure—a qualitative geometry permeating all imaginable relationships—in the historical collective unconscious of long duration. It then begat two important semantic derivations. First, what was anyway a dead metaphor derived from the Greek for "standing up together" (*ista'nai* plus *syn*), came to be used metaphorically for any sufficiently encompassing set of principles, scheme or method; increasingly, this incorporated humans as systemic parts. Second, a reaction by the oppressed identified "the System," capitalized, as what oppresses them: the dominant political, economic, and social order. This reaction was first recorded in gibes at system builders (*Tristram Shandy*) or indeed system mongers by the humanist intelligentsia, but it came to a head in the social-

ist agitation of the English working class of the mid-nineteenth century, whence it continued to (one hopes) our day. Today this reaction is (for our little historical moment) backgrounded in favour of systems obviously constructed by people yet nevertheless still largely outside of our control: computer operating systems, systems analysis or similar technocratic systems of late warfare-state capitalism.[2] Nor is there much hope we can get soon out of such anti-democratic programmings that progress smoothly from designing weapons systems, with humans inserted into their computerized net as "information processing systems," to designing the future of the present social system;[3] or that we can in any foreseeable future get out of systems analyses.

In conclusion: "system" is predominantly used as an unverifiable tautology that poses (or, even worse, tacitly presupposes) a delimited whole apprehended as an organized or articulated unity of distinguishable parts which are not simply in a fortuitous juxtaposition but obey a scheme or order, a "lawful" principle, a *rule*—so that they can be called a set, a complex unity, an organization. Even clearly manipulated technological or directly political sub-systems claim the prestige and sanction of "nature," including human nature, and of hidden teleologies—for example, of The Technology or The Market—obscuring how (by whom, through whom, for whom) they came about and functioned: as operative hypotheses carried out and constantly updated in the interest of precise social classes. When astronomy or cosmology subjects to a universal law of movement, anything from the Earth and Moon system up to the ensemble of red-shift galaxies, such a discipline exemplarily explicates the presupposition present in any talk about a closed system of relationships. That the Big Bang theory of cosmology came to be dominant after Hiroshima is a wonderful case of *post hoc ergo propter hoc* (causal dependency on history).

A note on Marxism as quasi-system: All systems assuming an unchanging nature, a fixed attribution of what is "natural," are hidden theologies.[4] Orthodox Marxism grew during the positivistic Second and Third Internationals into another scientistic orthodoxy or quasi-theological system. A collective desire (for all of us) as well as a distributive desire (for each of us) for salvation, is an unalienable necessity for life as we can imagine it bettered. But the *formalization* (shaping) of this desire into a closed system, characteristic of the Euro-American monotheistic long duration of the last two thousand years, was always constricting and too often pernicious. It is supposedly validated by the closure of nature as seen by a potentially all-knowing observer (God, Science, History) but it is in fact magically analogous to this closed nature. The working classes' revolt against the constrictive and oppressive System of (in)human relationships fell prey to their enemies' systematicity, a hierarchy of fixed classes. This is due not only to the millennial socialization of several continents into

comforting closures, but also to the hijacking of the workers' movement by new social groupings ("despotic bureaucracy" or "labour aristocracy") whose *interest* was involved in closure. This began in the nineteenth-century socialist parties—ironically, when both poetry (Heine, Baudelaire, Rimbaud) and serious philosophy (Marx, Kierkegaard) had abandoned rigid systems—but came to a head in Stalinism (and in parallel though overtly pro-capitalist ways in Fascism). Dealing with this multiple closure is indispensable for lessons to be drawn from twentieth-century Fordism (ca. 1890–1973), for which central Marxist insights are still needed.

Notes

1 All historical references to "system" have been taken from *The Compact Oxford Dictionary*, under that entry. *The Compact Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

2 Chris Hables Gay, *Postmodern War* (New York: Guilford Press, 1997), 142–43, 149–65.

3 See Les Levidow and Kevin Robbins, *Cyborg Worlds: The Military Information Society* (London: Free Association Books, 1989), 28, 56, 152; Andrew Ross, *Strange Weather* (London: Verso, 1973), 174 and passim.

4 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. M. Nicolaus (New York: Vintage: 1973), 471.

—Darko Suvin

talk

:{ t(ender) a(ny) l(ittle) k(ernel) }

—Vivian Selbo

Tattoo

The tattoo of course has always been commonly discerned as making meaning. Those who have studied the body marks of so-called "primitive" peoples tell us that the primary purpose of these inscriptions is one of differentiation. These marks assert the difference between what the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (like the Roro) also names "the raw and the cooked": the difference between nature and culture, between animal life and human life. They also act to discriminate and characterize the uniqueness of one culture from another, and within each culture, one individual from another. These marks are individualist expressions—of community, of age, of sex, of status—but they are also the differential marks of society's law set upon the body. The societal order, its meanings and its structure, is inscribed upon the epidermis, linking it permanently, physically and visibly to that which must be felt and obeyed. In this way, the