

Plenary Address

Media Ecology & the New Nomads

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Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

—W. B. Yeats, “Sailing to Byzantium”

WITH the accelerating stream of new media over the last few decades, we have created a new *kind* of culture, a culture of hunters—of information. Back in the day when information was simply content, information gathering was the route to mastery; now information is environmental, and gathering is pointless. All of it is instantly available everywhere. Navigation and hunting are principal skills of nomads. Like their Paleolithic ancestors, our neo-nomads go, in electric form, where the game is to be found. The simultaneous electric information environment takes the entire Neolithic age as its content and makes of us all nomadic hunters and huntresses. These are properly media-ecological concerns.

The first job Media Ecology has then is to study the new nomad as representing a form of culture. To this end, all modes of causality have to be brought to bear, particularly formal cause,¹ specifically useful for the elucidating environmental forms. And the procedure proper to formal cause, as it deals with simultaneous relations, is that of inventory.

Begin by taking stock of all of the kinds and modes of nomad. For example, we have the physical kind, as in the Paleolithic hunters and hunter-gatherers. And we have the current form, the metaphysical kind, the users of telephone, radio, television (including the channel-surfer), internet, etc. The old nomad used a spear or arrow; the new one uses a mouse, and to greater effect. The mouse is mightier than the spear.

Inventory all of the nomad-enabling devices and services that are presently in place and new ones that appear each day. These prepare the ground for nomadism. A few suggestions to get started: Blackberrys, pagers, cell phones, WiFi, e-mail...The list of bare line items may run a couple of pages.

¹ See “On Formal Cause” in the current issue of *Explorations in Media Ecology*.

Inventory all of the precursors to the new nomadism, the foreshadowings, to include such things as dropoutism in the 60s and 70s, and the jogger. This list, too, can be lengthy.

Our nomad's accessories include items like bottled water (the old form was the canteen, which has not made a reappearance) and the backpack. Bottled water might be seen as strictly an aesthetic item as there is clean water everywhere available across the continent. The point of the backpack is that it leaves the hands free: the old mode was the briefcase, a rigid box. With inventories, the patterns of pressure and influence become somewhat clearer and easier to discern. These suggestions are the merest sketch, intended as starting points only.

Let us now turn to some of the characteristics of the new nomadism. The neo-Nomad, the cyber-Nomad, has also been called the mass audience, and the electric crowd. I use these terms interchangeably in the following remarks.

During the early twentieth century, Elias Canetti suddenly realized that he could discern two distinct types of crowd, open and closed. It is significant that he noticed these things in the first powerful age of humanity's discarnate experience, the radio age. He announced that the two modes of crowd are the same everywhere, regardless of culture or language or era.

The open crowd is everywhere spontaneous, he maintained. It is programmed with a need to grow, and it has a terror of stagnating or growing smaller.

As soon as it exists at all, it wants to consist of more people: the urge to grow is the first and supreme attribute of the [open] crowd. It wants to seize everyone within reach; anything shaped like a human being can join it. The natural crowd is the open crowd; there are no limits whatever to its growth; it does not recognize houses, doors or locks and those who shut themselves in are suspect. "Open" is to be understood here in the fullest sense of the word; it means open everywhere and in any direction. The open crowd exists so long as it grows; it disintegrates as soon as it stops growing.²

The open crowd is inherently unstable. The closed crowd, on the other hand, is characterized by stability:

The closed crowd renounces growth and puts the stress on permanence. The first thing to be noticed about it is that it has a boundary. It established itself by accepting its limitation ... the important thing is always the dense crowd in the closed room; those standing outside do not really belong. The boundary prevents disorderly increase, but it also makes it more difficult for the crowd to disperse and so postpones its dissolution. (*Ibid.*)

These are **physical** crowds, in physical space. As Joyce remarked, "These twain are the twins that tick Homo Vulgaris."

Today, **metaphysical** nomadism is a feature of normal everyday life for about a third of the world's population. The effects of all that emphasis penetrate the other two-thirds. You cannot understand this new situation by using any of the familiar reference points such as classification, or population-sampling or nose-counting or comparing locations, etc. The mass is no focus group.

The analogical ratios hold strong: The two types of incarnate crowd are to 3D or 4D space as the electric crowd is to cyberspace. (I provide a tentative tetrad on Cyberspace in Appendix One).

² *Crowds and Power*, Trans., Carol Stewart (Victor Gollancz, 1962; Viking, 1963). New York: Penguin Books, 1973, Rpt., Peregrine Books, 1987, *et seq.* Page 17.

The new discarnate crowd of ours exhibits ten major characteristics.

1. The electric crowd / mass audience EC is invisible, composed as it is of *de facto* nobodies with no bodies.

2. The electric crowd lives as if already dead (a traditional Japanese technique for those attempting to achieve perfection in their art or endeavors)—consequently, it finds nihilism natural (cf. terrorists).

The ground for **the** electric crowd/mass audience is the totality of electric media present and operating, via broadcast, network or satellite, etc. The ground for **an** electric crowd is A medium. So there is the radio crowd, the TV crowd ... All of these are as it were dialects of the mass audience.

3. Electric crowds are paranatural. They have exchanged being-in-the-body for being in the absolute. This concern is, else, a closed-crowd trait; it accompanies the transformation to the metaphysical or discarnate world.

4. The electric crowd / mass audience / new nomad cannot have a goal or a direction or objective. Those matters belong to becoming and the nomad is involved rather with being. Being is not an objective or a goal. With no outer body the mass audience shifts its focus inward. Various manifestations declare this transformation, from the dropoutism (rejection of goals and objectives as irrelevant) of the sixties and seventies to the drug culture that suddenly appeared about that time (emphasizing inner life rather than outer). This move also appears under the guise of narcissism. But it is the narcissism or the selfishness of one without a self, rather different from the selfishness that attends private individualism. Electric speed has abridged time as well as space in the old senses of physical time and space. The four-dimensional world is entirely too restrictive for these discarnate entities. Fixed goals and becoming belong to *incarnate* existence. The electrified nomad is rapt in the ecstasies of sheer being, bereft of all traditional ties to the natural world and to natural law.

People have no idea why they suddenly began to look for quality of this or quality of that (TQM had managers abuzz for a while in the eighties); it just seemed the right thing to do. In other words, we are floundering, disoriented. Each electric medium does not so much extend the bodily senses as it extends into the environment or around the world—or the solar system—a parody of the central nervous system. So each new technology represents one or another modulation of our human being: herewith we find the foundation of all mass-audience aesthetics.

So the electric crowd shifts its interests from quantity (matter) to quality after it sheds the body. Shifts from facts (objective, observer) to feelings (subjective, participant) affected every area of life and culture at the end of the twentieth century. The boom in Harlequin Romances began in the seventies. So did the crash of literacy. A generation ago, Tom Wolfe announced the appearance on the scene of *The New Journalism*, by which he meant reportage that substituted feelings for mere recitation of fact. Check your news broadcasts tonight and tomorrow at home. The big questions today are not so much “What happened?” as “How do you feel about it?” “How does it feel to have survived the horrible _____ (select one: volcano, house fire, car crash, tsunami, etc.)?” “Give us an idea of how it felt when...” Etc. Only the police still concern themselves with facts.

5. We have to begin working on the problem of consciousness in this new circumstance. We know what to think about consciousness when *in* the body; *out of* the body is another matter. Discarnate, the natural mode of awareness is unconsciousness or sub-consciousness, or the intuitive (visceral) senses rather than the rational ones. What the mass knows is itself, and it

knows itself tacitly. Keep in mind that the “con”—“together”—in *consciousness* requires more than one. Consciousness while alone is a contradiction in terms: there’s just sciousness, that is, knowing (of a sort). By definition, consciousness requires at least two, for dialogue.

Advertisers a generation ago shifted their attention from product to image, from hard-selling to participative forms such as lifestyle ads. These provide life fantasies and group identities for all.

The mass audience is not characterized by rationality, though individual members may be rational.

6. The open crowd is characterized by a need to grow, an urge that is foreign to all mass audiences. The electric crowd has no body or physical being; therefore it has no size; paradoxically, though, it does have infinite mass. The physicists tell us, anything moving at the speed of light approaches zero size and infinite mass. Numbers and quantification apply only to physical entities. The mass is equally massive whether composed of a billion or twenty million or twenty, or two.

While density is a defining aesthetic for the physical closed crowd, it holds no meaning for the mass of nomads. Space has a totally different character for electric crowds, all of which are invisible and indivisible.

The biggest need of the mass audience is not to grow but to sustain, to continue to BE. In this regard, it resembles closed crowds (which renounce growth for permanence and stability). But these electric masses not stable. Participational imagery generates the emotion and the aesthetics of being, the only reality left after leaving the body and the physical world behind. On line or on the air, minus your physical bodies, you put on the corporate body: you wear all mankind as your skin. Under these conditions, a private sensibility would be a huge liability.

7. The quality of image adjusts the degree of participation. A “good” image allows a lot of participation in depth by a big, diverse mass. For this, it must be virtually devoid of content. The more vacuous the better. Our politicians know this well, for example. Their condition provides a paradigm of group identity on the Internet. On the surface, the ego seems to expand to immense proportions, but like a balloon it is all surface. As it enlarges it becomes more fragile, more precarious—and thinner and emptier. It has to be empty to allow all that participation.

The aesthetic of these circumstances derives from manipulations of being. Each new electric medium brings with it a new mode of group being, a new WE. Hybrid energies give the biggest kicks of all, and it is in the nature of electric media to hybridize endlessly. Each new medium collects older ones as “features” even as it becomes included in the others as a feature—a process that will continue until all have become features of each other. Their future is features. Gadgetry. Narcissism for the self-less.

A recent ad in Toronto for a cell phone proclaims it has “more features than Santa has elves”! (This, five months after Christmas.)

8. The crowd of electrified nomads has no natural boundaries: it o’erleaps all natural and physical limitations. It is exempt from natural law.

9. The term “Mass Audience” was coined for broadcast crowds. Sheer speed makes the mass. At electric speed, there is no to or fro: the user just arises there, having left the body behind. “There” might be the other side of the world or the other side of town: it’s all the same. You function in more than one place at once. Cyberspace foreshadowed. “On the air” you can “be” in thousands or millions of places simultaneously. Physical laws no longer apply once you leave the physical body: there is nothing on which to base them. You become information, an environmental image.

Not long ago, as these things go, the networked world supplanted the broadcast world. That is, the networked world now has taken over, among other services, the world of broadcast media as content. One effect of this change is that the broadcasters will begin shortly to present us with a range of new forms, as broadcasting converts into art forms. Broadcast once was fairly local, until they set up the big national networks for radio and TV, e.g., NBC, CBS, Mutual, etc. Every aspect of *our* networked world is global: there is no more local. “On” the net means automatically global. The user merges into the global information environment, reconstituted into data and image. And the global theatre brooks no spectators; only actors allowed. In a similar vein, Bucky Fuller often pointed out that Spaceship Earth has no passenger accommodations; there is only space for crew.

Derrick de Kerckhove observes that anyone who goes on-line becomes thereby a *de facto* node of the world-wide network. This is not an unfamiliar form: our worldwide net, then, has its centre everywhere and its margin nowhere.³ (Recall the medieval notion of God as having being everywhere, and as being nowhere circumscribed.) The world-wide network presents a state of complete equality, an equality of nobodies. There is no owner; nobody is in charge; there is no head office. Every user can say, with all fidelity, “I am every man.” “I am legion.”

Do you remember those tales our parents used to tell, about talking to a stranger on the telephone and forming a mental picture of him, then meeting some time later and being surprised at the speaker’s appearance? We had formed the wrong impression. Silly we! (Notice, we don’t hear these tales any more.) If the image and the reality differed there was no question which was in error. Today, the situation has reversed: image is all. In the electric world, the image is always correct and the physical appearance is the illusionary item. These principles apply equally to persons on the air—radio, and TV, etc.—and on other media, Internet included.

Internet is total and global and nomadic. We used to think of outer space as exotic, a Final Frontier. That’s just kid stuff. How much more exotic it is to live and work and play outside of space itself and time. And how mundane. Cyberspace is far bigger on the inside than it is on the outside.

And how disorienting. And, for that matter, disorienting.

The simple omnipresence of everyone on the worldwide net has some curious consequences. Of a sudden, every culture on earth finds itself present in every country and nation: every culture becomes multinational.⁴ And for the same reasons the reciprocal also applies: every nation instantly becomes multicultural, despite any and every effort to the contrary.

To one side, let me observe that not everyone responds favorably to the invasion. The Islamic terrorists clearly regard it as an extreme form of pollution of their cultures and their spirits. Obviously, terrorism is a media-ecological problem.

Why has Media Ecology not stepped up to the plate over the matter of terrorism? Or over the matter of democracy in the Middle East? Media Ecology holds the keys to destroying the power of the Taliban or of any other oral or tribal group, and we all know it. You know how to program an environment to produce certain perceptual and cultural effects: that forms a large part of the discipline. You know that the way to crack any tribal spell is via the phonetic alphabet, that making the oral, tribal group alphabetic will defeat them. The alphabet will instill separation of knower and known, and detachment. The alphabet will instill private awareness and individualism in the users, as it has always done. Simply give them everything they want, their books, their papers, even their own propaganda (none of ours), all free, as long as it is in

³ The utopia to end all. Nowhere is Now here.

⁴ In the simultaneous world, there is no more “international.”

alphabetic form. Democracy in the Middle East? We know perfectly well that democracy presumes a ground of individualism. Private awareness is quite literally the *sine qua non*. And the only sure route to individualism is through the phonetic alphabet. And all of this too is well known to media ecologists. Time to accomplish? Maybe as little as a generation, and that would be much less expensive than wars that continue for two or three generations, or go on forever as feuds.

10. The tenth characteristic concerns the impact on identities.

The Church teaches that each of us is endowed with an individual soul since conception, and the concomitant, an individual conscience. The private individual with a private self is also charged with private responsibility for his or her own actions, and quests for private salvation. The alphabet literally paved the way for these matters. These are New-Testament times; the Old Testament, for example, had declared the Jews a chosen people—group salvation.

Saint Thomas gives us the formula for individuation: he frequently observes that the principle of individuation is matter, necessitating a material body.⁵ To separate the mind or soul from the body is to mime death. (It is generally accepted that any separation of the two, of mind and body, results in death.)

Electric media disturb the natural union of mind and body at the deepest level. They take the user out of nature in a pantomime of death. The new sensibility brings a new fascination with death and the hereafter, and encourages the growth of nihilism and amorality. Doesn't this illuminate somewhat our culture's present infatuation with euthanasia and abortion? A generation ago, we awoke to a new awareness of the body: it had suddenly transformed into a programmable machine with replaceable parts, an art form to be shaped and molded and enjoyed at will. The new reality, which we all take for granted, is this: on the air, on the telephone, you are in many places simultaneously, minus any bodily inhibitions. You are there, they are here, fully functional (though disembodied) intelligences. These "out-of-body" experiences are casual, utterly unremarkable features of everybody's experience, and they pull the rug out from under individualism. Cyberspace is the home of the group, not the individual; its natural mode is the hive, abuzz with information.

Look at the ease with which the kids put on and shed personas, in games as easily as on *YouTube* and *MySpace* and *Facebook* and the rest. They can revel in role playing because their senses of identity are very fluid and supple. Role playing is 1st nature to them. This is a very right-brain pattern of preference.

A couple of weeks ago I asked my classes a question I haven't used for easily a decade. I asked them, "Do you think in words or in images?" A generation ago, left/right brain analysis was popularized to a fault; popularity killed much of its credibility, but even so there was substantial truth in what neurology had revealed about thinking processes and perception. The question is tantamount to asking, "Are you left-brained or right-brained?" In the mid-seventies, about 70% of an audience would respond "in words," and 30% "in images." By the later eighties, it had drifted to about even. My class gave this question 100% "in images": I was confronting a completely right-brain group. Amazed, I checked with the rest of my classes that day and got the same result: 90% - 100% "in images." Check with your classes when you get home: have they drifted significantly in the last 20-30-40 years? The significance is this: individualism, which results from the intellectual separation of knower from known, is a specific function of the phonetic alphabet. The alphabet—and words and language and utterance—works through the left

⁵ For example, he notes that "an accident which belongs to the individual...results from the matter, which is the principle of individuation." *Summa Theol., Prima Pars*, Q. 54, Ad 2.

hemisphere. Individualism, too, is a function of the left hemisphere and comes from the phonetic alphabet. No other form of writing, syllabary or pictogram, has the fragmenting power of the alphabet. Evidently it has secured no deep hold on these students, and, one would suppose, the same observation would extend to their colleagues throughout the Western school system. This is the right-brain generation and we are the aliens.

“You,” I told my class, “are Aristotle’s problem.” In the *De Anima*, Aristotle says that we all think in images. He takes it for granted, but it is not to his liking.⁶ He regards thinking in images not as a valuable faculty but rather as a **disability**, and that is why he never counts it among the main faculties of the soul. Thinking in images completely inhibits abstract reasoning, which he was wont to encourage. Since abstract thinking was essential to philosophy (Dialectic), Aristotle had to find a device to circumvent that pernicious habit, images. He found it: the syllogism. I’ve tried it, and I challenge you to do so. It is utterly impossible to syllogize in images: the syllogism forces the mind to think using words, to reason using the left hemisphere of the brain. The syllogism breaks the mimetic thrall in which the poets held their Greek hearers, and against which Plato inveighed in *Republic* and elsewhere. It posed a mortal threat to the new enterprise. Perhaps with great effort you can torture a few images into a semblance of a syllogism, but the result is lamentable use of images and nothing like the crisp efficiency of reasoning in words. Try it yourself. Aristotle’s syllogism constituted a real revolution not only in philosophy but also in making abstract thinking possible.

Dialectic—logic and philosophy—requires that you develop the capacity to think in words, rather than in images. Images are entirely too illogical, too concrete; they do not permit very much in the way of abstraction. As if by magic, Aristotle’s syllogism defeats images, freeing the imagination to dance with ideas and words. My students turn out to be pre-Aristotelian in their sensory lives. Actually, their—and our—sensibilities nowadays hearken back considerably further than that.

Recently I have been doing some work on the art of ancient Egypt. I decoded several aspects of their canonical drawings from the First Dynasty onward that have remained hidden from Western view until this century. They were “hidden” only in the sense that we were unaware of their presence because we had forgotten how to look at these old images. The culprit here, I feel certain, was the phonetic alphabet. (Naturally, then, this is a media-ecological matter at root.) We looked at these old icons with Western eyes, that is, with proper detachment and objectivity: we examined, we observed: precisely the wrong approach. I began in the ‘80s trying to show audiences how the Egyptian artists and artisans had coded movement into these ancient forms. They had, in effect, invented animated cartoons, moving images, which, predictably, look rather odd when they are static.

In the 1980s, I might succeed with two or three in an audience of twenty—10% or 15%. Last year, I was succeeding with about 70% to 75%, a success rate of two thirds or three-quarters.⁷ Our perceptual stance has shifted considerably during the last generation, so much so that these

⁶ “Now for the thinking soul images take the place of direct perceptions; and when it asserts or denies that they are good or bad, it avoids or pursues them. Hence the soul never thinks without a mental image.” (*Aristotle: On the Soul, Parva Naturalia, On Breath*. Trans., W. S. Hett (Heinemann / Harvard, 1957), III.vii; 481a.14-17, p. 177.) The Greek original: *Te de dianoetike psyche ta phantasmata oion aisthemata hyparchei. Otan de agathon he kakon phese he apothese, pheuge he diokei. Dio oudepote noei aneu phantasmatos he psyche...* (Loeb, p. 176.)

⁷ I have written up this discovery in a paper and the students assure me that it is posted on the conference web-site where you can download it and try the matter for yourself. Please bear in mind that results do not come instantly or easily: it will take a little practice. But if you do find it do-able, if not too easy, consider: 100 years ago, 1000 years ago, it was flat out impossible.

old images are become newly accessible to us. Our own changes, that is, have made us more like the average person of 4,500 years ago and less like our old selves of, say, 45 years ago. So much in so brief a span.

My students tell me that they find their younger brothers or sisters increasingly incomprehensible. The gap now seems to be three to five years. This younger crowd (13- to 15-year-olds) is like totally wired into the cell culture, and the cells provide so many features now that you really don't need lots of other media. They constitute a new culture. The youngsters don't use e-mail and all those old media. The generation gap in major technologies is the same: we are presented with a major new paradigm on the average of every three to five years. Right now part of that is called Web 3.0. Having to adjust to a new culture every few years leaves us no opportunity to study or reflect. We barely have time to react before the next one arrives. Here too we find Media Ecology's concerns and obligations writ large. The culture needs tools that enable us to predict effects before releasing a new form into the environmental soup.

We have made a start. We know how to attack environments and environmental causality. The tetrads do afford a measure of predictability. The basic anthropological work has been done, for the most part. We know that you can't simply add a new medium to an existing situation: in the nature of formal cause, the new medium simply engulfs the existing situation and reshapes it from top to bottom. Media are not additive but transformative. As each new medium penetrates the world wide net, it transforms the world. Any new medium is a new culture looking for a host.

It is no surprise that cyberspace is actually innerspace. Media Ecology has new a frontier to add to the roster: perception. Changes in perception wrought by media have always formed a central part of the study of how media transform culture. Add to that developing techniques for adjusting perceptual ratios, for "tuning" cultures. Media Ecology doesn't have to work alone on this challenge. Your natural ally is the serious artist.⁸ The artist is the only person in the whole culture whose job is full-time training of perception. Any environmental action automatically deadens perception and where there's a lot of action there will also be a lot of deadening. The arts' job is to adjust and to restore perception, so the artist is constantly occupied with creating counterenvironments. The media-ecological approach must always of necessity be counterenvironmental if for no reason other than to provide objectivity.

For the field of media ecology, two of the next moves seem clear. One, forge alliances with all of the arts and get to work together. Two, unlike the old alphabet, its perceptual properties are entirely consonant with the computer screen: learn to read (and write) the Chinese character. It breaks the sound barriers.

Thank you.

⁸ Ably identified by Ezra Pound in his essay "The Serious Artist." See *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, Edited with an Introduction by T. S. Eliot. New York: New Directions, 1968, pages 41 to 57, and while you're there read the next essay.

Appendix One

Cyberspace
(a sketch: tentative, incomplete)

Spaceship earth

Instant speed

World > theme park,
for kicks

Stasis

E

F

R

O

Inner space

Ancient percepts

The mystical
fluidity

3D space + time
Becoming, travel

the body
Nature, the natural

The rational
fixity