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**First, bodies!**  
**(Notes on the firstness of our physicality)**  
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Frederick Jameson remarked that "there is something special about the mediatization of our current culture, placing unprecedented pressure on the reality of the subject." Terms such as "unprecedented," "novel," and "transformative" appear often in writing on the topic of the new electronic media (as do remarks about current developments putting the subject at stake). The frequency of claims for novelty strikes me as odd, for it seems to me that much speculative writing about the new media is bound to a conceptual framework from the past. However, new media theorists seem not to acknowledge this filiation, possibly because they are forgetful of the tradition from which their ideas derive, or possibly because they want to associate their ideas with progress (and to claim that their formulations represent a historical advance). The topic I wish to consider is whether new media theorists and media makers would be so eager to embrace the ideas of recent theorists of virtuality if the antecedents for their theories were to be made evident. I argue that one very common framework for understanding the media of the virtual has assumed its warrant only through its association with a historical phenomenon, the transformation of the means of production, that has challenged received notions of art and thought—this challenge has sufficiently disrupted the received ways of understanding that thinkers have turned to older models to give them bearings in this uncharted terrain (though they do not acknowledge the models, and perhaps do not even realize they have assimilated ideas from an older model). By resorting to atavistic models that are not adequate to the task they are asked to fulfil, these theorists cripple their conceptual formulations.

A film-maker and media theorist whom I shall have occasion to mention again encapsulated the metaphysical conviction that lies behind much writing on new media: "the whole visible cosmos seems about to transform itself into a gigantic whirling rebus within which all things cast off scores of approximate apparitions, which turn again to devour and, finally, replace them." The author of that elegant remark was Hollis Frampton, an artist of formidable erudition who had been schooled in Classical languages and literature; so he probably knew the provenance in Greek and Medieval philosophy of many of the comments about the virtual image that were beginning to become commonplace in discussions of the new media (at that time, video) even as he penned this remark. Most commentators on cyber-media, however, seem not to be aware of their antecedents; consequently, they end up in conceptual and ideological deep waters. The media theorist who opines that "*everything is information* – it is digitized, moves at the speed of light thus annihilating spatio-temporal distinctions" does not seem to write in the light of the history of debates around energy and materiality. The media theorist who proposes that in the new "mediatized" regime "*there will be no more **there there!***" likely remembers only Gertrude Stein's very smart, and much quoted, remark—but is probably unaware of earlier debates about different orders of reality, and of the relation between the transcendent (atemporal, aspatial) order and the order of everyday, spatially- and temporally-situated, objects. Arthur Kroker's "Data Trash" proposes: "So begins our violent descent into the electronic cage of virtual reality. Down we go into the floating world of liquid media where the body is daily downloaded into the floating world of the net, where data is the real [there's the theme that

reality is electrified information again!] and where high technology can fulfil its destiny of an out-of-body experience.” But it does not situate that remark in the context of earlier debates concerning the status of the body and the relation of body and spirit/energy. Lack of historical awareness can engender an unwarranted enthusiasm for the novelty of the phenomena one discusses: it is that unwarranted enthusiasm, arising from historical obliviousness that allows William Gibson to portray cyberspace as a site for heroic adventuring and the release of imaginings and unconscious desires and to celebrate (in his *Neuromancer* trilogy) the possibility of our being shuffled off into “bodiless exultation.” That same enthusiasm, arising from historical obliviousness, makes Microsoft’s question “*Where do you want to go today?*” seem plausible, even when we sit, forlornly immobilized in front of our computer monitor. When we are dulled by historical oblivion, we allow language operates by stealth and to reshape our thinking without our being aware of the effects it has.

Here is a not atypical passage from a handsomely produced volume of Roy Ascott’s collected essays, titled *Telematic Embrace*—I present it, with interpolated comments.

Ascott: While Euclidean space appeals primarily to the physical body, . . .

Comment: That would certainly surprise Plato, who had to develop an elaborate account of how people, whose bodies never encounter Euclidean triangles or circles, can nonetheless have knowledge—an account that relied on the idea that the discorporate soul had acquaintance with such Euclidean objects between periods of being re-incarnated.

Ascott: cyberspace . . .

Comment: So cyberspace is non-Euclidean! Then, pray tell, is its geometry a spherical geometry, a hyperbolic geometric, or something else?

Ascott: appeals primarily to the mind. The body loves surfaces, solidity, resistance;

Comment: Really? My leg hurts when it strikes a solid surface!

Ascott: it wants its world to be limitless but safely ordered,

Comment: Does Ascott’s non-Euclidean geometry lack order—I would dearly like such a geometry explained to me!

Ascott: open to the clouds but protected from indeterminacy.

Comment: Why, you ask, does Ascott believe that it is the body that strives to eliminate indeterminacy? Our author does not reveal his reasons, and one is left wondering, “Is determinacy really a carnal longing?” Some of would suggest that it is reason’s mania for categories, order and determination that is responsible for our terrified response to indeterminacy. That view, that it is reason that demands order, has a long history. That history is not addressed.

Ascott: Above all, the body wants its senses put in perspective. In twentieth-century architecture, the body ruled. But in our new century, architecture progressively will embody mind; technoetics will be at the foundation of practice.

Comment: Is the claim ‘bodies want their senses put in perspective’ a

universal truth, true of all bodies, at all times and in all places? What evidence could Roy Ascott educe to establish that universality? What would he make of the writings of people from Edmund Carpenter to Marcelin Pleynet, who treat perspective as an historically relative perceptual system structured by ideological influences like those that undergird that geometric optics that developed during the Quattrocento? No answer is forthcoming.

And what is technoetics? The “art and the technology of consciousness,” Ascott informs us.

It is moreover immaterial, he tells us. Well, sometimes he sees that mind/information/spirit is immaterial, as is connectedness. One who hopes for explanation, that avoids the problems of Cartesian dualism, of the relation between the material and the immaterial realm waits in vain.

Ascott: The mind seeks connectivity

Comment: It is hard to tell what Ascott means by “connectivity”: If he means “connection to the internet,” then his assertion is either tautologically empty or simply wrong (either it is the empty comment that “the internet is a mind form, and the mind craves what is its own” or it is wrong, in saying that bodies don’t crave connectivity: after all, the Internet clearly has addictive features, and surely a bodily craving is the most likely explanation why people endanger jobs and family life to spend time surfing the net).

On the other hand, if by “connection” he means simply what we usually mean by “connection,” the claim is preposterous. Remember, Ascott’s argument proceeds by the appalling logic of binarisms: according to this logic of division, to say that the mind seeks connectivity is to say that bodies don’t. Now, do bodies really seek isolation and non-connection?

That would be interesting news to teenagers with surging hormones! One thing is clear: some of us take delight in connecting bodies!

Ascott: and complexity, uncertainty and chaos.

Comment: Did the Greek conception of reason have nothing to do with the West’s rage for order? Reading ancient philosophy reveals that is just not so. Ascott lumps together the term “complexity” and the terms “uncertainty” and “chaos.” There is a history that suggests that mind craves complexity and abhors uncertainty and chaos. One feels inclined to recommend to him a good primer on the Greek idea of το απειρον (to apeiron, the infinite, the indefinite, that which does not possess order) so that he might come to understand something of the history of these concepts. (The privative prefix, ‘a,’ should give him a clue, however.)

Ascott: It knows reality to be layered and ambiguous, constantly collapsing and reforming, observer-dependent, endlessly in flux. In reflecting these attributes, twenty-first-century architecture will be like nothing the world has ever known. Distributed mind, collective intelligence, cybermentation, connected consciousness, whatever we choose to call the technoetic consequences of the Net, the forms of telematic embodiment likely to emerge will be as exotic to our present conception of architecture as they will be protean. Stylistic and functional

diversity will increase exponentially as the practical consequences of nano-engineering kick in.

Comment: I guess in Ascott's view minds are different, and seek variety, but bodies are the same and seek what is similar. Some form of conceptual sclerosis is all that that could account for this prejudice. Many of us take endless delight in the diversity of bodies (and their carnal longings).

And, by the way, "telematic" seems to mean "web-based" in Ascott's distinctive techno-idiolect—you can decide for yourself how the terms "telematic" and "embodiment" go together, Especially when connectivity is supposed to be immaterial. (Is the idea of an immaterial body not oxymoronic?)

Ascott: In turn, our frustration with the limitations of our own bodies will demand prostheses and genetic intervention of a high order. We realise that the body, like our own identity, can be transformed, . . .

Comment: We all know the dogma: genetics counts for nothing, flesh counts for nothing, matter counts for nothing. And yet, and yet: my efforts to slim down get nowhere and I seem fated to resemble physically my Scottish ancestors.

Ascott: indeed must become transformable. [...]

Comment: I thought Ascott said that bodies already are transformable. Well, consistency is not the be all and end all, I suppose. It is so interesting how Ascott slides back into a dualistic view that accords greater value to that which belongs to the non-material realm, on the basis that that which is non-material can take on different characteristics, while material has a given nature. That binary, of course, was bequeathed to philosophy by Plato: incorporating it into a new theory of media and consciousness would hardly seem a step towards a new conceptual ecology.

Ascott: Increasingly, the attitude of mind towards body is cybernetic, seeking always the perfectibility of systems.

Comment: Yes, of course, the perfection of the rational. Truly, here, we back in Plato's domain. For Plato, that which is higher (ultimately νοῦς, nous, mind) had to correct that which is lower (αἰσθανόμενον, aisthanomenon, used generically for "projection" and specifically for an "organ of sense"; or even πάσχον, *paschon*, that which passively receives, a term used to refer to the senses); for Ascott, that which is higher, mind, must steer ("cyber" from κυβερνάω, *kybernao*, "to steer, to drive, to guide, to act as a pilot") the body toward perfection. Presumably, it will do so by making the body more like mind. (Thanks for offering, but no thanks!)

I'd love to go on; however, space forbids. Let me assure readers who might think I have chosen this passage because it is a conceptual muddle, that I have chosen it only because bears directly on my theme: I could select nearly any passage from the book and give it a similar treatment, and the result would be the same. And what a book it is! In addition to a hagiographic essay by Edward Shanken, the book consists of 285 pages, which differ little from

the pages on which I have commented. A highlight is an appendix glossing Ascott's idiolect. This is its gloss on "ki": "Consciousness in artificial systems, self-aware machines, and intelligent architecture. The Japanese know this spiritual energy to be intrinsic to advanced technology."

George Santayana's now clichéd remark, to the effect that a person who does not remember history is condemned to repeat it, seems apposite here. It seems apposite because speculative discussions of the new media often re-cast theological arguments that, I believe, few media theorists (and fewer new media artists) would be willing to accept. If there is, as Jameson claims, something special about the mediatization of our current culture, it seems to me it is not being well theorized.

As a point of departure, let us consider hypertext or, more precisely, hypermedia. This seems a suitable choice, because of hypermedia's exemplary status: all the new media partake of some of its attributes, and the much ballyhooed composite medium, yet to be produced through convergence, will surely have many of its attributes. Accordingly, an analysis of hypertext's character might reveal the fundamental structures of virtual being. Hypertext, we are told, is an open text (in the sense that it has no definite beginning or ending); it redefines the borders of the text by blurring the distinction between the intra- and the extra-textual. Thus, we are told, it brings into question our traditional notion that the real is constituted (largely) by spatially located material objects—indeed it brings into question the notion of location itself: hypertext conjoins links—the word "spaces" is often used to describe this pure virtual geography. It is, potentially, everywhere at once and nowhere in particular.

We are told, too, that hypertext, by integrating pictures and sounds, is becoming a multi-medium that is more apt than prose is at representing our complex and non-linear mental operations. The brain, with its myriad connections of neuron pathways, associates pieces of information to form aggregates of formidable complexity (just as the links of hypertext/hypermedia draw discrete pieces/complexes of information into astonishingly dense formations). The purported capacity to link disparate elements in a complex that has no spatial location grounds the claim that the new geography of the linked spaces is a "no-where" (where there is no *there*) and manner of functioning allows us to understand the status of these linked nodes: they constitute a reality whose character is essentially ideal, subjective. Hypertext, we are told, mimics the way the brain works: by association. Authoring hypertext results in the production of a net-like structure that creates a rhizomatic, multiform, and complex picture of the author's multiform and complex thoughts. The potential of hypertext to mimic the structure of human thought had been recognized when hypertext was still a recent development: in 1991, the father of hypertext, Vannevar Bush, reflected on his invention: "The human mind operate[s] by association. With one item in its grasp, it snaps instantly to the next that is suggested by the association of thoughts, in accordance with some intricate web of trails carried by the cells of the brain." Thus, new media enthusiasts propose that the development of computer technology is leading to systems that might replicate thought. At the same time, we are told, the structure of western thought is changing to reciprocally reflect the structure of its newest technology of communication—the hyperlinked, multisequential computer network. Developments in various disciplines are converging, creating a new conceptual system based on "multilinearity, nodes, links, and networks" rather than on "centre, margin, hierarchy, and linearity."

The World Wide Web, like hypertext, adheres to a distributed principle of knowledge representation, with knowledge stored as a network of nodes and links. Nodes can contain any combination of plain text, images, sounds and movies. Links connect items from a one node to any other node, according to the author's preference, taste, and intent. As for the user interface,

the user is expected to retrieve information by traversing meaningful links from node-items to other nodes, thereby making associative judgments that, from an arbitrary initial position, will lead to the node containing the desired information.

Taking the idea of hypertext to its conclusion, every node would be linked, through a path of some finite length, to all others. Ultimately, every text would be a link in every other text. The *telos* of hypertext is to have all books and journals now housed in real libraries (and others yet to come) subsumed in “one metatext” stored in a virtual library. That this would be the end towards which hypertext would progress was anticipated right at the beginning of the medium: in his renowned article in the *Atlantic Monthly* in July, 1945, tellingly titled “As we may think,” Vannevar Bush predicted that, as a result of his Memex hypertext system, “wholly new forms of encyclopaedias will appear, ready-made with a mesh of associative trails running through them, ready to be dropped into the Memex and there amplified.”

But before we get carried away with Vannevar Bush as a visionary innovator, we run down an (incomplete) list of earlier proposals for a Memex-like system. In 1883, the head of the Buffalo Public Library published, in *Library Journal*, an article, “The Buffalo Public Library of 1883,” which described a system that would allow people, sitting a desk, equipped with a keyboard connected by a wire, to indicate, through index numbers, what book they wanted and the book would be delivered to the desktop screen after an astonishing short interval.

A Belgian, Paul Otlet, went even farther. Paul Otlet was an early theorist of books (one of his most important publications was *Traité de documentation: Le livre sur le livre: Théorie et pratique*, 1934) and information, and one of his contributions was to develop a universal classification for information, the Universal Decimal Classification. His most forward-looking idea was based on the insight that books assemble many pieces of information, and that a next step in information storage and retrieval was to find a way to break apart the individual pieces of information that are stored in books, so that individuals could assemble this information in novel ways. He conceived of the Mundaneum, an advanced library, to accomplish this; in the 1920s and 1930s, he would attempt to construct the Mundaneum, in Brussels. The project involved extracting information from various media (video, audio, books) and indexed that information on index cards, using the decimal classification system he developed. What is more extraordinary, the index to the information (the index cards) would also contain information about previous uses made of that information and tables indicated (by “+” and “-” signs) the sort of affinity between different pieces of information; therefore, over time, the index would evolve toward a map of the relations between the different pieces of information. In *Traité de documentation*, Otlet set out his plan for a global nexus of linked “electric telescopes” that would allow people to search and then view, at a distance, millions of interlinked documents, images, audio and video files. People could use these devices—we would come to call them computers, of course—to send messages to one another, share files and even congregate in online social networks. Remarkably, he referred to this global linkage as “réseau,” or “network”; this global network would link all the world’s knowledge (a documentary on Otlet, shown on Dutch television on Nov. 1, 1998, is titled *Alle Kennis Van de Werld: Het papieren internet*).

The first glimmering of an idea for such a *réseau* dated back to 1895 (the year the first screening of films took place, when the secret of dreams was revealed to Sigmund Freud, and Röntgen rays were discovered), when Otlet met the future Nobel prize winner, Henri La Fontaine, who joined with him in planning to create a master bibliography of all the world’s published knowledge. This evolved into a proposal for a networked world where “anyone in his armchair would be able to contemplate the whole of creation” ; a telephone a screen and a loudspeaker would give anybody access to all the information accumulated in the vast edifice that the

Mundaneum would be. (He even foresaw the need for consulting multiple documents simultaneously, and proposed using multiple screens to do so.) He also forecast that books would be replaced by the multimodal film-cum-sound-recording-cum-radio-cum-television, which would become a key new tool for the diffusion of human thought.

These were all proposals, essentially, for systems whose content would be a universal encyclopaedia, a compendium of all the knowledge the old era possessed, yet (as we are so often told) its form would serve to initiate the new era. The philosopher Eric Voegelin has a name for this closure of tradition that is at the same time the formulation of a new doctrine: it is “koran.” Voegelin gives an interesting example of a “koran”: the *Encyclopédie française* “as the comprehensive presentation of all human knowledge worth preserving.” In his introduction to Vannevar Bush’s famous article, the editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* wrote, “Now, says Dr. Bush, instruments are at hand which, if properly developed, will give man access to and command over [I stress the “command over”] the inherited knowledge of the ages.” As the *Encyclopédie* was for the Enlightenment, hypertext will be for us.

We shouldn’t underestimate the importance of Voegelin’s insight: the ideas we have heard in the last few years about hypertext really do, I suspect, represent the closure of an earlier tradition. At the same time, we mustn’t overestimate the novelty of these ideas: they are, like Voegelin’s typical “koran,” rooted in the earlier tradition. We glimpse that earlier tradition in the early writings of Jacques Derrida, composed when the idea of hypertext was, for all intents and purposes, still a dream in the minds of the likes of Vannevar Bush and the wonderful contrarian, Ted Nelson (author of *Literary Machines*, *Dream Machines* and *Computer Lib* who, in 1965, coined the term hypertext). Derrida argued that a text is an unending combination of contexts that may be endlessly reshuffled to produce meaning, an “assemblage,” a “schema” for a general system and a “bringing-together” that “has the structure of an interlacing, a weaving, or a web, which would allow the different threads and different lines of sense or force to separate again as well as being ready to bind others together.” (Many readers will have recognized the resonance of Heidegger’s plurisemic notion of *Sammlung*, gathering, in Derrida’s “bringing together.”) Barthes proposed similar ideas about textuality:

Any text is a new tissue of past citations. Bits of code, formulae, rhythmic models, fragments of social languages, etc., pass into the text and are redistributed within it, for there is always language before and around the text. Intertextuality, the condition of any text whatsoever, cannot, of course, be reduced to a problem of sources or influences; the intertext is a general field of anonymous formulae whose origin can scarcely ever be located; of unconscious or automatic quotations, given without quotation marks.

The universal hypertext, we realize, would simply be this general field of textuality, newly electrified. It would embody, in such a way as to make them obvious, the underlying structures of textuality that the earlier tradition had only just revealed—revealed, appropriately, at the very moment of the tradition’s closure. Thus, it would embody the structuralist underpinnings of Barthes’ and Derrida’s *oeuvres* (from which the latter philosopher, especially, has gone to such lengths to distance himself).

The koranic status of the final hypertext reflects its totalizing character (resulting from the comprehensiveness of the links that it would incorporate). Over and over, we are told that the structure of hypertext reflects the ideal of total knowledge, of the immediate and direct awareness of all that was and is. Everyone recognizes, surely, that the idea of total awareness

is a fictional construct. But it is interesting to ask what conditions—what technological developments, pre-conceptions and narrative pressures—have made this fiction seem so compelling in recent years.

The technological conditions are those that have allowed for the development of enormous, distributed databases, with the result that the fiction of a total database that could contain all the world's knowledge today has supplanted the fiction of the universal library (the earlier home of the mental garden of the forking paths) in the imagination of new media theorists. To be sure, the universal library (our theme to this point) and the universal database are similar in most ways. What distinguishes the database from the earlier libraries is that it is accessible from everywhere and "distributed" (various parts of the "object" exist at different locations); so, in some important sense, it is located nowhere—recall the media theorist's "there is no *there* there." It is not located in any real space, but in (virtual) cyberspace. What exists in the totalized database is, because of its status as information, divorced from space and time.

This universal database encodes the world's knowledge. However, this knowledge exists nowhere; so it is separate from the real world of objects. We are learning to live in this new nowhere. Or, to put the notion in other terms, we are becoming alienated from the objective world: the realm of virtual knowledge is electronic (that is to say, transitory, fluxing, unstable, and, may I say, spiritual), while the world of objects is material. Alienation from the objective world has now become so widespread that it has produced a widespread sense that the material world is wholly opposed to the internal, spiritual world—this sense is the groundwork of Kroker's and Gibson's rhetorical tropes (and they are only two examples among others). The material world, according to one of the theological *topoi* that govern the texts of new media theorists, has encumbered us, shackled us to time and place; the ontology of virtual media is transforming the ontological structures of our being (which, for new media theorists, is tantamount to consciousness) in their image, so, in time to come, we will exist anywhere and everywhere (at once) in the virtual geography of new media reality.

Many of the salient features of the world-view that has developed from the new technologies of representation are consonant with the Gnostic world view: the belief in the duality of matter and mind; the notion of a knowledge that will save us; and the conviction that the key to this knowledge lies not with God but with the individual—all of these beliefs, whose acceptance helped to foster technological development and are congenial to our era, when technology has come to shape thinking, have Gnostic provenance. Gnosticism, in its classical form, is a system of cosmic redemption. The world is said to be evil as it was created by an evil God, the Demiurge. We are trapped in a bodily prison, from which there is no escape except through the knowledge that can free our spirit. In opposition to the Christian salvation by faith, by works, or by grace, Gnosticism offers salvation by knowledge (*gnosis*); this belief appeals to an age like ours in which learning is valued above faith (and intellectual pursuits above prayer). Further, since Gnostics hold matter and the body to be evil, they deny Christian belief in bodily resurrection (just as the soteriology implied in new media theology does).

The Gnostic conception of history challenges the Christian conception (and the character of that challenge helps explain why, in the past one hundred years, Gnosticism has become the unofficial religion of the West). Early Christianity contested classical antiquity's view of history as cyclic and replaced that conception with a linear view: the view that history would culminate with the reappearance of Jesus Christ. (Acts 1:11 shows that the disciples of Jesus expected this *parousia* to happen in their lifetimes.) A linear view of history raises the key question of what the meaning of history is. Christianity answered this question with the eschatological proposal that at the end-time, God will make a new world, populated by those



who, through faith in Jesus Christ, are saved. But faith is too demanding for most people, so if salvation depends upon faith, it seems terribly uncertain. Ways of overcoming this uncertainty will be welcomed, and Gnosticism's idea of salvation through knowledge fits the bill: acquire the requisite knowledge, and salvation is assured. Further, Gnostic doctrines do not maintain that humans have to wait until the end-time for the meaning of history to be revealed. For the individual, at least, *gnosis* can bring Heaven to Earth, now. Unwilling to wait for a celestial salvation, the Gnostic proposes to bring the future world to this world. Thus, Gnosticism immanentizes the *eschaton*. These ideas appeal to a culture whose ethos celebrates instantaneity.

Eric Voegelin demonstrated some decades ago that Gnosticism lies at the heart of modern technology (that is to say, the technologies that developed after the rise of science in the sixteenth century). His insight has been born out: the discussions around convergent technologies offer a full-blown Gnosticism. This is understandable: as a technology that is very closely related to intelligence, electricity and light (consider how often theorists of the virtual point out that communication now occurs at the speed of light, and that speed dissolves space), the computer seems almost bound to awaken dreams of revelation and transcendence. Cyberspace is often interpreted as an opportunity for humanity to climb outside the confines of material reality and to access a disembodied dimension in which one can realize one's true self (which, on this view, is disembodied reason)—Arthur Kroker's description of a digital "floating world of liquid media where the body is daily downloaded into the floating world of the net, where data are the real, and where high technology can fulfil; its destiny of an out-of-body experience" is a typical (and typically hysteric) example. Pure electric knowledge, we are told repeatedly, will graciously put paid to the evil "wetware" of biological being.

Further, we hear that new electronic/digital media leave behind the physical ground of the older media, transforming them all into non-corporeal electronic data that can be stored and accessed by anyone from anywhere. Awareness is liberated from the constraints of space. Time alone becomes of importance. And time, as Kant pointed out, is the form of inner sensation. The celebrations of the technologies of the virtual, intoned in Gnostic inflections, portray cyberspace as a new sphere of freedom—freedom from biological determinacy, from local censorship, and from geopolitical determinism. A soteriologic rhetoric is at work here, valorizing a kenosis—an emptying of the self propaedeutic to redemption. Thus, one of the most common commendations of new media proposes that the singular advantage of the media of the virtual is their power to negate the individual by transforming him or her into a non-corporeal being: corporeality is the basis of the *principium individuationis*—so, in becoming pure (electric) mind, one takes on an aspect of universal being. Mind is again ascendant in the metaphysical propositions of theorists of virtual media—even if (as Plato's philosophy often does) it speaks of the temporally situated (though inherently eternal) mind that knows the forms that populate the realm of the timeless. The theorists of virtual media tell us repeatedly that overcoming the idea that reality is composed (largely) of bounded, fixed objects will bring to an end 2500 years of Western metaphysics. But this hardly seems the end of the metaphysical tradition: the bulwarks of that tradition are still in place in the new media theorists' supposedly novel metaphysical/theological system.

The framework for media theory's disparaging the body in favour of mind was established decades ago: Marshall McLuhan famously remarked that "When you are on the phone or on the air, you have no body." But McLuhan was a very Catholic thinker, and the remark reflects an Augustinian strain in his writing. (McLuhan's writing generally evinces a tension between a strain that derives from Augustine and Bonaventure, and a strain that derives

from Aquinas.) Gnosticism and Augustinian Catholicism have often found themselves bedmates (just as Augustine himself had once kept company with those relatives of the Gnostics, the Manicheans); in McLuhan's thought the same fateful coupling occurs again. The Augustinian/Neo-Platonic strain in McLuhan's thinking led to his interest in Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (a non-canonical interest that McLuhan struggled mightily to conceal from administrators at St. Michael's College, where he taught). McLuhan was an expansively erudite and fabulously allusive writer whose fundamental theme was how new technology might join the individual mind to the *Nous* that is the Communion of Universal Catholic Ecclesia—or, to put the notion in terms that Teilhard would have endorsed, how technology has engendered a new organ of consciousness, the Noosphere, that will lead to the Omega point of consciousness where the coalescence of consciousnesses might guide us to a new state of peace and planetary unity (just as the more traditional Rite of Holy Communication once had done). McLuhan embraced a tradition and schooled himself in its writings. He was acquainted with the variety of ideas of that tradition had proposed about embodied existence, humans relation to nature, being and the Good, and the mind's participation in a higher reality of a *noēsis noēseōs* that is a purely self-referential actuality and ἐνέργεια (*energeia*, activity or something that brings possibilities to actuality) that in no way refers beyond itself. McLuhan's spiritual heirs and intellectual offspring among new media theorists do not seem as fundamentally committed to a Neo-Platonic/Augustinian Catholic world-view as the devout Marshall McLuhan was, nor do they seem as aware of the tradition that McLuhan embraced with such devotion. I would like to know what they make of the roots of the metaphysics of the virtual in this tradition. I can't believe they would be troubled by having those roots exposed.

The parallel between prevalent understandings of the semiotics of hypertext and prevalent conceptions of new digital communitarianism is striking. The exchange of messages and information over the Internet is said to be integrative—but one that accomplishes its aims through the decorporealization of the human being. Hypertexts, too, are understood as having a “virtual,” electrical existence. According to the common metaphysics of digital reality, the converged media promise to unite non-corporeal information and non-corporeal individuals in the same electronic medium, in which everything and everybody are co-extensive. This total co-extensivity is the basis for the “total awareness” my new media students keep telling me is dawning (for so their new media professors assure them)—it is total awareness based on complete identification of the subject and the object celebrated in the Romantic tradition that new media theorists routinely disparage, though now the subject and object of knowledge are volatilized into light and energy, rather than being converted (subject and object alike) into pneumatic forms, as Romantic thinkers had it. This is, essentially, a distinction without a difference.

At the opening of this paper I remarked that Jameson has commented on the pressure that this digital communitarianism is putting on the self. The effects of this pressure are understood differently by different thinkers, but a common theme is that this pressure has labilized the self and that this labilization liberates us from the prison of identity. Some even maintain that the technologies of the virtual have unleashed a process that will result in the vanishing of the self into a realm of ephemeral apparitions (or, as a variant of the thesis, a process that will eventuate in the self's becoming no more, or no less, real than those apparitions). The idea that the self's destiny is fulfilled in selflessness is a traditional one; nevertheless, it is not one whose implications most new media theorists would eagerly embrace (though they accept the proposition itself). The core of the argument is to eliminate a crucial Aristotelian distinction, that between things that grow and change because an inner principle

makes them grow and change until they reach their final form, and things that require an outer force to give them definite form. Most thinkers (philosophers and common-sense thinkers alike) would maintain that self belongs to the former category; nonetheless, the appeal that the idea of dematerialization has for new media theorists is that it supposedly exposes that nothing possesses an internal principle that accounts for its growth—that the self, to take it as an instance, is wholly and completely malleable and can, and is, constantly remade by changes in the conditions of the system of representation that shape it. Most new media theorists, I suspect (I can only conjecture, since they are silent on the matter), would claim that the self develops (at least primarily) according to an internal principle; yet they propound an ontology, phenomenology and epistemology of the media of the virtual and of its effects on its spectators that contradict this principle.

There are other anomalies in their position. The propositions that modern exponents of decorporealization offer are based on an extravagant metaphysics: an extravagant, but traditional metaphysics that, if stated baldly in its traditional form, I believe few new media theorists or artists using technologies of the virtual would be disposed to accept. It is the metaphysics expounded by (*inter alia*) Robert Grosseteste. I choose to mention Grosseteste not to select a straw man whose wan ideas expose him to easy ridicule; on the contrary, it is (partly) the poetic richness of Grosseteste's writing that recommends it for our attention. That Grosseteste's metaphysics was one of the touchstones of the thought of Hollis Frampton, one of the earliest and, likely, the most poetic expositors of the new media metaphysics, bolsters Grosseteste's claim on our interest.

Robert Grosseteste's was a polymathic intellect. He was one of the most learned individuals of his time: a peasant lad from Sussex, born around 1175, he studied law, medicine, science, philosophy, and theology and became, eventually, one of the first Chancellors of Oxford University. He was an educational reformer, a philosopher with scientific interests. He mastered geometry, optics, and astronomy, and even propounded the scientific principle—central to the later work of his young pupil, Roger Bacon—that experimentation must be used to verify a theory by testing its consequences. He also wrote beautiful, almost poetic, prose whose purpose was to teach people religious truths. Among those writings was a remarkable text entitled, "On Light, or, The Ingression of Form." A key line in the text is that "In the beginning of time, light drew out matter along with itself into a mass as great as the fabric of the world." Another passage further develops the idea:

But I have proposed that it is light which possesses of its very nature the function of multiplying itself and diffusing itself instantaneously in all directions. Whatever performs this operation is either light or some other agent that acts in virtue of its participation in light to which this operation belongs essentially. Corporeity, therefore, is either light itself or the agent which performs the aforementioned operation and introduces dimensions into matter in virtue of its participation in light, and acts through the power of this same light.

He proposes, in a fashion that has surely become familiar again in the past decade, that non-corporeity is higher than corporeity. Of the higher, non-corporeal realm he wrote

The form and perfection of all bodies is light, but in the higher bodies it is more spiritual and simple, whereas in the lower bodies it is more corporeal and multiplied. Furthermore, all bodies are not of the same form even though they all

proceed from light, whether simple or multiplied, just as all numbers are not the same in form despite the fact that they are all derived from unity by a greater or lesser multiplication.

The word Grosseteste used for “form” was “*species*.” The original sense of the term “species” was of an aspect, i.e., an outward appearance. Early Greek atomists proposed that objects emit what they called “εἰδῶλα” (*eidōla*, copies of the object’s form). These reproductions penetrated the viewer’s eye and vision resulted. The philosopher-poet Lucretius embedded this theory of vision as intromission in *De rerum natura* (especially Book 4, Part II), in what strikes moderns as a fantastic, even preposterous, theory of the *eidolon*. According to his conception of “radiant species,” objects radiated their image through the air and entered the eye of the beholder. “These images are like a skin, or film,” Lucretius writes, and he compares them to husks and birth sacs, to the sloughed hides of snakes and the carcasses of molting insects: “All things project such likenesses of themselves. . . .” Perception is the result of species entering the sensory organs.

Now will I undertake an argument—

One for these matters of supreme concern—  
That there exist those somewhats which we call  
The images of things: these, like to films  
Scaled off the utmost outside of the things,  
Flit hither and thither through the atmosphere,  
And the same terrify our intellects,  
Coming upon us waking or in sleep,  
When oft we peer at wonderful strange shapes  
And images of people lorn of light,  
Which oft have horribly roused us when we lay  
In slumber— that haply nevermore may we  
Suppose that souls get loose from Acheron,  
Or shades go floating in among the living,  
Or aught of us is left behind at death,  
When body and mind, destroyed together, each  
Back to its own primordials goes away.

And thus I say that effigies of things,  
And tenuous shapes from off the things are sent,  
From off the utmost outside of the things,  
Which are like films or may be named a rind,  
Because the image bears like look and form  
With whatso body has shed it fluttering forth—  
A fact thou mayst, however dull thy wits,  
Well learn from this: mainly, because we see  
Even ’mongst visible objects many be  
That send forth bodies, loosely some diffused—  
Like smoke from oaken logs and heat from fires—  
And some more interwoven and condensed—  
As when the locusts in the summertime

Put off their glossy tunics, or when calves  
At birth drop membranes from their body's surface,  
Or when, again, the slippery serpent doffs  
Its vestments 'mongst the thorns—for oft we see  
The breres augmented with their flying spoils:  
Since such takes place, 'tis likewise certain too  
That tenuous images from things are sent,  
From off the utmost outside of the things.  
For why those kinds should drop and part from things,  
Rather than others tenuous and thin,  
No power has man to open mouth to tell; . . .

So, if we test  
A square and get its stimulus on us  
Within the dark, within the light what square  
Can fall upon our sight, except a square  
That images the things? Wherefore it seems  
The source of seeing is in images,  
Nor without these can anything be viewed.

The Pythagoreans challenged this intromissive thesis, arguing that if this theory were true, then, in order to see large objects, large species would have to penetrate the eye, and that is clearly impossible. Accordingly, the Pythagoreans argued instead that the viewer's eye must be the source of the power of seeing: the eye, they claimed, issues a fiery beam that, in making contact with the object, makes vision possible. The Stoics largely agreed with the Pythagoreans, except for them eye does not emit a fiery beam but, rather, an aery substance—or rather a mixture of fire and air—they referred to as “pneuma.”

Plato attempted to synthesize the views of the Pythagoreans and the Stoics. He claimed that the fiery beam emitted by the eye interacts with a force that emanates from the object and that the beam returns from this interaction to the eye carries an impression of the object. The fascinating details he offered concerning this process, we shall have to pass over. To give a sense of his theory, we highlight his remarks on when the motions that bodies give off, which carry their appearance to us, are active enough to disturb our sleep:

but where the greater motions still remain, of whatever nature and in whatever locality, they engender corresponding visions in dreams, which are remembered by us when we are awake and in the external world. And now there is no longer any difficulty in understanding the creation of images in mirrors and all smooth and bright surfaces. For from the communion of the internal and external fires, and again from the union of them and their numerous transformations when they meet in the mirror, all these appearances of necessity arise, when the fire from the face coalesces with the fire from the eye on the bright and smooth surface (*Timaeus* 45b–46c).

The idea that decorporealized apparitions have reality, and do so because they are energy, has a long history in philosophical writings: new media theorists did not bring forth the idea that our mind has intercourse with realm of apparitions that have a reality independent of their original

model (or, to express that idea in other terms, a reality that transcends the spatio-temporal limitations of their model; or again, to express the idea in more Bazinian language, a reality that is freed from the temporal fate of their model). The *dissensus* from the tradition that new media theory represents was to embrace the idea that apparitional realm is higher than the corporeal realm (and as a matter of fact, they had plenty of Gnostic predecessors to help them to formulate that view) or, even, at the extreme, that it has supplanted the corporeal realm. But once one accepts that apparitions are freed from the spatio-temporal limitations of their models, that conclusion will seem to force itself upon us with the inexorability of fate.

The meaning of “species” underwent a shift in the early medieval period: St. Augustine used the term (*De trinitate* xi 9) to refer to an incorporeal likeness of an object—in the first instance, to an external likeness, but also to an internal likeness produced by the senses: the species of some body, when it is perceived, produces the species that arises in the sense of the percipient, and the latter gives rise to the species in memory, which produces the species that arises in the gaze of thought. Moreover, in Augustine’s system, each of the senses produced a different type of species—so our total understanding of, say, a particular person would depend on our synthesis of the various species we received through sight, hearing, and touch as well as the species that that person excited in the mind. Grosseteste and Bacon extended the meaning of the term to designate the first effect of any thing. Thus, it came to denote al-Kindi’s universal force, which radiates from everything to produce effects.

For Grosseteste, lower-order beings derive from higher orders; in the metaphysical system of new media theorists, the objects (or object/events) that belong to the realm that the media of the virtual have recently made (or are about to make)—the object/events composing this reality are, of course, data—are also derivative: they derive from what they once imitated (though with the advance of the process by which this reality came to supplant the reality of spatially and temporally located material objects, they ceased to be imitative, and in the process their status as derivative was obscured):

From medium to medium, the real is volatilized, becoming an allegory of death. But it is also, in a sense, reinforced through its own destruction. It becomes *reality for its own sake*, the fetishism of the lost object: no longer the object of representation, but the ecstasy of denial and of its own ritual extermination: the hyperreal [...] The hyperreal [...] manages to efface even this contradiction between the real and the imaginary. Unreality no longer resides in the dream or fantasy, or in the beyond, but in the *real’s hallucinatory resemblance to itself*.

The idea that derivative existents threaten/promise to supplant higher realities is a key topic of new media historiography—and the undecidability of the question whether this supplanting is baneful or beneficial is the core of the debate that is taking place in contemporary new media theory (though on the matter that this transformation is inevitable there seems to be widespread agreement). Gibson supposes the process has a positive role. Kroker seems unable to make up his mind (for, as we saw in the sentence quoted in the second page of this article, he, on the one hand, describes virtual reality as an electronic cage and, on the other hand, writes of “out-of-body experiences,” as being akin to ecstasy); thus, in a single panic-fuelled sentence, he registers the undecidability of the question. Baudrillard is skeptical, even pessimistic: for Baudrillard every realistic image, but especially an electronic image that offers a virtual reality, is the source of malfeasance. In a lecture resoundingly entitled “The evil demon of images,” Baudrillard proclaimed:

It is precisely when it appears most truthful, most faithful and most in conformity to reality that the image is most diabolical [...] It is in its resemblance, not only analogical but technological, that the image is most immoral and most perverse.

The appearance of the mirror introduced into the world of perception an ironical effect of *trompe-l'oeil*, and we know what malefice was attached to the appearance of doubles. But this is also true of all the images which surround us: in general they are analysed according to their value as representations, as media of presence and meaning. The immense majority of present day photographic, cinematic and television images are thought to bear witness to the world with a naive resemblance and touching fidelity. We have spontaneous confidence in their realism. We are wrong. They only seem to resemble reality, events, faces. Or rather, they really do conform, but their conformity itself is diabolical.

Baudrillard asserts that the march of history is realizing the evil world that Gnostics understood to ensnare us: history ensures that the world's power to entrap increases, as these seductive images come to constitute the real itself.

Most often, however, the process by which scores of approximate apparitions, which began as imitations, came to devour and, finally, replace what they once imitated—the process by which information (data, electricity, energy) came to supplant material reality—is seen as positive, beneficial, promoting intellectual, moral and spiritual liberation: in becoming energy (information), reality reverts to a higher level on Grosseteste's scale of being. Take this passage, from Roy Ascott's *Telematic Embrace*:

Ascott: Finally, the quality of coming-into-being, of apparition, is replacing the quality of representation, of appearance, which has for so long been the defining characteristic of Western art.

Comment: Yes, I have quoted correctly; the word "apparition" does appear here! But one wonders if Ascott really believes that new media technology produced the urge to replace "the quality of representation" (which Ascott naively identifies with "appearance") A cursory survey of early twentieth-century art and history of abstract painting (and film) will reveal that urge to replace "the quality of representation" began well before telematic art made its appearance. Western art began to repudiate representation long before there were new media. The historical revisionism here, claiming that the attributes of new media are fuelling the drive to replace "the quality of representation" has the undesirable effect of pushing into the background such question as what desires fuelled the push towards abstract art in the first decades of the twentieth century, long before the beginning of new media art?

And if, as seems evident, other forces conspire with new media to "overcome" representation, then (any reflective reader would be inclined to ask) what exactly is the relation between digital technology and the overcoming of representation? No answer is forthcoming.

Ascott: It's not simply that many colleges are haunted by the ghosts of culture past, . . .

Comment: Torontonians know that Roy Ascott, in his brief tenure (1971–72) as the President of the Ontario College of Art implemented a curriculum founded on the belief that colleges are haunted by the ghosts of culture past, a curriculum that dispensed with drawing . It is instructive to compare the account this book offers of Ascott's time at OCA (including the remarks that E. Shankin offers in the introduction) with Morris Wolfe' engaging, if all-too-balanced, account *OCA 1967–1972 : Five Turbulent Years*.

Ascott: . . . but that apparitions of the future are emerging on every screen, in every network. These apparitions are the constructions of distributed mind, the coming-into-being of new forms of human presence, half-real, half-virtual, new forms of social relationships, realised in telepresence, set in cyberspace. They are challenging the old discarded forms of representation and hermeneutics, which still haunt the lecture halls. [...] Art has a place in this cultural reformation. It can bring new values and new understandings of our post-biological condition and assist in defining the new responsibilities we carry for our own bionic evolution.

The contents of this new reality have (or, alternatively, depending on the theorist, will) become more like light/consciousness. Hollis Frampton's meditations on new media took place within a framework bequeathed by Grosseteste: he was fascinated by the volatilization of material in the image, a volatilization that would result in material reality reverting to a higher (immaterial) condition. Frampton's meditation on the ontological implications of the historical process effecting this conversion was likely based on the medieval idea of "species" – an incorporeal likeness that has real existence (and in that respect resembles the simulacra that populate the digital realm). To put the Frampton quotation I cited above in context, I quote it more expansively.

The image and its pretext (the "portrait" and the "face," which bear to one another the relationship called "likeness") are ontologically manacled together. Every discrete phenomenon has its corresponding photograph [compare Frampton's idea of the photograph with the medieval idea of species], every photograph its peculiar subject; and after little more than a century, the whole visible cosmos seems about to transform itself into a gigantic whirling rebus within which all things cast off scores of approximate apparitions, which turn again to devour and, finally, replace them.

Arthur Kroker's celebration of the floating world of liquid media into which the body is daily downloaded, where data are the real, and where high technology can provide an out-of-body experience (thereby fulfilling the body's destiny, to overcome materiality) is likewise formulated on the model of Grosseteste's light metaphysics: according to his theory of virtual media, high technology allows corporeal matter to return to its form and perfection, as energy.

The Gnosticism of new media theorists' idea of decorporealization is evident: our world is the wrong world, they say; it is wrong not only because it is a bad world, but also because it



offers the illusion of corporeality, and, as Baudrillard suggests, the illusion of corporeality is the root of all evil. According to the soteriological principles of these new media theorists, the reason why it is so important to see through the illusion of the self—why it is so important to understand that we possess no internal principle but (according to Haraway’s famous theme) are subject to endless remaking—is that the new, non-corporeal reality (including our own being) can come under our complete control: and once under our control, we would know how we made it (including how we fashioned our self or selves) and how to reproduce it (including our own being). Everything, including ourselves, is potentially eternal and infinitely multiform. Nothing would constrain this ceaseless process of making and remaking. In the end, we would act as a new Creator. Thus, according to the theological system into which new media theorists fold the media of the virtual, the virtual realm releases us from all moral limitations the material world imposes on us, so nothing outside of us limits our capacity to impose on the world or to engender new forms of the self.

Ascott again provides proof of the currency of such ideas. Writing about museums, he states:

Indeed, is it not time to reconsider the notion of the disembodied self in order to reach a better understanding of who we are and what we may become?[...] [W]e are not only leaving our bodies, the old definitions of “body,” we are leaving behind embodiment as the primary measure and sign of reality. Through telematic networks, our presence is distributed. We are both present and absent, **here and elsewhere, all at the same time**. It seems that embodied representation is giving way to disembodied reconstruction of ourselves.

In this immersion in the immaterial, which constitutes a culture of computer-mediated events, fuzzy logic, principles of uncertainty, undecidability, and chaos, what place do repositories of old pots and pans, sticks and stones, bones and baubles have in our consciousness? (Ascott, “The mind of the museum,” in *Telematic Embrace*, pp. 350–351, emphasis mine)

There is that gnostic religious hope again: the unity of the altogether-all-at-once beyond material realm.

Every Canadian who has realized how crucial to self-understand is thinking about technology knows George Grant had already provided, decades before Ascott, a stunning critique of that way of thinking, in such deeply moving books as *Technology and Empire* and *Technology and Justice*. Grant’s philosophy amounts to a demonstration of the role that the conviction that the Good is not inherent in the order of being played in forming the regime of modernity. The repudiation of the belief that beings owe their being to beneficence, Grant shows, underpins the idea that nature, both human and non-human nature, is endlessly available for making and remaking, unconstrained by any moral reality. And that belief, in turn, forms the groundwork of the regime of technique in which we exist and through which we conceive the world, and is used to justify our feeling that humans are free to remake the world. Grant pointed out that the notion of technique is central to modern civilization—so much so that the progress of technique by now has become the horizon for those who seek to understand the Good. Moderns have lost the ability to understand the standards of goodness by which particular techniques may be judged. The conviction that human knowledge has the purpose of mastering human and non-human nature is central to moderns’ ideas about the nature of human being. The belief that theorists of virtual media expound, that human being possesses no

inherent nature, has the purpose of justifying the proposition that humans can be made and remade at will—that nothing in (human or non-human) nature limits society's/ideology's/the artist's freedom to refashion them. And that conception, in its turn, belongs to a discourse on value and freedom that is associated with the will to technique—it is part and parcel of the modern belief that nature, since it is objectively devoid of value, can be remade at will.

What more than anything impresses me about the metaphysical propositions issued by virtual reality theorists is their aggrandizing tendency. The consequence of this aggrandizement, I fear, may well be tyranny. I mean “tyranny” here in the Straussian sense, as it arose within the remarkable exchange between Leo Strauss, the renowned political philosopher, and Alexandre Kojève, France's great interpreter of Hegel. A key topic of the debate, Grant pointed out, was Kojève's affirmation “that the universal and homogeneous state is the best social order, and that mankind advances to the establishment of such an order.” Kojève pointed out that the final stage of civilization, the establishment of the universal and homogeneous state, comes into being as the secularization of the political ideal of the Christian community, which proposed that all humans could transcend their given differences through their faith, and be made one in the body of Christ's church. Everyone, surely, will have noted that this claim resonates in the beliefs of the new media communitarians (who, again following McLuhan, proclaim that everybody will be made one in the electrified virtual space of instantaneous information exchange). Behind this lies the assumption (not unlike that of soteriological assumptions that undergird the metaphysics of virtuality) that thought (and specifically, for the ancients, philosophy) takes its bearings not from an ahistorical eternal order, but from eternity as the totality of all historical epochs (the sum of all knowledge that our new hypertextual “koran” represents).

Strauss argued, against Kojève, that the goal of Hegel's state, universal happiness, is unachievable—and what is worse, efforts to realize it will end in tyranny. Strauss' argument was founded in the classical belief that humans find their fulfilment in that thinking which leads to wisdom—a premise that Hegel had rejected in favour of the premise that humans find adequate fulfilment in a form of recognition that is available to all. Hegel's gambit, Strauss argued, had effectively lowered the goal of political action, for his idea of universal recognition as the basis of community and state cannot recognize the inevitable differences among humans, and he thus depicts human communities as nexûs of undifferentiated beings. When we must all be the same, no person will be a true thinker. The universal, homogenous state will erode difference and conflict in favour of the mindless consumerism of the liberal ethos. In such a state, philosophy will disappear through the convergence of technology and ideology.

It is time to put away this myth of decorporealization, of the totalization of knowledge that will bring history to an end. The phenomenon of decorporealization, even if it were real, would hardly justify the optimism that it will bring 2500 years of metaphysics to an end. For that myth, too, is rooted in the metaphysical tradition. In fact, it is rooted in one of the paradigms of metaphysics, the Neo-Platonic tradition, and specifically in the later Gnostic systems whose shapes Neo-Platonism helped generate (as its unfortunate offspring?). Furthermore, because it is grounded in the myth of total identity, total transparency, the prevalent metaphysics of virtual reality neglects the actual condition of knowledge: it arises from the Gnostic technologist's belief in the possibility of immanentizing of the *eschaton*, a belief that goes hand in hand with the idea that the future can be foreseen and planned. The prevalent metaphysics of virtual reality is simply the “dream world” of Gnostic lore, where the structure of reality is disregarded, facts ignored, and the openness of history replaced by a single, bold, revolutionary step into the New Age. To counter this myth, may I suggest that we return to where all true understanding starts: to the real body, not the amalgam of metal and flesh that is the cyborg, nor the data body of

Kroker's Gnostic dream, but the actual flesh body. Let us start with the real body that belongs to an actual, localized community and that experiences not in a mode of instantaneous ecstasy that affords complete identification with all that is (that is to say, *nexûs* of data), but experiences concrete reality partially and perspectively.

Let us begin by considering how to develop a theory of media that takes into account the fundamental fact that in advanced capitalist countries such as the USA, more than 50 percent of labour production involves the manipulation of information. The convergence of computer and communications technologies, a process that began in the 1960s and now occurs with ever increasing rapidity, has rendered the global information infrastructure ubiquitous. This convergence has facilitated the development of an international economy and the development of multinational and transnational corporations. This is the true "totalization" that electronic media are effecting; it is furthering the process of commodification that dominates global economic transactions. The flow of information across the planet now regulates resource distribution and control, wealth, and power. Transnational information linkages and "harmonization of systems" across different media produce tendencies towards centralization, through which power agglomerates by swallowing up disparate corporate entities. This, again, is the true totalisation that the new electronic technologies are effecting—not the totalized end of history, effected through the identification of the (now-volatilized) community of knowers with the (now-volatilized) objects of knowledge.

A hysterical, panic-fuelled theory of digital media that celebrates these global information structures in terms of the universal post-human who is about to emerge does not help us think about the problems that emerge from these economic changes. Nor are we helped by a metaphysics of digital communications whose political effect is the celebration of the universal, homogenous state—for the political effect of the widespread acceptance that the World Wide Web, this non-hierarchical, undifferentiated all-encompassing totality, will be the final form of knowledge is to endorse a variant form of the universal, homogeneous state of Strauss' dark vision. We need to think about our local realities—to think soberly about our local realities, since they are much endangered by these global information structures.

So, too, we must consider the concrete body, lest the forces that would turn it into a despised object should prevail. We must consider how these new media can intensify bodily experience, not deplete it: the more we have denied the body pleasure and the more we have allowed life to be sacrificed, the more we have allowed ourselves to be seized by its double, the mere spectacle of life. And the more daily life is thus impoverished, the greater the spectacle's attraction becomes. Through this process, the spectacle has dislodged us from the core of our lives, as the simulacrum has conspired to make lived reality seem trivial by comparison: this idealized projection has even come to obscure the importance of the reality of actual bodily pleasure. We have allowed identification with the re-externalized *imago* to compensate for the life energies we sacrificed to that projection. We need to deliberate for a moment on this process.

In the absence of the sense of the One that binds pages of the universe into a single volume, phenomena have become impoverished, eroded by desacralization. We live in a realm where nothing is higher and nothing is lower. Exchange value has all but consumed Being, and without a summit of Being, there is no hierarchy of value: changes in fashion decide what has value, so what has value today will become worthless tomorrow, and what was worthless yesterday has great value today. Nothing is more authentic than anything else and every being, even Being itself, is subject to re-evaluation—indeed everything is now available for infinite reinterpretation. In an era of infinite reinterpretability, everything is finally of equal value, and

everything is interchangeable and exchangeable. There is no centre. We are left with an eroded consciousness that has lost its metaphysical bearings.

The Logos was the common framework that integrated all, that all brought all beings together. Now we find ourselves enclosed within a fractured space in which beings lack connection with a transcendent. Now, only the brutality of Power can accomplish anything in the way of organizing the fragments. Nothing from above brings order; and lacking any reference what is above, we cannot even make contact with our deeper selves.

The Logos, in encompassing all, gave all meaning. The spectacle has reduced this unity to a series of fragments which it interrelates through the pseudo-connections of a thinned-out rationality whose characteristic form, as Bergson pointed out, is the series of linear succession. Thus this denatured reason constructs a life-world that depends upon an abstract temporality that assigns us positions according to the co-ordinates of power. Such a thinned-out, eroded rationality is what puts the spectacle, a feeble organization of appearance, on display. At the same time, the spectacle has colonized every area of modern experiences, and has subjected all phenomena to the iron law that no real change is possible—that only insignificant changes to fragmentary aspects of the system will be allowed. All we are left with is an enfeebled, eroded awareness of our role the spectacle.

Immersion in the phantasmagoria of a delirium-inducing ocean of sights and sounds is the condition that the culture industry has imposed upon; they have even established that state of semi-consciousness as normative. A most dire facet of this new regime is that the very ontology of our image culture increasingly includes its participant and incorporates their perspectives within the constitutive mechanism of representation. Subjects, therefore, are no longer the absolute centre of seeing—the illusion of the panopticon (Foucault's fruitful reworking of Merleau-Ponty's notion of the "outside observer") is dispelled; subjects, we are now convinced, are simply nodes of network of vision/visuality that operates beyond their control as phantasmic centres, by facilitating currents that course through the network, affecting the peripheral nodes by engendering a distorted replica of desire. This view entails that vision has its blindspots.

But even if vision includes blindspots, and even if the delirium induced by the image culture lures us into the other world of visual representations, these facts would not imply that the subjects' relations to social realities have been dissolved and the real has been replaced by simulation; nor does it imply that representations have been deprived of reference to the Real and so have acceded to their death. Only the delirium induced by immersion in the phantasmagoria of sights and sounds is responsible for the impression that reality has ephermalized into simulation.

Reality has not vanished, nor will it. It simply mutates, and this process of mutation is incessant. Reality is ever re-produced, for reality is never anything more than the product of the technique of a given epoch (remembering, of course, that technique is form in which the dispensations of Be-ing occur). Be-ing arises only within the whole that is the form of the dispatch (the *Geschick*, as Heidegger puts it); and the dispatch is historical (the *Geschick* is always *geschichtlich*). Be-ing appears only through the activity of transmission (*Überlieferung*). Reality is always being re-invented: humans transform themselves and nature through activity—this is something that always has been, is, and always will be. What Baudrillard believes to be the substitution of a signifying system for reality is not that at all—it is merely the replacement of the reality that is the product of one system of technique with another reality that is the product of another system of technique. There is no loss of reality; reality and virtual reality are still locked in an eristic relationship.

Subtending the belief in the precession of the simulacrum is the tendency to regard

information as an autonomous form from Beyond, a magic form of being without roots in the realm of concrete particulars, and therefore beyond our control. Is it really surprising if that which we exempt from the condition of being a product of labour, and from being subject to transformation by labour, should be accorded a spiritualized form of existence? Yet, in reality, both the realm of the simulacral and the technology which is used to produce it are expressions of the social relationships between real humans. It is human activity which is objectified in machines and information. And remembering that fact should remind us of the importance of the now unfashionable questions about how the rewards of this labour should be allocated to the different groups involved in the production of machines and information.

It is true: only the delirium induced by immersion in the phantasmagoria of sights and sounds is responsible for the sense that reality has transformed itself into a spectacle. Only the delirium induced by immersion in the phantasmagoria of sights and sounds is responsible for the impression that reality has been volatilized. So we must ask how to counter the effects of the delirium that the culture industries have induced, and how to rediscover our groundedness.

How can we rescue ourselves from immersion in the phantasmagoric? The phantasmagoric operates by creating the impression that its realm is a seamless unity. Our art must overcome that impression. This demands that art become physical—that we acknowledge that artworks are machines for affecting the bodies of those whom they address. Immersion in the phantasmagoria of sounds and images has reduced our capacity for direct sensory—and sensuous—experience. To counter that effect, we must emphasize the physicality of the making and the reception of artwork. That is to say, we must emphasize the body's role in making and experiencing art. Art—ars, making—should teach us about the body's way of knowing. The body learns first through activity, not through concepts. Recall that the unity of thought and practice that was central to the concept of τέχνη (techne, the rational method involved in producing an object or accomplishing a goal or objective)—acknowledging the unity of thought and practice is a key to countering the pernicious notion that human beings are information processing systems, an error that traced back to the Platonic form of idealism (which also disparaged the senses and maintained the unreality of the physical world and the superiority of a “hyperreality”). Our art must distort and fragment all with which it comes into contact: it must do all that it can to damage the wholeness of a work of art, to tear apart the seamless unity that is that staple form of both the entertainment “arts” and those new media forms that approach the condition of being “ambient media,” that seamless form that absorbs our be-ing and leaves it inert and unproductive. Further, it must make the mediation of the apparatus explicit, for the occultation of the apparatus figures among the phenomena that has led to erroneous thinking about the disappearance of reality.

To serve these physical ends, art should become genuinely erotic. Erotica is physical: it operates by elevating the corporeal unconscious to consciousness in sexual arousal. It reveals, and revels in, unacknowledged desire. Erotica plumps for the liberation of desire. Erotica shows the way for art to become a desiring machine that operates by induction to shape liberatory energies. Erotica demonstrates that the marvellous inhabits the everyday, that the physical bodies around us constitute the dreamworld and that the true dreamworld is made up of real physical bodies. Of course, most pornography conveys only body-hatred, but that should not lead us to the erroneous conclusion that erotica has no potential for the enhancement of bliss-consciousness. If ours is a culture mad for death, erotica has a role in transforming it into one mad for love—into one blessed with *amour fou*.

Furthermore, the truly erotic reaffirms joy—even a joyfulness of “repetition” that acknowledges that there is no such thing as exact repetition. But there is no reason why we

should accept Baudrillard's despairing claim that melancholy is the fundamental tonality of functional systems, including the grindingly repetitive systems of simulation, programming and information. There is no reason to believe that, by implosion, history has collapsed into inertia, into the endless repetition of the same—the same dead forms organized again and into new permutations and combinations.

The first goal of the intensification of life is to dissolve the subjugated consciousness that, by this process, has come to feel itself impotent. Intensity makes us feel our belongingness-to-others. The recognition that social relations are between real, embodied human beings is a key to overcoming that fetishism that generates the sensation that autonomous relations between simulacra have become the core reality for present-day metaphysics. It is important to remember that the psychological condition that allows relations between things, or between images, is a measure of *anomie*. The antidote to that *anomie* is intensity.

The kind of knowledge that arises from our familiarity with particular bodies, in particular times and places, is certainly also a *gnosis*, but not the *gnosis* of a place beyond, where everything will be better. On the contrary, this kind of *gnosis* aims at our actual, lived condition. It knows not some decorporealized, universal, totalized existence, but is *real* knowledge that begins with concrete experiences of immediate, localized reality, in the here-and-now. That is enough to be getting on with.

Let us begin with the body, for all thought is bodily: all that we know begins in a peculiar fusion of the human abilities for cognitive processing of sensory inputs, for abstract conceptualization as a means of problem-solving, and for the co-ordination of bodily functions (such as those of the hand and the eye) that enables us to translate thoughts into action. Yet, though all thinking is bodily, that does not mean that physiology alone determines beliefs. For all knowledge is culturally mediated—all thought and all action belong to culture, a system of beliefs and behaviours whereby human beings create meaning in their experiential world. It is through the system of culture that consciousness acquires the ability to represent the world both internally, within the individual psyche, and externally, through communicating with others. It is through culture that the mind manifests itself to itself.

The technologies of representation have a role in forming the structures of consciousness: consciousness is shaped by the systems of signification we use, the systems of language and technology in which thinking and our being are housed. Language and all the other technologies of representation are conscious recreations of our world of experience (linguistic constructs reflect the world); and, conversely, the world of experience is also a concrete representation of language (the structure of the world as we know reflects the structure of language). To put this in another way, we could say that we are parts of a reality that has become aware and able to reflect on events. Thus, we know reality from the "inside," from our experience of consciousness. This is the "immanentization" that must be thought, not the immanentization of the *eschaton* so celebrated in the theology of virtual media. That technology has penetrated the recesses of our being does not reflect "something special about the mediatization of our current culture": our self-understanding has always (even before the commodification that characterizes the present) been intimately linked to technologies of representation (and pre-eminently the technology of language). Technology has never been something that stands outside us, available for use. Technology (and pre-eminently the technology of language) has always haunted the inner recesses of our being, defining what we are.

Humans understand themselves by transforming the realm of the alien "other" into a world intimate with their own being. This transformation occurs through the technologies of

representation. This capacity to bring the other within a very highly developed system of consciousness makes human being the most open of all living beings—permeable to what we sometimes call “the outside,” even though it is constituted as a dialogue between the internalized system of representation and what lies outside the system of representations. Let us consider the dialogue between the concrete person and the specific conditions in which he or she lives, and the role that systems of representation have in that dialogue, and how that dialogue has been effected with the development of new systems of representation. This could provide a so much better foundation for a theory of virtual media than the grand reflections about the return to pre-lapsarian conditions offered by those whose thought longs to escape from actual, local realities.