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Abstract.

This essay argues that a Neo-Platonic/Gnostic metaphysics and soteriology is implicit in the writings of several theorists of virtual media. This provenance is particularly evident in the writings of theorists who propose that the destiny of the body is to be transmuted into energy/electricity/light in virtual space we will soon inhabit – a historical development that most of these theorists consider a positive one, that will liberate us from our baleful material condition. The paper offers a critical analysis of ideological and rhetorical pressures that have given shape to these metaphysical proposals and offers suggestions for an alternative theory of virtual media.

Bodies, Virtual and Material

by R. Bruce Elder

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 frequently 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). Whether new media theorists and media makers would be so eager to embrace the ideas of recent theorists of virtuality had the antecedents for their theories been made evident, are the topics I wish to consider. 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 not are adequate to the task they are asked to fulfill, 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.” That filmmaker 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!*” probably 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 hysterical comment in "Data Trash" – "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 fulfill its destiny of an out-of-body experience" – isn't situated 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"; and it is that same enthusiasm (an enthusiasm arising from historical obliviousness) that 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.

George Santayana's remark about history that has become a cliché, 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 an apposite choice, because of hypermedia's exemplary status: all the new media partake of some 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 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 our traditional notion that the real is constituted (largely) by spatially located material objects into question, and so 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 at representing our complex and non-linear mental operations than prose is. The 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** there) and 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. 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). Authoring hypertext results in the production of a net-like structure which 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 a 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, 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 judgements 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 renown article in *The Atlantic* in July, 1945, entitled “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.” The content of this universal encyclopaedia would be a compendium of 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* 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 Ted Nelson. In those works, 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.” 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 *œuvres* (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 is it interesting to ask what conditions – what technological developments, what pre-conceptions and what 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 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 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 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, crucial to technological development, 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 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, Gnosticism offers ‘salvation by knowledge (*gnosis*)’; this belief appeals to an age like ours in which learning is valued above faith. 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 the 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. The Gnostic strives to immanentize 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 16th 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 now communication 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 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 fulfill its destiny of an out-of-body experience" is a typical (and typically hysteric) example. Pure electric knowledge, we are told, 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. Their 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. 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 individual; in becoming pure 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 often tell us 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 (an 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 will lead us to a new state of peace and planetary unity (just as the more traditional Rite of Holy Communion had once done). McLuhan's spiritual heirs and intellectual offspring among new media theorists do not seem as fundamentally committed to a NeoPlatonic/Augustinian Catholic world-view as the devout Marshall McLuhan was: I would like to know what they make of the roots of their metaphysics of the virtual in this tradition – and in the Platonic notion of Mind's separateness from the body. I believe they would be troubled by having those roots exposed.

The parallel between prevalent understandings of the semiotics of hypertext and prevalent conception 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 of total 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 ideal 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 is putting on the self. The effects of this pressure is 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 variant of the thesis, 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 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 decorporealisation 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 expositor 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, 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, that became 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.

Thus, 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. The meaning underwent a shift in the

early medieval period: St. Augustine had used the term “species” (*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 which 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, through hearing, through touch and the species that that person excites 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) our current reality – 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 of 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 on the one hand, he describes virtual reality as an electronic cage and, on the other hand, writes of “out of body experiences,” 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 realising 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. The contents of this new reality have (or, alternatively, 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 similar to 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 out-of-body experience (thereby fulfilling its 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 the new media theorist's idea of decorporealisation 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, 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 imposed on us, so nothing outside of us limits our capacity to impose on the world or to engender new forms of the self.

Every Canadian knows the critique of this very position that George Grant proposed in such stunning books as *Technology and Empire* and *Technology and Justice*. Grant showed that the belief that the Good is not inherent in the order of nature underpins that belief, essential to the regime of technique in which we exist and through which we conceive the world, that humans are free to remake the world. Grant pointed out the notion of technique is central to modern civilization – so much so that the progress of technique has now 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 "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, homogeneous state will erode difference and conflict, in favour of the mindless consumerism of the liberal ethos. In such a state, philosophy will disappear, through a process that probably is now too far advanced to be reversed, 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 end. The phenomenon of decorporealisation, 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 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 real body of flesh. Let us start with the real body that belongs to a real, localized community, and experiences not in an mode of instantaneous ecstasy that afford 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 that 50 per cent 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 "totalisation" that electronic media are effecting; it is furthering the process of commodification which dominates global economic transactions. Information flows across the planet now regulate 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-volatilised) community of knowers with the (now-volatilised) objects of knowledge.

An 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 does a metaphysics of digital communications whose political effect is the celebration of the universal, homogenous state – for the political import of the widespread acceptance of the notion 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 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. 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 the psychological conditions that allow relations between things, or between images, is a certain 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 conceptualisation 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 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. 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 which has become aware and able to reflect on events. Thus, we know reality from the “inside,” from our experience of consciousness. This is the “immanentisation” that must be thought, not the immanentisation 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.