Electronic Literacies

by Caitlin Fisher

My research and artistic practice is organized around the overarching theme of electronic literacies in the broadest sense and the research concerns of this emerging field: production by artists and writers of new kinds of texts, the way these cultural objects are encountered and understood, and the widespread implications of these new cultural artifacts. As a hypermedia theorist and storyteller – as both a reader and a writer of these arguably new kinds of texts, I believe that the way we tell stories matters in a profound way, that forms are never innocent, that storytelling has intimate connections to theory-making and that playing with ideas and forms is not only good for you, but can also result in some surprising, unanticipated discoveries. I would like to share some of these discoveries with you, here.

All of my work to date is invested in finding a common language between thinking and doing – to making electronic art and texts, as well as thinking about them and reading them. This is significant with respect to digital literacies because as McLuhan said, "we shape our tools and then our tools shape us," (Lapham, xi) echoing Nietzsche who similarly observed that "our machines are working on our thoughts" (qtd. in Machine, n. pag..). An exploration of digital literacies necessarily, then, demands a consideration of both new ways and means of writing and new strategies and effects of reading.

The Living Literacies conference asked us to consider what it means to read and write now – and with respect to electronic literacies we need to consider specifically, I think, what it means to read and write non-linearly, visually, and cinematically. Do these new cultural forms and digital grammars allow us to communicate differently? How? To what effect? How do digital technologies and new media tools modify the relationships between language, texts, and culture? How do we speak to one another, now? What are the benefits of reading digital text as a material mode of creating shaped by ideological concerns? What is the

future of storytelling? In short, how will our encounters with new digital texts and possibilities challenge and change us?

These are the large questions in the field of electronic literacies of interest to this conference, as I see them, though it's impossible in one short piece, of course, to cover all that, and immodest to try. And so my focus here will be to sketch roughly for you a handful of the literacy skills I think electronic texts demand from us as readers and storytellers.

We will be challenged to:

1. read and write databases
2. read and write thought sculptures built through electronic linking
3. balance the need for experimentation with a current craving for readerly texts
4. read and write code
5. inhabit information architectures

First, though, some quick definitions. When I use the term electronic texts I mean texts not simply generated on a computer, like a word processed document, but a text that must be read on screen, one that demands the computer for its instantiation. A lot of my own early interest was in hypertexts. Electronic hypertext has been described as a system of nested, electronic footnotes, and early literary work in hypertext usually involved replacing one screen of text with another screen of text – and in this way they much more resembled print work than contemporary hypermedia works we now see in the field. Hypermedia refers to texts combining word, sound, image, animation, or other components into fully coherent and integrated work – the words in hypermedia work are, then, only part of the text. Those of you who use the World Wide Web are already familiar with hypertext/hypermedia – clicking on words that connect you from one (sometimes hypermedia-enhanced) document to another. Others of you who are not familiar with computers may be able to find a way to begin to imagine electronic hypertext through this suggestive list written by Susan Hawthorne:

Consider the form of a Hindu Yantra. This is hypertext.
Consider the form of the Kabbalah. This is hypertext.

Consider the paintings of Aboriginal artists.
Consider an astrological natal chart.
Consider the stained glass windows of a Gothic cathedral.
Consider the images you find in Russian or Greek Orthodox icons.
Consider the algebraic architectural and religious designs of the medieval Arab world.
Consider the image of the labyrinth, the maze. All are shorthand for hypertext.
(n. pag.)
So most of us, then, already have at least some complex, translatable literacy skills we can bring to electronic works. I'd like to talk now about my own work and experiments in this area and some of the things they have taught me.

I. Databases

My doctoral dissertation, *Building Feminist Theory: Hypertextual Heuristics*, explored the intersection of feminist and hypermedia theories and was written in HTML and a software program called Storyspace for stand-alone CD-ROM. It was an exploration, in hypertext, of the resonances and productive couplings between digital writing technologies and feminist theories and the dissertation used feminist and hypertext theories to build a new kind of text, a text that sought a form homologous with excentric knowedges.

Implicit in the title was the claim that the process of shaping this hypertext was itself a form of feminist theory production – that theory was "built" both by the structure of the dissertation and as an effect of reading. For example, the reader was challenged to choose her own pathways through the material from among many others I had coded; to build the text from fragments. No two readers were likely to have read the same screens in the same order.

I think of this text as my text of *jouissance*, which Barthes identifies as "the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts," that "unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, . . . [and] brings to a crisis his [sic] relation with language" (14). In other words, it was a text that very few people seemed to enjoy. Two years ago when hypermedia theorist Lev Manovich published his much antici-

pated book *The Language Of New Media*, I returned to my doctoral work to think about the "unpleasure" I had caused.

In his book, Manovich posits the database as the culture's new symbolic form and the unordered list, the archive etc., as a challenge to traditional narrative. He goes so far as to suggest that "database and narrative are natural enemies. Competing for the same territory of human culture, each claims an exclusive right to make meaning out of the world" (225). He goes further to suggest that we may even call the database a new symbolic form of the computer age, a new way to structure our experience of ourselves and of the world.

Building Feminist Theory was composed of over fouteen hundred lexias, or screens of text. While I wrote my dissertation long before Manovich published this piece, a database was, in effect, what I had produced – a large database and instructions for reading across it. In short, one of the things I had learned in the process of producing *Building Feminist Theory: Hypertextual Heuristics* was to answer the call of the new symbolic form. In terms of emerging literacies, then, I agree with Manovich that we must learn or relearn to read archives and databases.

II. Thought Sculptures

But my own work wasn't simply a database.

One of the first things I came to know when I began to share my dissertation widely with readers was that, more often than not, my readers read nodes and not links; these reluctant bricoleurs read the words and quotations, the elements of the database, but not its structure or associative method of organization.

The lexias or screens full of text were understood as the "real" content of the dissertation and the structure itself – its contours, its conventions, new ground I'd hoped it might break – was largely unintelligible to many of them. For some months I understood the work as a catalogue of losses – the loss of polemic, of certain kinds of rhetorical gestures, of mastery.

While I believe even now we can begin to talk about a new grammar and aesthetics of digital media, I had undertheorized, I think, the ways in which readers – expert readers of linear texts – would experience this hypertextual work.

The intellectual core of the hypertext, and one of the most interesting aspects of hypertextual writing to my mind, is the constellation of ideas held aloft by the technology – the linked and coded concretization of the weaver's constellation I visualize as a thought sculpture. I have always seen my texts as three dimensional, sculptural. Perhaps this is why linear forms always felt one step removed from my writing process. I would build a set of notes with many linkages and then work hard to flatten it all out again to construct a persuasive, two-dimensional essay form. My understanding of the constellation and its philosophical and political importance emerges from my reading of the Frankfurt school: when we want to understand an object of interest – in the case of my doctoral work, for example, feminist hypertext theory – we must not look directly at the object, fetishizing the concept. For Walter Benjamin, the constellation is a multidimensional form: the arrangement or configuration in which a variety of concepts, models, ideas or other materials takes shape (in "Theses on the Philosophy of History" for example). In Adorno's extension of the idea, the constellation holds contradictions in tension and is addressed this way: "as a constellation theoretical thought circles the concept it would like to unseal hoping that it may fly open like the lock of a well-guarded safe deposit box: in response, not to a single key or a single number, but to a combination of numbers" (163). Sounds very hypertextual.

I use the word constellation with a nod to Benjamin and Adorno, among others, then, but it's different here in new media. How? Crucially, because this particular constellation has been coded, because the linking structure, however complex, is saved in computer memory, I can return to it, and I can share it with you.

In the case of my dissertation, the web of original lexias, quotations, and imagery and sound put into conversation was held together by more than 17,000 links. While it is sometimes assumed that "links are directly analogous to prose transitions, page sequence or other connective structures in print" (Slatin, 871), as Burbules points out, there are different kinds of links that signal different kinds of associations: metaphors, metonymy, association not by similarity but by contiguity, synecdoche, antistasis, identity and catachresis: "novel, strange instances might spark reflections just as revealing and delightful as

those one recognizes more readily" (111). The linking structure, in other words, was an integral part of the intellectual work necessary to produce the text.

Indeed, the linking structure – the ability of this writing technology to hold the all-at-onceness of theory as we build it, to communicate this constellation of ideas, and crucially, to have readers encounter and explore them (though never unmediated, of course) – is, I believe, one of the most theoretically interesting aspects of hypertext writing.

I associate this hypertext, in part, with the scaffolding of the academic enterprise, the unconscious of the philosophical line, whose communication, I suggest, has real academic, theoretical, and aesthetic value: the concretization of a web of signification – the constellation of ideas held aloft by the technology through its linking structure. While it's true that much digital work is increasingly televisual, time-based, and linear, that many new texts employ software like Flash and Director in ways that do not showcase classic hypertextual structure, and that some texts consist solely of unordered lists, in my own work and in the work of many others, links continue to be crucial to the writing/thinking practice. It is for this reason that simply learning to read archives or databases will not always be enough.

It won't be enough because to concentrate only on the dataset in our reading practices is potentially to miss the structure coded by the author and to miss entering into a relationship with that artful labour. This structure is what I'm calling the thought sculpture – the invisible intellectual labour that demands a new kind of literacy and one that risks remaining unintelligible to readers even though its contours have been given what we might call a certain kind of materiality through coding. This is a very important innovation, then: conceiving of the navigational apparatus not simply as a way to get around the text, but the navigational apparatus itself as a signifying component of the text (Hayles). And so we need to focus on finding ways to make the digital constellation intelligible to us. We will learn to read archives and datasets, yes, but we must also explore ways to teach ourselves to read and write and theorize the navigational apparatus, this thought sculpture, too – its contours, its grammar, its possibilities … its poetry.

III. Balance

My first sustained attempt to think through what I had learned from my doctoral experience resulted in the writing of my recent electronic novella, *These Waves of Girls.*

Based on my theoretical understandings of emerging literacies, and my doctoral finding that readers of hypermedia typically still crave *readerly* texts, I constructed an architecturally and visually complex piece that nevertheless employed many of the traditional appeals of narrative. While some electronic writers predict that many of the current concerns about readability in hypermedia work will fade over time as the notion of reading itself makes the shift, and the scope of what we mean by "text" expands, I nevertheless deliberately set out to write *These Waves of Girls*, as a text of pleasure built in part as an echo of the dissertation.

The novella was awarded the 2001 International Electronic Literature Prize for Fiction, and I believe in large part *These Waves of Girls* won because it made concessions to people's *existing* literacy skills, allowed for closure and pleasure, and wasn't devoted to the "unpleasure" of more experimental texts, including my own. Unlike my dissertation, people knew how to read it and people "got" it.

Still, at a theoretical level, the text considered complex questions around how narratives of girlhood are discursively produced and how hypermedia might enable a writer to craft a complex and new kind of text while resisting the impulse to produce a standard univocal account of the subject matter – a linear developmental tale. Although it's a fairly narrative text, the small stories are to be encountered in no particular order. I wanted the stories and memories to crash like "waves" because I wanted possibly contradictory tales to emerge, for readers to encounter the complex nature of diverse girlhoods themselves – girls at once strong, as victims, as scheming, as vain, as kind, as wanting … all of this within one girl. Or are there many girls here? Hypermedia made it possible for me to suggest all of this at once.

IV. Codework:

"Writing" in a digital environment consists of both text and code, and many of the other works on the shortlist for the Electronic Literature

Prize might be called "codeworks," works in which programming languages are revealed on the surface of the text, or executable code shapes the writing and reading of the text. Techniques vary, but the general result is a digital text that emphasizes its own programming, mechanism, and materiality. Rita Raley – whose important article "Interferences: [Net.Writing] and the Practice of Codework" forms the basis of the following discussion – notes that practitioners refer to the practice variously as: "net.wurked" language, "rich.lit," codepoetry"; "digital visual poetics"; and "programmable or machine modulated poetry (n. pag.). Some works, for example, rely on operable code using algorithms and randomization functions to generate new texts from pre-existing ones. The new text is different every time it's read, and you see it being built on screen a little at a time.

Other authors use code mixed with a natural language like English. The work of Mez – the screen name of Marianne Breeze, an Australian author – is a good example of this practice. Mez calls her hybrid language "mezangelle." Mez uses code fragments visually, on the surface of her texts – square brackets, operators and those of you familiar with mobile phones, pagers, instant messengers, and other info shorthands will be familiar with the look of some of this work. Work like this interrupts and impedes smooth transmission of information, rendering meaning opaque and troubling interpretation, which results in another text of jouissance. Not surprisingly, lots of people dislike it. Mez receives email regularly from people asking "why can't you just write in plain English?" and Mez's answer is found in the work itself: "[meaning code: if narrative is essential to comprehension, then TTT is not for you. turn reading 'off' and filter 'on'. if, on the other key, you enjoy dream sequences/ sequentials, reverse the last.]" (Mez, Puzzle Pieces of a Datableede Jigsaw)

Codework has roots in earlier avant-garde practices – found poems, concrete poetry, Oulipian texts, Dadaist composition – but the context and circulation of the texts is different. Mez makes clear that her writing practice has at its core an ongoing sense of performance and collaboration: "code wurk_remnants d-voted to the dispersal of writing that has been n.spired and mutated according 2 the dynamics of an active network" (qtd. in Raley).

As Raley points out, codework has interesting implications for literacies: "the reader-users will learn to process the meaning of some elements of code: a handful of operators, instructions, and characters" (n. pag.) We will also learn to process these hybrid, irregular, shorthand languages. Indeed, Raley suggests that codework like Mez's facilitates a kind of oppositional literacy, that the practice of mezangelle might well jam our complacent reading practices and awaken those that lie dormant; or, as Mez herself declares, "move through the neural in waves, swarming into active channels, critically hitting inactive potentials" (n. pag.).

V. Inhabit

Finally, another key area of interest of mine with consequences to literacy is hypermedia in virtual environments, particularly the work of writers built in virtual reality (VR) caves. Powered by high-performance computers, a cave is an eight-foot-square cubicle with high-resolution stereo graphics projected onto three walls and the floor to create a virtual reality experience. Special hardware and software keep track of the positions and movements of visitors entering the space, changing the images within in a way that allows them to feel immersed in the virtual space. Although the cave was initially embraced as a way to produce mimetic representations with application to medicine, archaeology, chemistry, applied mathematics etc., writers, performers, and dramatists, cultural theorists and visual artists are increasingly being drawn to VR as a new realm for their work.

I am particularly struck by the fascinating work undertaken in the VR cave at Brown University, under the direction of novelist Robert Coover. Coover and his students are the first to experiment with the use of written text in the caves, and are working with questions about how the spatial qualities of VR can be employed to create narrative experiences in new and innovative ways. Coover notes that "those of us who have loved the literary experience, the richness of reading, are working to preserve some of that experience inside the new media … while acknowledging that there is no use trying to imitate the printed page" (Curtis 2000a: n. pag.).

One of the potentials of the cave is the creation of animated 3-D

worlds and characters that a user can interact with, in effect making the user part of a story. I have been fortunate enough to explore some of these works – to step through boxes of text, to inhabit and explore a storyroom, to shrink a wall full of poetry so that it fit into the palm of my hand, to pull a giant letter "O" over my head before stepping through a doorway to interact with characters at a virtual cocktail party.

And so it makes perfect sense to me that the first graduate fellow in electronic literature at Brown, Talan Memmott, was trained as a visual artist in painting, video, installation art, and performance, and that he has worked in theater, as both an actor and a director. Memmott similarly feels that "electronic writing sort of pulls together all of these interests – from painting, to performance, theater and text. It's all part of what I think of as electronic writing" (Brown has its first graduate fellow, unpag.). Although the audience is limited owing, in part, to the physical limitations of the cave itself (only a handful of people can be accommodated at one time and the caves are very expensive to construct and calibrate), Memmott believes the cave nevertheless "puts literature into exhibition mode," and that "there's great potential for what I refer to as narr-act-ivity, rather than narrativity" (Curtis 2000b: n. pag..).

With respect to this, there's one other item I'd like to note before concluding. Theorist Greg Ulmer, who coined the term "electracy," has noted that with respect to electronic literacies, the kindergarten curriculum has much to offer the high schools. He writes "I am not saying to forget literacy, but to include aesthetic and performance experience in the educational process. K–3 teachers ... allow the children to ... relate to the story not so much in terms of meaning but doing. High schools to become electrate need to add this aesthetic performance dimension to learning as well" (Memmott, n. pag.) And many of us would agree that more Kindergarten activities – hands-on, experiential – probably wouldn't be so bad at the university, either. Because as readers of electronic texts, it will be through *doing* – experimenting, making sense of, puzzling through – that we will begin to know and to learn what kinds of knowledges and ways of understanding these new artefacts demand, encourage, or make possible.

What I've suggested to you here today is that I think, at a minimum, we will be challenged by electronic texts to:

–learn to read databases. And if Lev Manovich is right, the database will increasingly compete with traditional narrative for our attention;

–we will learn to read digital constellations – to see the materiality and depth of code, the sculptures of stories, the scaffolding of essays, their shapes;

–we will continue to crave stories, closure, narrative pleasure, I think, but perhaps we will increasingly recognize code, its intrusions and enhancements of texts. Perhaps by rendering information more opaque these texts can, paradoxically, allow us to see things anew;

–we will, through virtual reality technologies like the cave, inhabit information architectures and change the stories we wander through for our having been there. There will be a new kind of "literature" in immersive virtual reality not readily described by old terms or understood with reference to the printed page.

Finally, and with a great deal of excitement, the only thing I can predict with any certainty: we will need to learn to read shapes and texts that none of us here has even begun to imagine.

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Moses' Rap

Moses Znaimer

I come to talk to you today,

Not knowing exactly what I have to say.

Because our subject here today –

What the hell does that mean, hey?

B.W. Powe just lays the title down,

It's we who have to risk the clown.

Going down, laying egg, to find out –

What "Living Literacies" are all about.

Know what I'm sayin'?

Know what I'm sayin'?

(If you do, tell me!)

Literacy is making yourself understood;

No matter what your hood.

High or low, young or old.

Timid or bold.

A job for body, as well as spirit.

No reason to fear it!

My words have pictures,

Explainin' the scene.

Sharin' what I mean.

What I'm sayin' man

Is I'm here,

That you're there.

That's a relationship.

That's a fellowship.

Though made of air,

Its totally there.

You dig?

If you don't,

Move on –

Find somethin' more to your taste,

Don't waste,

My time

And yours

Resurrectin' a meaning that don't exist.

Abstraction?

Distraction?

If we don't stay alert,

We could get hurt.

Abstraction?

Distraction?

Real is what I can see.

The word alone,

Can be absurd.

Its image that makes the bird –

Fly.

The word is not in charge,

Man!

Not now,

Not ever!

It's no contest;

Between our gonads,

And our head.

Appetite that has to be fed.

Necessity overcomes reflection,

Making a lasting, deep impression.

Don't just read the book.

Look!

It's movement man.

Put your body in it.

Find the music in it.

Avoid confusion,

Process – not conclusion.

Pictures; everybody gets,

The flow – not just the show.

Illiteracy comes from words,

Just like birdshit,

Comes from birds.

The best TV,

Tells me,

What happened to me,

Today.

Consumption Is personal;

Who is bringing me,

The story?

My story?

TV sameness expands worldwide.

I say;

Resist the tide.

Local is;

Where its at,

Local is;

Where I hang my hat.

There is no mass,

No masses either;

Except by –

Compulsion.

Consumption.

Compulsion.

Consensus,

Subject to immediate change,

Not a problem,

To be solved-

But an instrument,

To be played.

The central business,

Of the age!

TELEVISION

Put your body in it,

Find the music in it.

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An Emanation of Vacuity:
(boobs on the book tube?)

by Daniel Richler

[On the screen behind Mr. Richler appears an infomercial for Nair Hair Removal Gel]

Well, people, that was what greeted me as I turned on our brand-new channel last fall. Mortified, I fired off an e-mail to my bosses:

I turned on BookTelevision this morning, expecting to see Writers' Profiles with – as is promised in the TV guides – George Orwell. What I saw was a woman removing swathes of hair from the back of a freak-ishly hirsute man with some miracle solvent. She did this repeatedly, turning a facecloth over in her hand to display the resulting dark and glutinous wad to the camera. Now that that disgusting monster midway exhibition is over, I'm watching a sequence of smiling fitness gargoyles demonstrate the wonders of the latest phony plastic exercise gizmo to end up featured on suburban lawn sales across the land next spring. Now, I know that writers are not always pretty or fit – John Irving is an interesting exception, being a hairy wrestler *and* a sexy beast – but this material was an offense to my eyes. Elsewhere on the schedule we put up a Viewer Discretion Advised warning at the drop of a hat, but nothing to prepare us for this. How do we reconcile the seri-ousness of our mission with the tasteless cheez of these infomercials? How much cash do these things earn us? Have you any idea what the press would do to us if they saw them? I can tolerate these embarrass-ments after midnight – under duress. But at 10:00am on Monday morning? The only saving grace as far as I see it is that we're lucky no one's watching.

It was put to me with much forbearance that if I knew of another source of revenue for the channel I should reveal it right away. As things stood, our new venture was haemorrhaging cash by the hour, so would I please pipe down and return to my oar. BookTelevision: The Channel

– the world's first and only twenty-four-hour literary channel. One month in, and reality had already bitten hard. I had a flashback of my father's dubious expression over his reading glasses earlier that year, shortly before he died; I had proudly shown him our full-colour brochure, boasting not just a channel, but a bookstore, a library, and website, no less, with a library of forbidden literature called *Archive 451*, a spoken word and acid jazz venue we'd call *The Lingo Lounge*, book clubs nationwide and a creative factory that would for the first time make television ads for books affordable to publishers, create the literary equivalent of the Hollywood EPK (electronic press kit) to spare authors peddling their books on the road, and develop the literary equivalent of the rock video (reprising the work we'd done twenty years earlier with our rockumentary show, *The New Music*). Dad had emerged triumphant from the wilderness years of Canlit, lending this country international status, raising the bar for all future generations. He knew better than anyone how tough a row to hoe it is – he'd always said he didn't want five little Mordecais running around – and now here was I, his eldest son, setting up a rickety literary lemonade stand.

Televison is generally thought of as monolithic, but the most accurate way to picture BookTelevision, I have had to accept, is as a corner store, a small business, an independent press, virtuous in its ambitions but something of a snake oil operation when it comes to achieving them. Here at the Living Literacies conference, as we discuss what it means to read and write in this day and age, I anticipate the cat will be skinned in many ways. There will, I imagine, be deconstruction galore – political critiques, racial analyses, class dialectic, the clash of high versus low culture, feminist perspectives, dire polemics about the death of the word, the insidious tyranny of the paragraph, the imperialism of the noun, and so on. I would simply like to offer a nuts and bolts account of how we erected a book channel. I'll show you a glimpse or two of what it looks like, but too much would be a lazy way for me to occupy this stage. Moreover, it would likely fuel the academic's suspicion that TV people can't live without eye candy, and in any case, it would be against my greater interest, since I'd rather you subscribed to it if you want to see it.

Now I like to think the channel really began in 1989, when TVOntario

commissioned me to investigate how a book show might fly in Canada.

I phoned around. I asked several authors how they felt about being on the box. The early results of this poll told me that TV appearances are more taxing for writers than for ordinary people. Martin Amis said he'd always hated it: "It's the fear of disgracing yourself. I used to want to smoke to calm my nerves, but I'd end up pinching my cigarette between my knees because I didn't dare hold up my shaking hands in front of the camera. Then one day my interviewer said, 'Excuse me, Mr. Amis, for interrupting, but your trousers are on fire.'" Ian McEwan revealed, with characteristic spleen, "I always feel a pot of tea is halfway down my cock."

John Irving recalled for me his time on the *Dick Cavett Show*. Cavett's reliance on research cards for questions and factoids so enraged him he demanded whether the host had actually read his book. Well, no, said Cavett, actually, not yet. (Irving digressed at this point to describe the other guest on that episode, Blondie's Debbie Harry, who'd fallen asleep on his shoulder, her face, he said, the ecto-plasmic green of a bottle of Chardonnay when you look at it through the heel. I relate this to make the point that rock stars get nervous on TV too, but have fewer compunctions than most authors about resorting to drugs for relief.) Irving walked off the set. "If the ignorant, preten-tious prick had admitted to it before the show began," he told me, "I would have understood – you can't be expected to read everything – but putting on that blithe, sophisticate act of his really made me want to puke."

John Updike, meanwhile, called appearing on TV "a truly raffish experience – to be in the same hospitality suite on *Good Morning America* as Mel Tormé and the woman who has given birth to sextu-plets! I like it and I do it once a year."

Nonetheless, getting books on the air – not to mention their authors – was evidently going to be rough.

I happened to be taking a European holiday that summer and looked up Bernard Pivot in Paris. His world-famous programme, *Apostrophes*, was in its second decade and so successful it commanded a special "Books of the Week" table in almost every bookstore in France; it was accessible in quiz and encyclopaedia form on the coun-

try's *Minitel* database network; and it fuelled a European literary magazine called *Lire*. Its enduring success in French Canada, meanwhile, was a tweak on the noses of Anglophones here who professed to have a literary culture of their own. Yes, I presented myself as an innocent holidaymaker, but was in fact on a poaching mission.

Apostrophes' format was not complicated. Before a live audience, six authors gathered to chat. The themes they were asked to explore were not infrequently saucy: "Sexy, les Seins," "Pudeur, Impudeur," "Ça va saigner." I might have overlooked this fact were it not for the cover of *Lire* that week, which displayed a nude woman reading in bed, its main feature erotic lit. Laurence Kaufmann, *Antenne 2*'s PR person, assured me rather sternly that, whatever I was suggesting, it was mere coincidence, but I had stopped listening by then, my mind on fire: I was picturing Robertson Davies in a pose that recalled Burt Reynolds, a typewriter, hot from recent use, strategically placed.

Anyway, it might have been the jet lag, but having taken our seats in the studio for Pivot and company's round table on the secrets of the Romanovs' cuisine or some such arcana, my wife fell asleep on my shoulder – and this was her first appearance on French national television. Unimpeachably intelligent as the show may have been, *Apostrophes* did not always deliver the jolt-a-minute quotient that I felt would be crucial to success on Canadian TV. I started to suspect that some of *Apostrophes*' reputation around the world rested *un peu trop* on one notorious episode from some eight years earlier in the middle of which Charles Bukowski, drunk and bellicose, had been hauled off the set.

At the post-taping cocktail party I asked M. Pivot if in his estimation an *Apostrophes*-like show could be reproduced elsewhere. Modestly he replied, "Oh *mais oui*. Anyone could do it." Then he thought about his own remark and added, "You know, Sweden tried and failed – they're such a cold people, I suppose that's why. And Belgium tried, but went nowhere. They're so … plain, it was inevitable. And the Italians, *alors*, on every show within fifteen minutes they're at each others' throats, so they took it off the air. So, no – no, I would say it is not so possible."

I thought about North America, a continent with more guns than books in her subways and school libraries; where teachers prioritize

conflict resolution over spelling; where mail goes undelivered while disgruntled postal workers roam the inner cities. Given the viciousness of literary criticism in our neck of the woods, I'd want a weapons search before each interview.

In the US at that time even the Book of the Month Club, with its 1.7 million members and over thirty participating PBS stations, had failed to make a book show fly. When I asked the BOMC's President, Al Silverman, what he'd do differently were he given another go, he despondently proposed, "Keep a better stocked bar?"

Against all the odds, then, we launched a book show on TVOntario. Arguably more than other shows, *Imprint* faced a challenge to please every type of viewer, every type of reader. We felt, for example, that we bore some responsibility to nurture young readers, and so we featured the occasional punk descant and the occasional punk. I remember *Maggotzine #3*, which featured "Mondo Sex-O-Rama zine-time: shrunken heads, robot orchestras, grasshopper wrestling, pussy pussy, self-mortification and more!" Some fans of Alice Munro were not enchanted with the editor, a mohawked subterranean with an ice-tong in her nose. Conversely, we were not able to avoid "Modernity and its Discontents: The Death of the Prairie Epic?" forever. And when we did, I just know we got zapped.

We fired away regardless, on the one hand punctuating the show with videos and film clips, sales charts and reading lists, news hits and comedy skits; on the other, simply cramming the hour with every kind of writer we could find. Wags say if Shakespeare were alive today he'd be writing sitcoms. Well, we weren't snobs; we'd still have had him on the show. Chinese dissident poets, gangsta rappers, Tolkien nerds, gay pornographers, the toeheads who write the so-called instructions you get with your DVD player, even political speechwriters – all were welcome.

Serendipitously, *Imprint* also stumbled into the cleansing fire of political correctness, making for some white-hot arguments and lending the show an urgent, newsy flavour. Debates over racism in publishing, sexism in novels, and ageism in lullabies may have struck some viewers as overwrought, but the fact is they struck a lot of viewers, one way or another, and reinforced what lovers of literature have always

known: literature (to paraphrase Ezra Pound) is news that *stays* news.

Fast forward, now, to 1999: the recombination of my experience at TVO and the considerable juice of Moses Znaimer and his team at CityTV, plus the academic bona fides of Dr. Ron Keast and Canadian Learning Television in Edmonton, won us the bid for a TV license from Canada's regulatory body, the CRTC. Astonishingly, there was fierce competition for this. You would not imagine a book channel to be the most lucrative proposition – not when you could have gone for the sex channel or the speed channel or – and this one surely has greater potential – Jewish Television, with its *Sabra Price is Right* show and its twenty-four-hour UJA fundraiser, and its Klezmer music nights, and its Yiddish kitchen sink dramas, and more WWII retrospectives than even The History Channel, and – a real cost saver – nothing at all on between Friday sundown and Saturday evening. But books? Not likely. Why bother, especially when it's also an exercise in inevitable punishment, since television is usually blamed for the demise of the book itself?

I announced my suspicion earlier that few of you subscribe to BookTelevision. Well, if you haven't yet, you're not alone. A senior bureaucrat at the Canada Council we'd invited to discuss the Governor General's Award the other day asked what format the show might take – since, he confessed, he didn't subscribe to digital TV. "Well," I said. "Since this is the only book channel on the planet, a real first, don't you think it behooves a Canadian – particularly of your high cultural office – to support it?" I can be a little touchy, I admit, feeling that this venture, while worthy in the extreme, could not suffer more from obscurity and neglect. (Oh, by the way, if I do pique your interest and you decide to subscribe, I will throw in a discount on any Nair hair-removal product with every subscription.)

It's quite amazing to think of the barrage of disdain that's been aimed at television from the start. Lee Loevinger himself, the Commissioner of the FCC between 1963 and 1968 in the US, once commented, "Television is really the golden goose that lays scrambled eggs. It is futile and probably fatal to beat it for not laying caviar." Television is something absolutely everyone feels qualified to criticize, regardless of their profession. Remember Frank Lloyd Wright, he of the immortal, "Television is bubble gum for the mind." And then

Groucho Marx (though he can be forgiven for obvious reasons): "I find television very educational. Every time someone turns it on I go into the other room to read a good book."

Is TV a cornucopia of crap? Surely no more than all Lloyd Wright-influenced architecture looks like a Soviet apartment block. What is it about television as a whole, then, that arouses so much ire? I imagine it's partly to do with resentful perceptions of power – a hangover from the days when only a few networks commanded huge audiences, when watching the box felt like forced collectivity. There's also that unwelcome feeling that TV is watching you, not the other way around. For many people, watching TV is not so much a cozy cultural experience as a combative one, an embarrassing one; like a bright kid in a class of dim bulbs, you resent being dumbed down to. BookTelevision, in particular, has been greeted by the academic and literary communities with some suspicion; some snobs love to snort that we are an inherently oxymoronic proposition, and simply leave it at that.

But you know, there's really no one like a TV critic to lay on the lash. There they are, the champions of the people, all of them too smart for the boob tube. Have you ever read a film critic who dislikes film as much as, say, TV critics loathe TV? Or a restaurant critic who so hates food? What I find most aggravating is how, after howling column on column about the vulgarities of reality television, quiz shows, and the like, they will turn their noses up at us altogether because we're digital; all the major newspapers in Canada, each one a part of a multimedia conglomerate, have policies (more or less unspoken) of not reviewing digital TV because it reaches a marginal number of households. But the dislike of television among print people is even more visceral than that. Let me illustrate.

The Observer's former TV critic, John Naughton, is one of the few who's copped to this in writing. Once, in the course of commenting on television coverage of the Chinese pro-democracy movement and its bloody suppression, he'd remarked on the increased harassed appearance of the BBC's Diplomatic Editor, John Simpson: "He began the week ... looking as usual like an expensive rubber beach toy and ended it like a deflated barrage balloon in a club tie." Later, Naughton has confessed, he read in *Granta* Simpson's personal account of how a mob

had surrounded an armoured personnel carrier, set fire to it, pulled out two of the three soldiers manning the vehicle and beat them savagely to death. Unable to maintain journalistic detachment any longer, he'd used his physical bulk to prevent the third soldier from being butchered. Which explained why Mr. Simpson had not looked his best toward the end of his tour of Tiananmen Square. Now, I've never stuck my neck out like Mr. Simpson, but as someone who has never worn a plastic wig on camera, I seize on this story to argue that it is *critics* of TV who are obsessed with appearances, not necessarily us.

On BookTelevision, incidentally, we are plotting the sweetest revenge: a show called *Everyone's a Critic*, which will regularly analyze and criticize what the critics have written – not just about TV, but books too, restaurants, cars, goalies, the House of Commons. It will be a show about critical writing, a show that ought at least to soothe the savage soul of the critic by letting him know someone cares about what he has to say.

Quotes on screen

"I don't own a television."
Dr. John Meisel – Chairman, Canadian Radio-Television Commission, 1979–83

"Television is the literature of the illiterate, the culture of the lowbrow, the wealth of the poor, the privilege of the underprivileged, the exclusive club of the excluded masses."
Lee Loevinger – Commissioner, US Federal Communications Commission, 1963–68

"Television is at its most trivial and therefore most dangerous when its aspirations are high; when it presents itself as a carrier of important cultural conversation."
Neil Postman – author of *The End of Education*

"The smallest bookstore still contains more ideas of worth than have been presented in the entire history of television."
Andrew Ross – Journalist

"It is destroying our entire political, educational, social, institutional life. TV will dissolve the entire fabric of society in a short time."
Marshall McLuhan – Media Scholar/Critic

"Don't you wish there was a knob on the TV to turn up the intelligence? There's one marked "Brightness," but it doesn't work."
Gallagher – Comedian

"Television was not intended to make human beings vacuous, but it is an emanation of their vacuity."

Malcolm Muggeridge – Journalist

In our first year on the air we featured, in a mix of documentaries, archival footage, news reports, in-depth interviews, book fair coverage and even vampirological game shows: Allen Ginsberg, Alistair MacLeod, Andrew Pyper, Anthony Bourdain, Armistead Maupin, Christopher Hitchens, Chuck Palahniuk, David Suzuki, Douglas Coupland, J. M. Coetzee, Laurence Ferlinghetti, Gilbert Sorrentino, Irvine Welsh, Margaret Atwood, Mario Puzo, Maxine Hong Kingston, Michael Franti, Michael Ondaatje, Michael Redhill, Evelyn Waugh, Naomi Wolf, Martin Amis, Kingsley Amis, Anaïs Nin, Nick Bantock, Nino Ricci, Paul McCartney, Rohinton Mistry, Salman Rushdie, Stephen King, Yann Martel, Yashar Kemal, Naomi Klein, Austin Clarke, Umberto Eco, Jamaica Kincaid, Margaret Drabble, Brian Fawcett, Michael Ignatieff, Susan Faludi, Timothy Findley, Mark Kingwell, Peter Carey, Jonathan Franzen, Mavis Gallant, Annie Cohen-Solal, Aharon Shabtai, Janette Turner Hospital, Barbara Gowdy, Ian McEwan, James Joyce, Henry Miller, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, William Gibson, George Orwell, Melvyn Bragg, William Baldwin …

I don't sound too defensive, do I? Of course, it is possible that we had

these people on the channel in a very stupid way, asking them dumb questions, misunderstanding everything they said, wrote, and stood for. But I don't think so. More likely is that unimaginative people cannot even conceive of our full potential. You should see most people's faces when they hear there's a book channel, as they picture the inert tome on the screen with its indecipherable title and leaden promise, the farthest thing imaginable from exciting television, and then the author, seated with a TV host afflicted with myopia and dandruff, answering academic questions in a monotone. I have a certain sympathy with this view, but I was saddened to see that in a recent season opener issue of *The Globe and Mail*'s *Broadcast Week* surveying the most intelligent new TV channels in Canada, Book-Television was not even mentioned.

How do we address this problem? For surely the world opened up in books is infinite in its variety and potential majesty, and therefore on TV too – a place at present almost entirely unexplored, scarcely imagined, like Borges' Uqbar with its transparent tigers and towers of blood and playing cards and mythological terrors. Now, obviously, some people will never be persuaded, but for the reachable ones our channel must be advertised as funny, aggressive, original, challenging, and respectful of their intelligence. I say, "advertise" because yes, we are marketing literacy here. That is as much my job this week as interviewing writers in Turkish prisons was last month. And so the channel must adopt all the tricks and tropes of traditional TV, with its theme music and animated openings and game shows and news shows and bumpers and stings and entertainment beat reporters and – to utterly convince the dubious viewer that this is a channel worth watching – ads; ads for expensive cars, international airlines, and computers.

But about the programming: At a party last year the writer M. T. Kelly was complaining to me about a friend of his, a professor of ancient Greek literature, who claimed kids today are unreachable. M. T. argued that there are parallel heroic themes between the Homeric narrative – of Achilles on the blood-boltered plains of Troy – and the lyrics of the gangsta rapper Tupac Shakur, gunned down a few years ago in the streets of Las Vegas. So we took him up on it, videotaping him on a brutal literary tear both in the Royal Ontario Museum and the

graffitied alleys of downtown Toronto, and then putting the argument together in the form of a scratch music video.

The problem with this outlaw approach to books is that the serious book-set tend to sniff at such lowbrow material. Readers are just as tribal as pop fans, and though you'd think twenty-four hours a day was enough time for everyone, it always seems that Mrs. Teakettle from Flin Flon is tuning in during the musical Marquis de Sade revival hour, and the punks you promised some serious action always find Bonnie Burnard.

In time, there will be a show for everyone. The natural progression of narrowcast TV with its specialty channels heralds the end of the one-size-fits-all book show. At TVOntario I experimented with this as well, creating a show about SF, comix, and graphic novels called *Prisoners of Gravity* that took the form of an extraterrestrial rogue veejay broadcast. At BookTelevision right now we are developing a show called *The Biz*, about business writing in books, magazines, and newspapers, as well as an erotica show called *Lust*. There's no reason why one day we shan't have a show specifically for mystery lovers too, for philosophers, for émigrés of war-torn countries.

But meanwhile, if there is to be a show for followers of Derrida or Chomsky or Amiri Baraka, I need your help. Over the years I've been, shall we say, *impressed* by the anger and determination worked up on campuses across the continent over the political ideas contained in literature. At Lakehead University in Thunder Bay one year, before a colloquium of Student Council Presidents, I remember attempting a critique of the word "Holocaust" as it had been used by protestors outside the Royal Ontario Museum's "Out of Africa" exhibit. To say "African Holocaust," I argued, was appropriation of voice, for the word derives from the ancient Greek meaning "to be burnt whole," was formerly used to describe a sacrifice by fire on the altar in Jewish religious practise, and was clearly associated with the agonies of Jews cremated at Auschwitz. For descendants of slaves to convey the agonies of their forbears, and not to invite suspicions of anti-Semitism and competitive suffering, I requested an original and possibly more accurate term be used. One student barked out, "Asshole!" Another demanded to know what right I had to be on stage with a microphone,

and was not dissuaded when I replied that the Council of Students had invited me. A third lectured me with ferocious condescension about the "witches" who'd been burned in the sixteenth century – a holocaust, in other words, for feminists. Without a doubt I was perceived as a member of the exclusive white male club, evidently of inherited wealth, power, and influence. But I was appalled at how these little ideologues, so attuned to the plights of Western society's underdogs, to "otherness," could be so insensitive to anyone but themselves and their adopted cause. To be fair, they'd all grown up in an era of inaccessible, big corporate TV that never asked them for their opinions. But not one person thought to approach me with ideas for any TV of their own.

Even in the era of affordable, homemade, hand-held TV equipment, the power remains in the hands of the powerful. Still today, one hears complaints that TV does not afford everyone a voice. This is true to a dismaying degree. (I once attended a lecture delivered by Mark Starowicz, Executive Producer of *The Journal*, in which he promised us a people's revolution of TV thanks to handicams. A colleague sitting beside me whispered, "Yeah. And when they invented the typewriter everyone became a novelist.") Think how quickly the technology that exposed the beating of Rodney King and promised the democratization of the news has devolved into slick, banal, so-called reality shows, desert island survival adventures in which no one is ever seen leaning against a palm tree and reading a book – not Sun Tzu, not Machiavelli, not Napoleon – in order to get ahead.

But the intellectuals are to blame as well. Like so many other critics, for example, Pierre Bourdieu complains in *On Television* about the inherent constraints of the TV format – seven-second soundbites, trumped-up polarizations of opinion, and all that. My first thought on reading *him* was, "My God, I've seen French television, and no long-winded philosopher is wanting for airtime there," but I also wondered, given his impenetrable prose, who exactly he imagined was going to invite him on.

Similarly, one of our esteemed colleagues here at *Living Literacies* once gave me a very hard time when I was at TVO. Taking offence at comments made about her on *Imprint*, she demanded equal time – *demanded* it, I felt, in a rude, intractable, imperious and opportunistic

fashion that quickly led to an escalation of rhetoric (public, on her part) and a hardening of both our positions. *Equal* time? I finally said. okay, let's calculate it. You, Madam, were commented upon for precisely one minute and fourteen seconds. I'll be generous: You may have *two* minutes. This resulted in her excoriating article about the white media establishment and me, "2 Minutes in the New Jerusalem," which caused me considerable pain, since I'd always imagined myself to be sympathetic to the grievances of visible minorities. Why, I wondered, weren't there pickets outside the egregiously insensitive, starched, and exploitative mainstream TV studios? It struck me as cowardly on her part to be stabbing at the soft underbelly of white liberalism, and above all counterproductive not to plead her case more imaginatively.

On the other hand, I've never been happy with the way our quarrel went. Why *couldn't* we have been more accommodating? What would it have cost us to give this or any other person an *entire* show if they asked for it? I know that we felt besieged. We felt that the public could not be allowed to dictate our content. We spoke of principles and precedents. And yet, and yet, were we not a publicly funded station?

So there is a certain irony in me standing here today, representing a privately owned, commercially minded TV station asking: Literacy, what is it? Access, power, privilege. Belonging. Enabling. Yet I insist, I remain impressed by how few academics, how few intellectual interest groups, how few aggrieved minorities have approached me with a plan. Where are they? Where's the democratic media revolution? Where are the homemade documentaries? What's coming out of university multimedia facilities? We have a national network here, folks. Let's use it like the televangelists do. Save some illiterate souls! Think commercially, charismatically. In case you haven't noticed, the public trough is drying up. Together we ought to be finding sponsors, underwriters, advertisers. *This revolution is brought to you by Nair Hair Removal Gel!*

It seems to me the sky is always falling for academics. We receive dire warnings that reading is on the wane. The esteemed George Steiner has remarked that while the classical act of reading broke down around 1914, the real trouble began with modern media: "Guttenberg was not a fundamental revolution," he has written, "as the current technological revolution is." But before television, how many people were

literate? What romantic idea do we harbour of a well-read populace of yore? Besides, television actually requires a great deal of reading – there's text on the screen all the time. And, as communications technologies converge, try getting around the Internet without reading skills. I might propose that, in fact, the classical act of reading broke down around 1923, at the Frankfurt School, for in my experience, critical theory on campus has done far more damage to basic literacy skills than TV ever did. The tortured prose! A simulacrum of language! The de(con)struction of English. The murder of the author in his own write!

Perhaps I should get back to my point: that those who worry we live in an illiterate age should seize the tools available to them, one of those being television. There is no tenure to be had here, no grants or guarantees, but there is a new future in specialized, narrowcast, digital, and ultimately interactive TV. I cannot do it all myself because, quite frankly, running a book channel totally gets in the way of my reading, so I appeal to you to get down out of your ivory towers and contribute to the cause in a language the masses – on whose behalf you express so much concern – can understand. As a matter of fact you already have, just by being here, for the TV cameras you see in this hall belong to Canadian Learning Television, our sister station, and in a few months thirteen Living Literacies programs will air there and on Book Television. Which is, at least, a start.

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Violence of the Virtual and Integral Reality

Texte par: Jean Baudrillard

Translation by: Marilyn Lambert-Drache

"One should not believe that truth remains truth when you remove its veil" – therefore the truth has no bare existence.

"One should not believe that the real remains real when illusion has been taken away from it" – therefore the real has no objective reality.

"We have suppressed the true world (*le monde vrai*) – what kind of world does then remain? The world of appearances? Not at all. While suppressing the true world we have also suppressed the world of appearances."

– Nietzsche

What happens to the world when it is freed from truth and appearances? It becomes the real universe, the universe of integral reality. Not truth, nor appearance but integral reality.

If the world in the past leaned toward transcendence, if it fell on occasion into other rear-worlds (*arrières-mondes*), today it is falling into reality. From one transcendence in the heights to another one, this time in the depths. It is as it were the second fall of man that Heidegger talks about: the fall into banality – this time though, no redemption is possible.

According to Nietzsche, once the true world and the world of appearances are lost, the universe becomes a factual, positive universe, such that it does not even need to be true.

This world is as factual as a *ready-made*. Duchamp's "fountain" is the emblem of our modern hyperreality. It results from the violent counter-transfer of every poetic illusion into pure reality, the object transferred onto oneself, every possible metaphor cut short.

The world has become so real that this reality is only bearable at the

expense of perpetual denial. "This is not a world," after "this is not a pipe," Magritte's surrealist denial of evidence itself – this double movement of, on one hand, the absolute and definite evidence of the world and, on the other hand, the radical denial of this evidence – dominates the trajectory of modern art, not only of art but also of all our deeper perceptions, of all our apprehensions of the world. We are not talking here about philosophical morals, we are not saying "the world is not what it should be" or "the world is not what it used to be." The world is the way it is. Once transcendence is gone, things are nothing but what they are and, as they are, they are unbearable. They have lost every illusion and have become immediately and entirely real, shadowless, without commentary. At the same time this unsurpassable reality does not exist anymore. It has no reason to exist for it cannot be exchanged for anything. It has no exchange value.

"Does reality exist? Are we in a real world?" – here is the leitmotif of our current culture. This only expresses the fact that the world is prey to reality and it is only bearable as radical denial. All this is logical: as the world can no longer be justified in another world, it needs to be justified here and now and to find strength in reality while purging itself of any illusion. At the same time, as the very result of this counter-transfer, the denial of reality *as such* grows.

For reality is no longer prey to its natural predators, it proliferates very much like an algae, or like the human species in general. The real grows like a desert.

"Welcome to the desert of the Real" (*The Matrix*).

Illusion, dreams, passion, madness, drugs but also artifice and *simulacrum* were the natural predators of reality. All these have lost their energy as if they were suffering from some incurable, surreptitious disease (that might very well be reality itself). One needs then to find an artificial equivalent for them. Otherwise, once it has reached a critical mass, reality will spontaneously destroy itself. It will implode by itself – which it is already doing now, making room for the Virtual in all its forms.

The Virtual is the ultimate predator, the plunderer of reality. Reality has generated the Virtual as a kind of viral and self-destructing agent. Reality has become prey to virtual reality. The ultimate consequence of

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a process that started with the abstraction of objective reality and ends in integral reality.

The Virtual is not about a "rear-world" (*arrière-monde*): The replacement of the world is total, it repeats itself identically, a perfect lure. So the question is resolved by the sheer annihilation of symbolic substance. Even objective reality becomes a useless function, a kind of trash, the exchange and circulation of which has become more and more difficult. We have moved past objective reality into something new, a kind of ultra reality that puts an end both to reality and to illusion.

The hypothesis is the following: the world is given to us. The symbolic law says: what is given must be given back. In the past one could give thanks, in one way or another, to God or any other authority, and respond to the gift by sacrifice. From now on there is no one to give thanks to, for transcendence has vanished. If one cannot give back anything in exchange for this world, it is unacceptable. We then need to get rid of the natural world and to substitute an artificial one for it, built from scratch, a world for which we do not have to account to anyone.

Hence this gigantic undertaking of technically eliminating the natural world in all its forms. Anything that is natural will be irrevocably rejected, sooner or later, as a consequence of this symbolic rule of (impossible) exchange. It is the final solution (including extermination).

This does not resolve anything of course. It is impossible to avoid this new debt we have contracted to ourselves. How can we be absolved from this technical world and this artificial power? We again need to negate or destroy this world if we cannot give it back, or exchange it for anything (and what would we exchange it for?). That explains, as our building of this artificial universe is moving forward, the huge negative counter-transfer against the integral reality we have created. Deep denial is now present everywhere. What will prevail over it? This irresistible undertaking or this violent abreaction?

Let us now enter this sphere of integral reality (we have yet to determine if this reality has one, or two, or three dimensions).

Here is an example – integral music. It is heard in quadraphonic spaces and it can be "composed" on a computer. A music whose sound has been clarified and purged, a music restored in its technical

perfection. The sound there is not the result of a form; it is actualized by a programme. A music reduced to a pure wavelength. The final reception, the sensorial impact on the listener is also programmed with precision like that in a closed circuit. A virtual music in other words, flawless, deprived of any imagination, mistaken for its own model, the enjoyment of which is also virtual. Is it still music? Nothing is less certain; it was even suggested to reintroduce noise to make it sound more "musical."

The same can be said about synthesized and digital images, images that are pure creations, with no real reference, and from where the negative itself has disappeared – we are not only talking about the negative of the photograph but about the negative moment at the core of the image, an absence that makes the image vibrate. A digital image is technically perfect. There is no room there for *fuzziness*, no tremor either, or any space left for chance. Is it still an image then?

Take now the example of the Integral Man (*Homme Intégral*), the human being, genetically modified and edited for perfection. It is purged of any accident, of any disease, any emotional problem, for genetic manipulation does not aim at reproducing the original human formula but a formula that is the most standardized for efficiency (serial morphing).

The movie *Minority Report* gives us a taste of this. In this movie crime is prevented and punished before it even takes place, before anyone knows whether or not the crime would have taken place. Nipped in the bud, in imagination even, according to the now universal principle of precaution.

The movie is naive and anachronistic, however, because it still involves repression. In the future, prevention will be genetic, *intragenic*. The "criminal gene" will undergo prophylactic sterilization at birth or even before birth (this will need to be systematized, of course, because in the opinion of the police or of the powers that be, we all are potential criminals).

This manipulation is a fine illustration of what will happen to the future human being. It will be modified and corrected. Straightaway, it will be what it should be ideally; it will never become *what it is*. It will not even be alienated anymore, by virtue of its pre-existential

modification for better or for worse. It will not even have to face its otherness as it will have straightaway been suppressed by its model.

All this relies on a universal process of identification of Evil that, of course, aims at eradicating. While it used to be metaphysical or moral, Evil now is materialized, embodied in the genes (it can just as well be turned into the Axis of Evil). It becomes an objective reality, objectively dispensable. We will manage to eradicate it completely, and with it everything that made dreams, utopia, illusion, fantasy – all of this, according to the same global process, is being taken away from the possible, to be poured back into the real.

The same goes for everything that has to do with virtual reality and synthesized models. Digital and programmed, the real does not even have time to happen. It is sanitized (*prophylactisé*), pulverized, short-circuited in its shell like the crime in *Minority Report*. Thinking itself is anticipated by models of artificial intelligence. Time itself, the time already lived out that has no more time to take place, is captured and spirited away by virtual time, which we choose, mockingly no doubt, to call "real time." The historical time of the event, the psychological time of affect and passion, the subjective time of judgment and will, all are being questioned simultaneously. We will not even *give time to time*.

Last but not least: by some strange surgical operation, language, in its digital version, has been purged of its symbolism, of everything that allows language to be more than what it means. Any absence, any vacuum, any literalness in it – anything that prevents its meaning from being brought into focus – has been eliminated like the negative in a synthesized image. Such is the integral reality of language.

It is also the death of the sign. Integral language does not contain any signs – the sign and its representation have disappeared. Now it is precisely when the sign and the real are no longer exchangeable that reality, now left alone and meaningless, veers off exponentially and proliferates infinitely. The death of the sign paves the way to integral reality.

We often hear that the real has disappeared because of the hegemony of the sign, the images and the *simulacrum*, that reality has been erased by the artifice. This analysis underlies the concept of the *Société du Spectacle*. We need to reverse this overly common analysis and say:

We have lost both the sign and the artifice for the benefit of the absolute real. We have lost everything: the spectacle, alienation, distancing, transcendence, abstraction – everything that was defending us from the onset of integral reality, of the immediate realization of a world with no reprieve.

With the disappearance of the *simulacrum* as such, a later stage in the process of simulation has been reached, namely the simulation of a real more real than the real, the simulation of a hyperreal.

What does then make the exchange impossible if not the abstract transcendence of the value? What makes the exchange of language possible if not the abstract transcendence of the sign? All this is now liquidated, pulverized. The value as well as the sign is affected by the same dizziness of deregulation. It is not the real but the sign and, with it, all the universe of meaning and communication, that is subjected to the same deregulation that affects the markets (maybe this came even before the deregulation of the world market).

The caves of Lascaux offer an almost trivial example of this confusion. The original caves having been closed for a long time, visitors line up in front of a replica, a *simulacrum* of the caves, Lascaux II. Most visitors do not even know that what they are seeing is a replica as there is nowhere any indication of the existence of the original caves. What awaits us is a kind of prefiguration of the world: the replica is so perfect that we will no longer know that it is a replica. Now, what happens to the original when the replica stops being a replica? Such is the ironical dialectics of the *simulacrum* at a later stage of disappearance. Even the original is equal to the artifice. There is definitely no more God who can recognize His own (from that point of view, one may at least say that God is indeed dead). Here we have a kind of justice, the privileged and the underprivileged ones are now equal in an artificial world. As soon as the original becomes an allegory among others in a technically completed world, democracy is then realized.

As well, what becomes of the arbitrariness of the sign when the referent stops being the referent? Without the arbitrariness of the sign, there is no differential function, no language and no symbolic dimension. As it stops being sign, the sign becomes a thing (*chose*) among other things. It becomes something of a total necessity or of an

absolute contingency. Without the *instanciation* of the meaning by the sign, only the fanaticism of language remains – this fanaticism that Ferlusio defines as an "absolutist inflammation of the signifier."

My hypothesis is that a kind of radical fetishism, resulting from the eclipse of every process of meaning, underlies the transformation of the real into pure information and the cloning of the real by virtual reality.

What hides behind the immateriality of the technologies of the virtual, of the digital and of the screen, is indeed an injunction, an imperative that McLuhan had already spotted in the television and media image: an imperative of reinforced participation, an interactive investment that may turn into fascination, into the "ecstatic" implication that we see everywhere in the cyberworld.

Immersion, immanence, and immediacy characterize the virtual. No more gaze, no more stage, no more imaginary, no more illusion even, no more exteriority, no more spectacle: the operational fetish has absorbed all exteriority, all interiority and even time in the operation of "real time." It is the realization of utopia.

We are this way getting closer to the real world, a world "integrally" realized, affected and identified as such. We are talking about the real world not about the *world-as-is*, which is totally different. The world-as-is is in the nature of appearances (or even of integral illusion because there is no possible representation of it) or as Nietzsche says "while suppressing the true world we have also suppressed the world of appearances."

Video, interactive screens, multimedia, the Internet, virtual reality – we are threatened on all sides by interactivity. What used to be separated is now merged; distance is everywhere abolished: between the sexes, between opposite poles, between stage and audience, between the protagonists of action, between subject and object, between the real and it's double. This confusion of terms, this collision of poles means that there is no more possibility of a moral judgment, neither in art nor in morality nor in politics. With the abolition of distance and of the "pathos" of distance, everything becomes undecidable, even in the physical realm: when the receiver and the source of transmission are too close together, a feedback effect known as the Larsen effect occurs

which muddles up the transmission waves; when an event and the broadcasting of that event in real time are too close together, the event becomes undecidable, virtual, stripped of its historical dimension and removed from memory. We are in a kind of generalized Larsen effect.

Wherever distance is abolished, wherever a collision of poles occurs, we get a Larsen effect.

Even in reality TV, where, in the live telling of the story, in the immediate televised acting, we witness the confusion of the existence and its double. No more distance, no more vacuum and no more absence: one enters the screen and the visual image without encountering any obstacle. One enters one's life while walking onto a screen. One puts on one's own life like a digital suit.

Unlike photography, cinema, and painting, where there is a scene and a gaze, the video image and the computer screen induce a kind of immersion, a kind of umbilical connection and of "tactile" interaction, as McLuhan said of television. A cellular, corpuscular immersion: one enters the fluid substance of the image in order to possibly modify it, in the same way as science infiltrates itself into the genome, the genetic code, to transform the body itself. One moves as one likes, one makes of the interactive image what one wishes to. Immersion is the price to pay for this infinite availability, for this open combinatory of elements. The same goes for any "virtual" text (the Internet, word processors): it is worked on like a computer-generated image; it has nothing to do anymore with the transcendence of the gaze or of writing. In any case, once in front of the screen, one no longer sees the text as text, but as image. It is only in the strict separation of text and screen, of text and image, that writing is an activity in its own right – never an interaction.

As well, only the strict separation of stage and audience will allow the spectator to be a participant in one's own right. Everything today contributes to abolishing that separation. The spectator is immersed in a user-friendly, interactive spectacle. Is it the *apogée* of the spectacle or is it the end of it? When all become actors, there is no action, no scene anymore. It is the end of the aesthetic illusion.

Another form of implosion is the feedback. Integral reality refers to everything that works in an integrated circuit. When everything that happens gets immediate feedback. May '68 and the radios on the

barricades. One no longer does anything unless one sees oneself do it. Even irony is part of the mechanism. Immediate promiscuity of the control screen, even in our head.

Once again it is not a representation but a rotating movement of things that are jumbled together, joined, saturated.

It is a perfect reality, in the sense that it is realized right through (*perfectum*). In a perfect reality nothing is "verified" unless it is "pasted" on and mistaken for its own image. Feedback best illustrates this process. It affects the visual and mediatic universe as well as the political and intellectual life, the daily and individual life, our movements, our thinking. This automatic refraction of our thoughts affects us deeply in our own perception of the simplest and most natural world. Feedback seals everything by focusing on it, by automatically simulating it. In a way, feedback is the virus of our postmodernity.

Feedback short-circuits the gaze; it short-circuits the representation by, so to speak, duplicating things beforehand and by interfering with their progress. Feedback covers everything with a "performance veil" – a particularly sensitive phenomenon in the photographic universe where beings and things immediately "put on" a context, a culture, a meaning, an idea of themselves while blocking off every vision and creating a sort of blindness that Raphaël Sanchez Ferlosio denounces:

There is a terrible form of blindness that very few notice. It allows you to look at and to see but not to see at once without looking at. It is the way things used to be: one would not look at them, one would just see them. Today everything is caught in duplicity; there is no pure and direct impulse. This is how the countryside has become "landscape," that is to say a representation of itself....

In this way one may say that our perception itself, our immediate sensitivity have become aesthetic. All our senses – sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste – have become aesthetic in the worse meaning of the word. Therefore any new vision can only result from a deconstruction of this feedback, from a resolution of this counter-transfer that blocks off any vision.

One needs to distinguish the process of confusion with one's own image from the process of representation where we differ from each other by our opposite image and enter an open form of alienation, an

open form of play with the image. It is precisely the mirror, the image, the gaze and the scene that were opening onto a culture of the metaphor.

Machines produce only machines. This is increasingly true as the virtual technologies are becoming more perfect. At a certain level of machine-ness, of immersion in virtual machinery, there is no more distinction between man and machine. The machine is on both sides of the interface. You may indeed be merely the space of the machine now: man has become the virtual reality of the machine, its mirror operator. This has to do with the very essence of the screen. One cannot look "through" the screen as if it were a looking-glass. The dimensions of time itself merge there in "real time." The characteristic of any virtual surface is first of all to be there, empty and thus likely to be filled with anything. It is left to you to interact in real time with the vacuum.

Machines produce only machines. The texts, images, films, speeches, and programmes that come out of computers are machine products. They have the features of machine products: they are artificially expanded, facelifted by the machine; the movies are full of special effects, the texts full of lengthy passages and repetitions, which are the consequences of the malicious will of the machine to function at all costs (for that is *its* passion), and of the operator's fascination with the limitless opportunity of operating the machine. Hence the wearisome character of all this violence and "pornographied" sexuality, which are merely special effects of violence and sex that are no longer even fantasized by humans. This pure mechanic violence does not affect us any longer. Hence all these texts which can be regarded as the works of "intelligent" virtual agents, whose only act is the act of programming. The rest unfolds in a purely automatic fashion. This has nothing to do with automatic writing (*écriture automatique)*, which played on the magical telescoping of words and concepts, whereas all we are left with here is the automatic programming of all the possibilities. Forward, the machine design of the body, the *make-up* of the text and the image. This is called cybernetics: controlling the image, the text, the body from within, as it were, by playing with its genetic code or modalities. It is this phantasm of the ideal performance of the text or image, the possibility of correcting endlessly, which triggers in the

operator this dizziness of interactivity with his/her own object and, at the same time, the anxious dizziness of not having reached the technological limits of his/her possibilities. In fact, the virtual machine is speaking you, it is thinking you.

Is there, by the way, any possibility of discovering something in cyberspace? The Internet merely simulates a mental space of freedom and discovery. Indeed it merely offers an enhanced, yet conventional, space, in which the operator interacts with known elements, pre-existent sites and established codes. Nothing exists beyond these search parameters. Every question has its anticipated response. You are the automatic questioning-and-answering device of the machine. Both coder and decoder, you are, in fact, your own terminal. That is the ecstasy of communication.

No more "other" facing you. No more final destination. Any destination, any correspondent will do. The system goes on, without end and without purpose with the sole potential for infinite reproduction and involution. Hence the comfortable dizziness produced by this electronic interaction that acts like drugs. One can spend one's entire life at this, without any interruption. Drugs themselves are only the perfect example of a crazed, closed-circuit interactivity.

In order to win you over to it, people tell you that the computer is merely a handier and more complex kind of typewriter. But this is not true. The typewriter is an entirely external object. The page flutters in the open air, and so do I. I have a physical relation to writing. I touch the blank or written page with my eyes, which is something I cannot do with the screen. As for the computer, it is a true prosthesis. I am in a tactile and intersensory relation with it. I am becoming myself an ectoplasm of the screen. Hence, in this incubation of the virtual image and of the brain, the technical faults which afflict computers and which are like the *lapsus* of one's own body.

On the other hand, the fact that priority is given to the identity of the network and never to the individuals' identity implies the option of hiding and disappearing into the intangible space of the virtual and thus, the option of not being located anywhere, which resolves all problems of identity, not to mention those of otherness. The attraction of all these virtual machines undoubtedly derives not so much from the

thirst for information and knowledge as from the possibility to dissolve oneself into a phantom conviviality. A feeling of "being high" takes the place of happiness. Virtuality comes close to happiness only because it surreptitiously removes every reference from it. It gives you every-thing, but, at the same time, it subtly takes everything away from you. The subject is realized to perfection, but then, it automatically becomes object and panic sets in.

It is against this world that has become entirely operational that the denial and disavowal of reality develop. If the world is to be taken as a whole, it must be rejected as a whole, the way the body rejects a foreign element. There is no other solution. Thanks to a form of instinct, of vital reaction we are able to rise up against this immersion in a perfected world, in the "Kingdom of Heaven" where real life is sacrificed to the hyper realization of all these possibilities, to its maxi-mal performance, the same way the human species is sacrificed to its genetic perfection. Our negative abreaction results from our hypersen-sitivity to the ideal life conditions that are offered to us.

This perfect reality, to which we are sacrificing every illusion, is, of course, a phantom reality. It belongs to another world. If both reality and truth were to be subject to a lie detector, they would confess that they do not believe in this perfect reality. Reality has vanished, and yet we are suffering as if it still existed. We are like Ahab in *Moby-Dick*:

"If I feel the pain in my leg, although it no longer exists, who can assure me that you will not suffer from the torments of hell even after your death?"

There is nothing metaphorical in this sacrifice. It is more of a surgi-cal operation, which provides oneself some kind of self-enjoyment: "Humanity that, long ago, with Homer, was an object of contempla-tion for the Olympian gods, has now become its own object of contem-plation. Its alienation from oneself is such that it is now experiencing its own destruction as a first-rate aesthetic sensation" (Benjamin). Self-destruction is indeed one of all the options offered to us. It is an excep-tional option for it poses a challenge to all the other ones.

Focusing on a perfectly integrated reality is bound to entail many forms of exclusion, of eccentric or parallel worlds – not only marginal or peripheral ones as they exist in traditional societies, but worlds that

find themselves clearly dissociated at the very core of this total integration.

The homogeneity and the very coherence of life are, for that matter, turning us off. What applies to the real applies to the social: one day everything will be social, everything will be real but we will not be there anymore. We will be elsewhere. Everything will be social and dissociated. Double lives, parallel worlds will be our both negative and happy fate. We will be freed from the grip of the real.

Are all the functions – the body, the real, sex, death – not destined to live on as parallel worlds, as autonomous peculiarities, completely dissociated from the dominant world?

Finally, what is fundamental is the stranger-ness (étrangeté) of the world, the one which resists the status of objective reality. The world itself resists globalization. As well, what is fundamental is our own stranger-ness, the one which resists the status of subject. Double illusion: the illusion of an objective reality of the world and the illusion of a subjective reality of a subject. They are reflected in the same mirror and are one and the same founding movement of our metaphysics.

As for the world-as-is, it is not at all objective. It rather looks like a strange *attracteur.* Since the world and the appearances are dangerously attractive, we prefer to exchange it for its operational *simulacrum*, its artificial truth and its automatic writing. This is yet a bit risky because everything with which we defend ourselves against vital illusion – this entire strategy of defence by the principle of reality – acts as a true emotional shield and becomes unbearable to us.

In all those forms of disavowal, denial, *dénégation* (in the sense of the German *Verleugnung*, not *Verneinung*), we are no longer confronted with a dialectics of negativity or with the work of the negative. This move no longer concerns notions of ultimate purpose, or of contradiction, as in simple negative critique; it has to do with reality *as such*, its principle and its hard evidentiality. The larger the space taken by positivity, the more likely it is that denial – possibly even silent – will turn violent. We are all dissenters of reality today, clandestine dissenters most of the time. When there is no possibility of exchange between thought and reality, immediate denial becomes the only way to think reality.

Negativity used to correspond to plain positivity, or critical reality, that had not yet crossed over to the other side of the mirror. When positivity turns out to be absolute, denial becomes radical. Every option of dialectical negativity has been absorbed and liquidated. The limiting case of that ultimate reaction to the fundamentalism of reality is absolute denial (i.e. *négationnisme*, as we speak of "denying" the Holocaust). Think about it: it is the virtual itself that is *négationniste*. It is the virtual that takes away the substance of the real, setting it off balance. We are living in a society of *négationnisme* by virtue of its virtuality. Disbelief reigns everywhere. No event is perceived as "real" anymore. Criminal attempts, trials, wars, corruption, opinion polls: all of that is either falsified or undecidable. State power and its institutions are the first victims of the disgrace of the principle of reality. Hence the moral urgency, in the face of rampant *négationnisme*, of recovering the "citizen's viewpoint," taking one's stand *for* reality, against the frailty of all information. The mirror of information has been broken. The mirror of historical time has been broken. This is why it has become possible to negate the existence of the Shoah, together with the rest (the Pentagon crash, man landing on the moon). The reign of the virtual is also the reign of the principle of uncertainty. It is the inevitable counterpart of a reality turned unreal by excess of positivity.

Will this last forever? Are we doomed to remain captives of this transfer of the real into total positivity, and of its no less ponderous counter-transfer shift toward pure and simple negativity?

Against total absorption, against extinction of the sign and its representation, we have said it was imperative to save difference, all differences. In particular, to save the distinction between the world-as-is and the real world. Whereas everything pushes us toward the virtual realization of the world, we need instead to wrench the real out of its reality principle. In fact, it is this very confusion that prevents us from seeing the world-as-is. In the words of Italo Svevo: "the search for causes is an immense misunderstanding, a clinging superstition, preventing things and events from coming into being as they are". Namely: in their singularity. The real world belongs to the order of generality, the world-as-is to singularity. To repeat: not only is it a world of difference, it is one of absolute, radical difference, more different

than difference, at the remotest distance from that sort of fusion /confusion.

Toward literalness.

Consider the literalness of the image.

The image is not related to the truth. It is related to appearances. Hence its magical affiliation with the illusion of the world-as-is – an affiliation which reminds us that, whatever its content, the real (like the worst) is never a certainty and that, perhaps the world may do without the real and the principle of reality.

I believe that images affect us immediately, well ahead of, at an infra-level to representation, at the level of intuition, of perception. In that sense, an image is always absolutely surprising. Or at least it should be so. Sadly, because of that, we can say that images are scarce. The force of images, most of the time, is cut off, deflected, intercepted by everything we want them to say for us.

So you can see there is a blur in the real. Reality is not focused. The world-as-is cannot be brought into focus (which makes it very different from the real world). Bringing the world into focus would refer to objective reality, so-called reality on the side of the objects, that is to say bringing it into focus on models of representation – as it happens when we bring the lens of the camera into focus on the object, aiming for absolute precision of the image. Fortunately, this definitive level of precision is never achieved. Full control through verification and identification of the world cannot be achieved. The lens displaces the object. Or the other way around. In any case, there is displacement.

There is an aphorism by Lichtenberg that speaks of "tremor." Indeed, all gestures, including the most assured, begin with a tremor, like a fuzziness of motion. And there is always a trace of it left behind. Without that tremor, that fuzziness, when a gesture is purely procedural, when it is brought into perfect focus, we have something of the order of madness. So, genuine images are those which attest that tremor of the world, whatever the situation or the object: pictures of war, still-life compositions, landscape, portrait, art, and documentary.

At this point, the image is something that belongs to the world, it is a part of its becoming, it participates in the metamorphosis of appearances. The image is a fragment of the hologram of the world. Every

detail of it is a refraction of the whole. A nice metaphor for this is found in the movie entitled *L'étudiant de Prague*. After selling his image to the Devil, he breaks up the mirror of representation (that is his lost image). Only then does he find his genuine image, in the shards of the mirror – and he dies.

The purpose of a photograph is not to document the event. It aspires to be the event itself. Logic will claim that, first, there is the event, first comes the real, then only will the image appear, to document it. Sadly, this is what happens most of the time. A more poetic sequence intends that the event has never taken place in an absolute sense, that it remains in some way a stranger to itself. Something of this strangerness survives in every event, in every object, probably in every individual. This is what the image must account for, or "develop" so to speak, and for this to be developed, the image itself must remain, in some way, a stranger to itself. It ought not to reflect itself as medium; it must not take itself for an image. It ought to remain a fiction, an echo of the irresolvable fiction of the event. The image must not be caught in its own trap; nor should it let itself be trapped by the feedback loop.

The worst part for us today is the impossibility of seeing a world without feedback – so as not to have it recaptured, raptured, filmed, photographed, before we can even see it. That is lethal not only for the "real" world, but for the image itself, since, if everything is an image, the image is nowhere, at least as an exception, an illusion, a parallel universe. In the visual flow of events in which we find ourselves submerged, the image itself does not even have the time to become an image.

Can photography be an exception in the face of that outpouring of images, can it restore them to their initial power? To do so, the clatter of the world must be suspended; the object must be grasped at the only moment of true magic, the first contact, when things have not yet sensed our presence, when absence and vacuum have not yet evaporated …. In fact, it is necessary for the world itself to act out the role of the photographer – as if it had the possibility to appear to us outside ourselves.

I dream of an image that would be the automatic writing of the singularity of the world – after the Iconoclastic dream of Byzantium.

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The Iconoclasts held that the only genuine images were those in which the divine figure was immediately present – as in the veil of the Holy Face – an automatic writing of the singularity of the divinity, of the face of Christ, without any interference from the human hand. I have a dream of an immediate calque, like the reverse image of the negative in photography. The Iconoclasts rejected violently all other images, human-made icons that, according to them, were mere *simulacra* of the divine, *acheiropoiesis* (etymologically: *not* fabricated by a human hand).

Similarly, we, modern iconoclasts, might reject all those images that are mere *simulacra* resembling the real, or an idea, an ideology, whichever truth. Most images are of that type, but virtual images even more so. They resemble nothing.

This is exactly it. What is *cheiropoietic*? What is *acheiropoietic*?

Isn't the *act* of photography in this sense properly *acheiropoietic*? Automatic writing by virtue of light, without interference from the real or the idea of the real? Such automaticity would make photography the prototype of the literalness of a world from which the human hand has disappeared. The world as self-generator, radical illusion, pure trace, with no simulation, no human interference, above all without truth. If there is a product *par excellence* of the human mind, a *cheiropoietic* product, it has got to be the truth, objective reality.

Have we not had, ever since the beginning, the profound fantasy of a world functioning without us? The poetic temptation to see the world in our absence, exempt of all human intervention, the all too human willpower? What is so immensely pleasurable in poetic language, in *le mot d'esprit*, is to see language operate by itself, in its materiality, its literalness, without being mindful of meaning. This is what fascinates us so much. The same thing goes for anagrams, anamorphosis, the "figure hidden in the carpet." Does not photography also operate as a means of revelation in both senses of the word in French – it develops, technically; and it reveals, metaphysically – "the figure in the carpet"?

Italo Calvino wrote: "The lesson of a myth is in the literalness of its narrative. Every interpretation impoverishes the myth and strangles it. Better to meditate on each detail patiently, never abandoning its figurative language."

Even dreams, in their psychoanalytic versions, lose their literal character. They fall prey to meaning and interpretation. Dreams, however, like myths, are cunning. They contest, like language in general, what we want them to signify. There is a cunning of literalness that goes against analytic exegesis and that resuscitates ever so subtly (is this not the secret of literacy?) the world-as-is, a world which is, literally speaking, *only* what it is.

These are the stakes nowadays. We are being faced with a new fundamentalism, a genuine fanaticism that, with the help of all the data provided by all the technologies, is taking us further and further from the literal and material world, further and further from a truly *literal* world, off toward a world technically "real."