

New Stationary States

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Abstract

In what follows, I will suggest something not new and startling, so much as hidden in plain sight: that there is no reason to believe that digital publishing will be any less resource-intensive than what preceded it, or that the tendency of modern research to what Heidegger called “the industrious activity of mere busyness,” and Harold Innis “the expenditure of subsidies for the multiplication of facts,” will be any more sustainable in digital media than it was in print — either ecologically *or* as a cultural assertion of civilizational modernity as *fait accompli*. With masters that cannot be pleased, and little left to lose, I suggest, we might as well insist on the long-durational productivity of *waiting* for our work. But this need not entail what the historian Arthur Herman, in *The Idea of Decline in Western History*, superciliously names “cultural pessimism.” One model for such professional literary and cultural-critical temporization, in the new stationary states to come, might be found in a now widely proposed, if nowhere enacted reevaluation of the essay and of a certain *essayism*; another is ongoing professional second language acquisition, on the model of Marjorie Perloff’s proposed language initiatives for faculty members.

In that altogether too famous essay often described as his “essay on the memex,” Vannevar Bush observed that “[i]f the aggregate time spent in writing scholarly works and in reading them could be evaluated, the ratio between these amounts of time might well be startling.”¹ Noting a “mountain of research” now growing faster and out of all proportion to scholars’ ability to collectively absorb what they collectively produce, Bush described the knowledge worker “staggered by the findings and conclusions of thousands of other workers — conclusions which he cannot find time to grasp, much less to remember, as they appear.” “Yet specialization,” Bush continued, in a characteristically terse expression of what we might call the antinomy of the technocratic imperative, “becomes increasingly necessary for progress, and the effort to bridge between disciplines is correspondingly superficial.”

The problem of finding human time to read, and thus determine a human use for what mechanically extended researchers can produce, has been with us in the United States for a long time, and longer elsewhere. Its roots certainly lie in the long American nineteenth century, with industrial revolution, manifest destiny, and mechanized civil war. But in the form in which it affects us most acutely, in 2011, the *temporization* of research might be said to derive from the scale of science applied in the second great war of the twentieth century, the one that generated the episteme indexed by Harold Innis's apothegm "The *interest* in post-war problems is the post-war problem."²

In his author's foreword to *Giles Goat-Boy*, the novel he began while teaching at Pennsylvania State University in the late '50s and early '60s, John Barth described an "epidemic of academic gigantism" beginning with that war and multiplied by the Sputnik launch, in "a massive effort to 'catch up,' fueled by an inpouring of federal money that would fertilize the groves of Academe right through the Sixties."³ By most accounts, the literary humanities in the U.S. came comparatively late and gradually to this hyperproduction party. But it is unquestionable that the late-blooming and sometimes necessarily "silent" work of cumulative human wisdom has been nothing less than thoroughly colonized, now, by the disjunctive form of the scientific breakthrough noisily achieved in relative youth.⁴ Indeed, we might well describe our chronic overproduction of research monographs, today, in their displacement of the critical essays of yore, as a refraction of that oblique appropriation of technoscience, through which a discipline practically weakened by the war relinquished the only advantage it retained over its triumphant rival: the not at all useless, and not at all publicly scorned *normativity of critical vision* in a universe of amorally mechanized research.

To the extent that a newly arrived and thoroughly wonkish new or digital media studies is today the latest and greatest white humanist hope for salvation through grant funding and facility in technical administration, it might prompt us to consider, once again, the tragedy of Marshall McLuhan, a writer and thinker I admire and take seriously, against the grain of the dominant cultures of literary humanism and antihumanism even today. By “the tragedy of McLuhan” I mean not so much McLuhan’s steadfast and extreme refusal of proper academic discipline for satire and self-satire, in what his most sensitive reader, Glenn Willmott, has called “symbolic self-sacrifice to the problem of the critic itself.”⁵ I mean rather McLuhan’s embrace of discipline at its absolutely most typical extreme, in the hyperexpansive hyperactivity with which McLuhan the English professor traveled the knowable world seeking to expand it to his own dimension: a denial of finitude producing interlocking epistemic and corporeal consequences. Postwar literary studies’ first and greatest media guru would die of elected overwork, expiring before the age of seventy, disabled by stress- and travel-aggravated congestive heart failure, stroke, and at the very end, the horrifyingly overdetermined torture of total aphasia, a punishment worse than death for a graphomaniac and a great conversationalist.

That the University of Toronto shuttered McLuhan’s Centre for Culture and Technology before the guru was even in his grave might prompt us to consider a warning of Norbert Wiener, who, unlike McLuhan, was a genuine technocrat at the genuine center of the postwar new world order: that “We must value leisure.” (This is from Wiener’s essay “Men, Machines, and the World About”; again, Wiener’s statement is: “We must value leisure.”) Delivered along with a warning that the new postwar order was “going to be a difficult time,” and that the new applied scientists may well “deserve the punishment of idolators,” Wiener’s determinedly alarmist

lament concludes with the suggestion that “the medieval attitude is the attitude of the fairy tale in many things, but the attitude of the fairy tale is very wise in many things that are relevant to modern life.”⁶ A sympathetic critical reader of McLuhan who is also a reader of human life in modern human social institutions might have a hard time resisting the thought that McLuhan, reflecting at the end on all he had done that was worthwhile, must have sensed also that much of it simply had *not needed to be done*, in a world that really was historically prone to involution. By involution I mean “implosion,” as McLuhan imagined it, in that strain of his work most deeply derived from Innis: not the euphoric global village, but the heat-death of the Western empires, an entirely earthly and sensible challenge to Euro-Atlantic modernity conceived productivistically as an irreversible *fait accompli*.

The time has come, we might say, for new media critical *anachronies* addressed, from the technocratic horizon of the imminent (and immanent) death of humanist print, to the still more remote and both “human” and post-human extinction of the digital, itself. To ask, in all honest curiosity, what the extinction of the digital would “look like” is of course to demand a picture of the unimaginable. Naturally, I do not mean something like “molecular computing” as applied science, further advancing the saturation of the lifeworld by a mechanistic ontology ever so strenuously qualified and disavowed by its operators as such. Rather, I mean something like “history’s disquiet,” as Harry Harootunian so elegantly imagined it, in time’s revenge on even the study of time itself.⁷ Harootunian traces the traces of a catastrophic actuality of everyday life reducing all our “modernological” labors to naught. It is a complicated and subtle way of marking the loss of the scholarly imperium of research through which that modernity maintained

and maintains itself, today, as academic capitalism⁸ facing off against the “recognition that nothing lasts.”⁹

Nothing. Not the reduction of all human conflict to the soluble dimensions of technical problems, as Joseph Weizenbaum saw it, warning us that “there are some acts of thought that *ought* to be attempted only by humans.”¹⁰ Not the remodeling of critical inquiry, itself, as measured output, in the pervasive culturalization of computation that now almost entirely circumscribes contemporary academic intellectual life.¹¹ I am saying that we may as well *look ahead*, since there is no pleasing our masters, who will make every new level of productivity achieved a standard, until we have collectively gone mad — or are dead — and for whom the freedoms we imagine for digital scholarship are in the end perhaps merely productive efficiencies. (I was entirely serious, earlier, in invoking the personal consequences for McLuhan of discarding Auden’s injunction [in “Under Which Lyre”] “Thou shalt not worship projects.”)

To be sure, like any force of creative destruction, new media of publication stand to level the literary-humanist field of scholarly production in any number of obviously salutary ways: ways that I myself, as someone who has always pursued problems (or problematics) rather than topics, particularly welcome. The stranglehold on scholarship of a print economy of artificially scarce resources (in digital media studies itself, no less than in traditional print studies) needs to be broken. And in fact a collective fixation on “quality control,” invoked to justify the competitive suppression of publication in literary and cultural studies — “mistakes” made in which never in fact endanger human life, or any other common good — seems finally to be facing meaningful challenge, today. Meanwhile, proposals to reverse the order of the process of peer review, beginning with publication and concluding with evaluation, are now part of the administrative

mainstream in non-humanities disciplines, and model collective work-flows approximating this reversed order of priority and labor already exist.¹²

And yet, there is simply no reason to believe that an “entirely” digital publishing infrastructure will consume any less energy than its mechanical or mixed mechanical and digital antecedents. (As long as writing, publishing, and reading tools still comprise manufactured materials, of course, such an infrastructure cannot be “entirely,” or even mostly, digital.) Nor is there any reason to believe that the tendency of modern research to what Heidegger called “the industrious activity of mere busyness,”¹³ and Innis “the expenditure of subsidies for the multiplication of facts,” will be any more sustainable in digital media than it was in print — either ecologically *or* as a cultural assertion of civilizational modernity as *fait accompli*.¹⁴ Raised to the next level, then, the question of ecological sustainability, for the paper-print culture of our work, is the question of the sustainability of the current level of scholarly production, itself, and of the *productivism* that is its principal driver, irrespective of medium. To the extent that already, in the highly leveraged current system, we scholars are collectively constrained to write much more than we can possibly read, we might well ask ourselves whether what Mike Davis called “the bubble world of American consumerism, as it existed [...] in 2007,” can ever be restored — or whether “protracted stagnation, not timely technology-led recovery, seems the most realistic scenario.”¹⁵ (Those are Davis’s words.)

Echoing Davis, Gopal Balakrishnan speculates that the historical vitality of capitalism “has depended on a demographic youthfulness [...] unsustainable over the long term,” with the ecological impasse of the historical present “likely to be the most absolute of all.”¹⁶ How, then, might the “stationary state” of secular stagnation to which Davis and Balakrishnan point, as

“our” future, bear on its reflection in the material conditions of production of our *knowledge of that state*, itself? The consequences, for the default modality of academic critical modernism, today, are clear: if the “stationary state” is symbologically not the old world of paper, progressively superseded by the new digital media and their administration, but a static world in which new media cannot save capitalism any more than China, India, Brazil, or Turkey can, then when we speak of the “sustainability” of the current system, we perhaps mean not sustained forward momentum, in growth as constant and violent change, but little more than keeping things from getting any worse.

What would it mean for the new digital humanists to integrate an account of the eco-systemic impact of computing into their work? When in 2009 Alexander Wissner-Gross, a Harvard-trained physicist running a startup measuring Web sites’ carbon footprints, opined in *The Times* (UK) that “each Google search generates an estimated 5-10 grams of carbon dioxide,” he found himself swarmed by Google’s vast immune system, producing an Internet news “meme” that eventually branched into publicity for Google’s, Yahoo’s, Amazon’s, and Microsoft’s plans to fuel green server farms with wind turbines and methane from cow manure harvested from dairy farms.¹⁷ It is hardly controversial to point to the administration and monetization of conservation itself, in green industry, as an either mindless or entirely strategic check on ecological activists’ goals. Facing the tendentious and relentless dialecticalization of the temporization of *waiting* before the Next, we might say that what we need, now, is a truly regulative ideal, in the non-concept of zero: a cognitive oblivion or knowledge-death as terminus of scholarly hyperspeed, like the ideal of corporeal death that scares us off “fast food.”

If the opportunistic critique of “useless” humanities research now emerging from the academic center-right¹⁸ has but one virtue, it is to focus attention from the inside on the productive automatism of mere busyness, which Heidegger told us “must, at all times, be resisted,” if we wish to save modern research from itself.¹⁹ It is not in fact limitless opportunity, but only a radical circumscription, in the creation of limited, rule-governed model worlds, that enables and sustains such mere busyness. Heidegger noted the integral role of the publishing industry in disseminating, mimicking, and in its own way driving this “worlding” conversion of problems to results, through *limited* publication: narrowing the publishable world through forward projection as the construction of change.²⁰ And it is thanks to that ongoing construction of gratuitous, gratuitously incessant, and incessantly violent change, in capitalism’s circumscribing “creative destruction,” that the permanence of the progressive civilizational legacy of Euro-Atlantic modernity is a question, rather than an answer, for more core subjects of the United States empire, today, than at any time since the 1970s. Viewed in this light, the salvation of the humanities, in what remains of the United States public eye, at this historical moment, might well lie not in still more strenuously friendly, unpersuasive, and unreciprocated approaches to technoscience, but rather in setting a moral example by purposefully *refusing to grow*. What will it take, I am asking, to recognize *time*, not print *or* digital media, as the medium of research — in so far as time itself brings all worldly striving to extinction?

I insist that the structural irony of posing this question, as someone obviously personally *and* structurally committed to life in and the life *of* what we call institutions, is not simply a contradiction. With masters that cannot be pleased, and little left to lose, now, we might as well insist on the long-durational productivity of *waiting* for our work. One model for such

professional literary and cultural-critical *temporization*, in the “new stationary states” to come, might be found in a now widely proposed, if nowhere actually enacted “reevaluation of the essay” and of a certain essayism²¹ against a fetishization of rigor as bulk, rather than depth of thought. But let me close with a vision of another kind of productive activity that perhaps looks (but only looks), in the institutional optic, something like “doing nothing.”

For McLuhan, a medium was very much like a language: a fully rounded and local “world,” at once limiting, determining, immersive, and profoundly educative in its partial or complete incommensurability with many diachronically historical and synchronically contemporaneous others. How might it have turned out for McLuhan, one has to wonder, if rather than demanding the maximum novelty from electronics, he had dedicated himself to something like adult second language acquisition? I mean language acquisition as a *practice*, the everyday practice not of a student, but of the fully trained and mature intellectual who rightly believes he has something better to do — and not as a means to an end, in immediately applied professional translation, but rather (or at least first) as a productive “time out” from critical productivity, yielding results only in the personal *longue durée*. (And I mean “second language acquisition” in the conventional sense: acquiring a language other than one’s own first or “native” language or languages. “Second” refers here to temporal order, not number: a third or fourth language can be a “second” language in this sense, in relation either to a single first language, or one or more first languages.) In the lived time it takes to acquire, a second language stands not, or not only, as instrumental remedy for the literal or critical national-cultural monolingualism endemic, just for example, to “new media studies” itself, as a research field. For its acquisition is also, inevitably

and instructively, a figure for the antinomy or structural contradiction of a primary *experience* of (and of being-in-) mediation.

- 1 Vannevar Bush, "As We May Think." *Atlantic Monthly*. Web. Original publication: Vannevar Bush, "As We May Think," *Atlantic Monthly* 176.1 (July 1945): 101-08. The essay was republished in *Life* following the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. See also "Memex Revisited," in Vannevar Bush, *Science Is Not Enough* (New York: William Morrow, 1967): "We are being buried in our own product" (75).
- 2 Harold Innis, "The Problems of Rehabilitation," in *Political Economy in the Modern State* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1946): 56.
- 3 John Barth, "Foreword to Doubleday Anchor Edition," in *Giles Goat-Boy, or, The Revised New Syllabus* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), v.
- 4 See Lindsay Waters, "Tenure, Publication and the Shape of the Careers of Humanists," *Profession* 2007: 93-99.
- 5 Glenn Willmott, *McLuhan, or Modernism in Reverse* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 207.
- 6 Norbert Wiener, "Men, Machines, and the World About: The Linsly R. Williams Memorial Lecture," in *Medicine and Science: Lectures to the Laity, No. XVI*, New York Academy of Medicine, ed. Iago Galdston (New York: International Universities Press, 1954), 28; Norbert Wiener, "Men, Machines, and the World About," in Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort, eds., *The New Media Reader* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 72.
- 7 Harry Harootunian, *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).
- 8 Harootunian, "Theory's Empire: Reflections on a Vocation for Critical Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 30.2 (Winter 2004), 397.
- 9 Harootunian, *History's Disquiet*, 2.
- 10 Joseph Weizenbaum, *Computer Power and Human Reason: From Judgment to Calculation* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Co., 1976), 13.
- 11 See David Golumbia, *The Cultural Logic of Computation* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009).
- 12 In the form of the open access academic journal *Philica* and the Naborj "dynamical" peer review system for article preprints (in physics, mathematics, computer science, and other science areas) deposited in the arXiv.org repository hosted and operated by Cornell University.
- 13 *Betriebsamkeit des bloßen Betriebs*.
- 14 Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 74; Heidegger, "Die Zeit des Weltbildes," in *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1957), 97; Harold A. Innis, *The Bias of Communication*, second ed. (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 203.
- 15 Mike Davis, "Obama at Manassas," *New Left Review* 56 (March-April 2009): 40.
- 16 Gopal Balakrishnan, "Speculations on the Stationary State," *New Left Review* 59 (2009): 20; 21.
- 17 See Alexander Wissner-Gross, "How you can help reduce the footprint of the Web," *The Times* (UK), January 11, 2009; Jonathan Leake and Richard Woods, "The environmental impact of Google searches," *The Sunday Times* (UK), January 11, 2009, with a clarification added January 16, 2009; "Powering a Google search," The Official Google Blog, January 11, 2009; Jason Kincaid, "How the Times Got Confused about Google and the Tea Kettle," TechCrunch, January 12, 2009; Ben Dowell, "Sunday Times clarifies figures in Google carbon emissions debate," *The Guardian*, January 16, 2010; "One Moos and One Hums, but They Could Help Power Google," *The New York Times*, May 18, 2010; "Google to Use Wind Energy to Power Data Centers," Reuters, July 20, 2010. Kincaid: "An editorial piece Wissner-Gross wrote to accompany the widely-spread 'Tea kettle' article contains the passage 'based on publicly available information, we have calculated that each Google search generates an estimated 5-10 g of CO₂,' which seems to indicate that the statistic came from his research. However, Wissner-Gross denies that he offered the '5-10 g' figure as his own. In the

draft he submitted to the Times, he referred only to ‘publicly available information,’ not to his calculations. [Jonathan] Leake has confirmed that the wording was changed during editing, but insists that Wissner-Gross claimed the statistic as one of his own findings during a phone conversation.”

- 18 See Mark Bauerlein, Mohamed Gad-el-Hak, Wayne Grody, Bill McKelvey, and Stanley W. Trimble, “We Must Stop the Avalanche of Low-Quality Research,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 13, 2010.
- 19 Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture,” 74; Heidegger, “Die Zeit des Weltbildes,” 98: “Constant activity becomes mere busyness when its methodology no longer holds itself open on the basis of an ever new completion of its projection, but rather leaves this behind as something simply given and no longer ever requiring confirmation; instead, all it does is to chase after results piling on top of each other and their calculation. Mere busyness must, at all times, be resisted — precisely because, in its essence, research is constant activity. [...] [T]he more completely research becomes constant activity and in this way becomes fruitful, the more steadily there grows within it the danger of becoming mere busyness. In the end we reach a situation where the difference between constant activity and busyness [*Betrieb und Betrieb*] is not only unrecognizable, but has become unreal.”
- 20 Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture,” 74; Heidegger, “Die Zeit des Weltbildes,” 98: “The growing importance of the publishing business is not merely based on the fact that the publishers (through, for example, the book trade) have a better eye for the needs of the public, or that they understand business better than do authors. Rather, their distinctive work takes the form of a process of planning and organizing aimed, through the planned and limited publication of books and periodicals, at bringing the world into the picture the public has of it and securing it there.”
- 21 See David Damrosch, *We Scholars*; Edward W. Said, “Secular Criticism,” in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 1-30; “The Extension of the Monograph Requirement; Rethinking the Preeminence of the Monograph; Revaluing the Essay,” in *Report of the MLA Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion*, 38-39; Sidonie Smith, “An Agenda for the New Dissertation,” *MLA Newsletter* 42.2 (Summer 2010): 2-3.