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### “The Agenbite of Outwit (1963)”

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With the telegraph Western man began a process of putting his nerves outside his body. Previous technologies had been extensions of physical organs: the wheel is a putting-outside-ourselves of the feet; the city wall is a collective *outring* of the skin. But electronic media are, instead, extensions of the central nervous system, an inclusive and simultaneous field. Since the telegraph we have extended the brains and nerves of man around the globe. As a result, the electronic age endures a total uneasiness, as of a man wearing his skull inside and his brain outside. We have become peculiarly vulnerable. The year of the establishment of the commercial telegraph in America, 1844, was also the year Kierkegaard published *The Concept of Dread*.

A special property of all social extensions of the body is that they return to plague the inventors in a kind of *agenbite of outwit*. As Narcissus fell in love with an outring (projection, extension) of himself, man seems invariably to fall in love with the newest gadget or gimmick that is merely an extension of his own body. Driving a car or watching television, we tend to forget that what we have to do with is simply a part of ourselves stuck *out there*. Thus disposed, we become servo-mechanisms of our contrivances, responding to them in the immediate, mechanical way that they demand of us. The point of the Narcissus myth is not that people are prone to fall in love with their own images but that people fall in love with extensions of themselves which they are convinced are not extensions of themselves. This provides, I think, a fairly good image of all of our technologies, and it directs us towards a basic issue, the idolatry of technology as involving a psychic numbness.

Every generation poised on the edge of a massive change seems, to later observers, to have been oblivious of the issues and the imminent event. But it is necessary to understand the power of technologies to isolate the senses and thus to hypnotize society. The formula for hypnosis is “one sense at a time.” Our *private* senses are not closed systems but are endlessly translated into one another in the synesthetic experience we call consciousness. Our *extended* senses, tools, or technologies, have been closed systems incapable of interplay. Every new technology diminishes sense interplay and awareness for precisely the area ministered to by that technology: a kind of identification of viewer and object occurs. This conforming of the beholder to the new form or structure renders those most deeply immersed in a revolution the least aware of its dynamic. At such times it is felt that the future will be a larger or greatly improved version of the *immediate* past.

The new electronic technology, however, is not a closed system. As an extension of the central nervous system, it deals precisely in awareness, interplay and dialogue. In the electronic age, the very instantaneous nature of the co-existence among our technological instruments has created a crisis quite new in human history. Our extended faculties and senses now constitute a single field of experience which demands that they become collectively conscious, like the central nervous system itself. Fragmentation and specialization, features of mechanism, are absent.

To the extent that we are unaware of the nature of the new electronic forms, we are manipulated by them. Let me offer, as an example of the way in which a new technology can transform institutions and modes of procedure, a bit of testimony by Albert Speer, German armaments minister in 1942, at the Nuremberg trials:

“The telephone, the teleprinter and the wireless made it possible for orders from the highest levels to be given directly to the lowest levels, where, on account of the absolute authority behind them, they were carried out uncritically; or brought it about that

numerous offices and command centers were directly connected with the supreme leadership from which they received their sinister orders without any intermediary; or resulted in the widespread surveillance of the citizen; or in a high degree of secrecy surrounding criminal happenings. To the outside observer this governmental apparatus may have resembled the apparently chaotic confusion of lines at a telephone exchange, but like the latter it could be controlled and operated from one central source. Former dictatorships needed collaborators of high quality even in the lower levels of leadership, men who could think and act independently. In the era of modern technique an authoritarian system can do without this. The means of communication alone permit it to mechanize the work of subordinate leadership. As a consequence a new type develops: the uncritical recipient of orders...”

Television and radio are immense extension of ourselves which enable us to participate in one another's lives, much as a language does. But the modes of participation are already built into the technology; these new languages have their own grammars.

The ways of thinking implanted by electronic culture are very different from those fostered by print culture. Since the Renaissance most methods and procedures have strongly tended towards stress on the visual organization and application of knowledge. The assumptions latent in typographic segmentation manifest themselves in the fragmentation of crafts and the specializing of social tasks. Literacy stresses lineality, a one-thing-at-a-time awareness and mode of procedure. From it derive the assembly line and the order of battle, the managerial hierarchy and the departmentalizations of scholarly decorum. Gutenberg gave us analysis and explosion. By fragmenting the field of perception and information into static bits, we have accomplished wonders.

But electronic media proceed differently. Television, radio and the newspaper (at the point where it was linked with the telegraph) deal in auditory space, by which I mean that sphere of simultaneous relations created by the act of hearing. We hear from all directions at once; this creates a unique, unvisualizable space. The all-at-once-ness of auditory space is the exact opposite of lineality, of taking one thing at a time. It is very confusing to learn that the mosaic of a newspaper page is “auditory” in basic structure. This, however, is only to say that any pattern in which the components co-exist without direct, lineal hook-up or connection, creating a field of simultaneous relations, is auditory, even though some of its aspects can be seen. The items of news and advertising that exist under a newspaper dateline are interrelated only by that dateline. They have no interconnection of logic or statement. Yet they form a mosaic of corporate image whose parts are interpenetrating. Such is also the kind of order that tends to exist in a city or a culture. It is a kind of orchestral, resonating unity, not the unity of logical discourse.

The tribalizing power of the new electronic media, the way in which they return us to the unified fields of the old oral cultures, to tribal cohesion and pre-individualist patterns of thought, is little understood. Tribalism is the sense of the deep bond of family, the closed society as the norm of community. Literacy, the visual technology, dissolved the tribal magic by means of its stress on fragmentation and specialization, and created the individual. The electronic media, however, are group forms. Post-literate man's electronic media contract the world to a tribe or village where everything happens to everyone at the same time: everyone knows about, and therefore participates in, everything that is happening the moment it happens. Because we do not understand these things, because of the numbing power of the technology itself, we are helpless while undergoing a revolution in our North American sense-lives, via the television image. It is a change comparable to that experienced by Europeans in the twenties and thirties, when the new radio image reconstituted overnight the tribal character long absent from European life. Our extremely visual world had immunity from the radio image, but not from the scanning finger of the TV mosaic.

It would be hard to imagine a state of confusion greater than our own. Literacy gave us an eye for an ear and succeeded in detribalizing that portion of mankind that we refer to as the Western world. We are now engaged in an accelerated program of detribalization of all backward parts of the world by introducing there our own ancient print technology at the same time that we are engaged in retribalizing ourselves by means of the new electronic technology. It is like becoming conscious of the unconscious, and of consciously promoting unconscious values by an ever clearer consciousness.

When we put our central nervous system outside us we returned to the primal nomadic state. We have become like the most primitive paleolithic man, once more global wanderers, but information gatherers rather than food gatherers. From now on the source of food, wealth and life itself will be information. The transforming of this information into products is now a problem for the automation experts, no longer a matter for the utmost division of human labour and skill. Automation, as we all know, dispenses with personnel. This terrifies mechanical man because he does not know what to do about the transition, but it simply means that work is finished, over and done with. The concept of work is closely allied to that of specialization, of special functions and non-involvement; before specialization there was no work. Man in the future will not work, automation will work for him, but he may be totally involved as a painter is, or as a thinker is, or as a poet is. Man works when he is partially involved. When he is totally involved, he is at play or at leisure.

Man in the electronic age has no possible environment except the globe and no possible occupation except information-gathering. By simply moving information and brushing information against information, any medium whatever creates vast wealth. The richest corporation in the world — Atlantic Telephone and Telegraph—has only one function: moving information about. Simply by talking to one another, we create wealth. Any child watching a TV show should be paid because he or she is creating wealth for the community. But this wealth is not money. Money is obsolete because it stores work (and work, and jobs, are themselves obsolete, as we see daily). In a workless, non-specialist society, money is useless. What we need is a credit card, which is information.

When new technologies impose themselves on societies long habituated to older technologies, anxieties of all kinds result. Our electronic world now calls for a unified field of global awareness; the kind of private consciousness appropriate to literate man can be viewed as an unbearable kink in the collective consciousness demanded by electronic information movement. In this impasse, suspension of all automatic reflexes would seem to be in order. I believe that artists, in all media, respond soonest to the challenges of new pressures. I would like to suggest that they also show us ways of living with new technology without destroying earlier forms and achievements. The new media, too, are not toys; they should not be in the hands of Mother Goose and Peter Pan executives. They can be entrusted only to new artists.