Much ink has been spilled on the political economy versus cultural studies divide in communication studies. Many urgent, indeed passionate, calls to bridge this divide have been issued by authoritative voices in authoritative forums. Few scholars, however, have been able to bridge this divide more adeptly, more constructively, and more substantively than Professor Vincent Mosco, an internationally renowned communication scholar and currently Canada Research Chair in Communication and Society in the Department of Sociology at Queen's University.

Digital Sublime: Myth, Power, and Cyberspace was conceived and presented as a sequel to Mosco's influential 1996 book, The Political Economy of Communication. "That book," as Mosco writes at the beginning of The Digital Sublime (p. 6), "took political economy as a starting or entry point and built a bridge to the cultural analysis of communication. This one begins with culture, particularly as manifested in mythology, and builds a bridge to political economy." In the first book, Mosco systematically interrogated political economic theory, demonstrated how the political economic processes of commodification, spatialization, and structuration provide fruitful entry points for understanding social communication, and concluded with a chapter that documented the mutually constitutive relationship between political economy and cultural studies and called for a research program that integrates political economic and cultural analysis. Mosco fulfills this paradigmatic research agenda with this new book. In The Digital Sublime, he undertakes an intellectual journey in the reverse direction, taking a central dimension and process of culture—myth and mythmaking—as the entry point of analysis and ending with an astute political economic analysis. Taken together, these two books effectively illustrate how a holistic and yet non-essentialist scholarship, in which political economic and cultural forces are seen as mutually constitutive of social reality, can produce a powerful perspective on communication and social analysis.

While the theoretical and disciplinary contribution of The Digital Sublime is highly significant, the substantive dimension of the book is perhaps even more important. The cultural myths that Mosco analyzes are not just any myths, but the epoch-defining myths of our time: the myths of cyberspace and, in association with them, myths about the end of history, geography, and politics. In broader terms, Mosco's analysis confronts the paradigmatic myths of post-industrial society, the information age, neo-liberalism, and globalization. Ultimately, the political economic ground where Mosco's intellectual journey lands at the end of the book is "Ground Zero"—the site of the attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Center, the icons of post-industrialism and of a global center for communication, information, and trade. All of this is set in the sober economic realities surrounding the demise of the "New Economy," especially as symbolized in the collapse of the telecommunication industry and the burst of the Internet stock bubble. The discussion is also contextualized in relation to the history of mythmaking surrounding previous information and communication technologies. Substantiated by Mosco's superb command of a vast range of academic and empirical evidence, including an impressive invocation of cultural sources ranging from ancient myths to Dante's Divine Comedy to Hollywood's The Matrix, this is an erudite, engagingly written, and elegant book of captivating analytical power, profound intellectual depth, and extraordinary topical relevance.

Most admirably, Mosco accomplished his objectives in a book of modest size: six tightly organized chapters totalling 218 pages. Following a brief introduction that sets the broad theoretical and thematic contexts for the book, chapter 2 analyzes the key dimensions of mythmaking in relation to cyberspace and reveals the mutually constitutive relationship between myth and power. The core of the chapter is an overarching critique of the myth-
making process as sustained by leading mythmakers from the academic, political, and business worlds and powerful political economic and cultural institutions. Chapter 3 examines the connection between myths of cyberspace and the myth of “the end of history.” Here, Mosco not only offers a fruitful exposition of the contrasting writings of Francis Fukuyama and Daniel Bell, but also takes the reader on a fascinating ride into intellectual territories occupied by cyber-prophets such as Nicholas Negroponte, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and Ray Kurzweil. Chapter 4 follows up with deconstruction of the related myths of “the end of geography” and “the end of politics”—in short, the widely circulated claims that new communication technologies are not only transcending physical spaces, but also undermining the boundaries that mark social divisions and transforming politics by flattening unequal power relations and bringing power closer to the people.

After having taken the reader on a ride into the intellectual landscape of the various cyberspace myths, chapter 5 offers a powerful lesson in history. Through a concise and sometimes ironic examination of popular and intellectual responses to previous technologies such as the telephone, electricity, telegraph, radio, and television, Mosco not only demonstrates that our current myths about computer technology are not new, but also documents “our remarkable, almost willful, historical amnesia” (p. 8). Chapter 6 is no doubt the climax of the book. In this chapter, Mosco literally grounds the myths of cyberspace at “Ground Zero,” providing powerful accounts of both the political economic origins of post-industrialism and the political economy of computer communication. At the same time, he also fruitfully employs cultural analysis’s methodological insight of foregrounding the local by documenting historical and contemporary struggles over the Ground Zero site in lower Manhattan, New York. As Mosco (p. 141) puts it, “History, geography, and politics returned with a vengeance” in the post-9/11 world.

Throughout the book, Mosco adeptly demonstrates the value of seeing the world vigilantly with both eyes—the eyes of political economic and cultural analysis. Yet this is not the whole message of the book. Mosco underscores this in his retelling of a Norse myth in which the protagonist plucks out one of his own eyes in exchange for “The Secret of Life” from the god Thor, only to learn from Thor that “The Secret of Life” is to see vigilantly with both eyes. As Mosco concludes, the secret of life is thus first and foremost not a thing, but a process, like the act of seeing. Mosco’s act of seeing computer communication vigilantly through both the lenses of political economy and cultural analysis, then, must itself be seen as an important intellectual intervention in the ongoing political and cultural struggles over cyberspace and, in a broader sense, the struggle over humanity’s collective future. As Mosco reminds us, “[M]yths can foreclose politics, can serve to depoliticize speech, but they can also open the door to a restoration of politics, to a deepening of political understanding” (p. 16).

The future, digital or not, is uncertain, and Mosco (pp. 183-184) concludes the book with an insight from Salman Rushdie:

After the dotcom bubble burst, who trusts Bill Gates to point out the road ahead? But once again, it is easy to debunk the myth … it is more difficult, but more important, to accept Rushdie’s conclusion … ‘In the end, ceasing to be children, we all become magicians without magic, exposed conjurers, with only our simple humanity to get us through.’

Cutting across the twin lenses of political economic and cultural analysis of the magic of technology and also through the power relations embedded in the myths and realities of technology, then, is the process of social struggle in our capacity as constituent elements of “our simple humanity.” This analysis is rendered all the more powerful and poignant by Mosco’s conscious location of himself in the narrative, writing in the book’s acknowledgments that chapter 6 began, in a sense, nearly 50 years ago, when his father would take him and his brother for Sunday walks to Battery Park through what would later become the site
of the World Trade Center, and that his own cousin died while working as an electrician in
the south tower of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. This elegant and moving
book is essential reading not only for every scholar in communication and cultural analysis,
but also for every human being who struggles to make a living and make sense of our so-
called information age.

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