
No Time is Heather Menzies’ fourth book probing changes induced by new, globalizing media of communication. It is also her best. Menzies is an admirer of Canadian media scholars Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan. Both were critical of the modern age and both fretted over the impact of emerging media on the pace and nature of social interaction. With Innis, Menzies shares concern that present-mindedness and instantaneity are replacing a sense of duration and continuity as well as concern about the demise of the locale in the face of commercial empire. With McLuhan she shares concerns regarding media’s impact on perception and consciousness, claiming in fact that we are in the process of losing touch with material reality, so absorbed have we become by symbols in the form of electronic bits. Essentially, Menzies updates and extends Innis and McLuhan for a digital era.

Menzies, however, does more than this. She not merely theorizes; she grounds her speculations and criticisms in day-to-day conversations and observations. She recounts, for instance, meetings with her long time-friend and university professor, Jody Berland, who for years has suffered from chronic fatigue. She travels the 401 with a stressed trucker. She recounts dreams and episodes in the raising of her child. She interviews such notables as Somer Brodribb, Arthur Kroeker, and David Suzuki. She reflects on her own life, her workaholism, and her penchant for multi-tasking. It is essential that she do all this as antidote, her main thesis being that new and emerging electronic media (cellphones, e-mail, Internet) as well as longer established modes of electronic communication cause us to lose touch with one another, with our own bodies, and with material reality: “There’s this other pseudo reality around us,” she writes, “an invisible virtual or hyper reality composed of symbols standing in for lived, embodied experience yet totally cut away from it and floating free above it” (pp. 5-6). This other environment is fast and fleeting, and in it everything is fungible. And, it produces psychic and social consequences, according to Menzies in three distinct ways: “through scale (global versus local), pace (instant, lightning speed versus face-to-face rhythms and continuities) and pattern (asynchronous hypermedia and multitasking versus organic wholes)” (p. 40).

The consequences of exclusively or predominantly inhabiting the digital environment for Menzies are severe: devastation of the material environment; the rise in attention deficit disorder; the lapse of leisure; superficiality of understanding; heightening apathy, dissociation, passivity, and indifference; increased stress.

At the root of the problem, Menzies claims, is our penchant for abstraction. Actually, she writes, hyper reality and abstractions began centuries ago. At one time, an inch was the width of the measurer’s thumb (pouce means both thumb and inch in French), and a foot was the length of the measurer’s bodily appendage, meaning that measurement was inseparable from the context in which it was made. Standardization of weights and measures not only did away with the idiosyncratic, but dispensed with the lived context as well. A similar process concerned clock time replacing organic time, and the setting of time zones. Likewise in manufacturing: the division of labour, so celebrated in the eighteenth century by Adam Smith, entailed workers losing sight of complete production processes and being governed instead by abstract performance indicators. Digitization of media, according to Menzies, is therefore but the latest in a long chain of developments giving precedence to abstractions over lived experience. But digitization, she believes, accelerates and magnifies the fragmentation and abstraction enormously. She writes

We’re [often] engaged in a realm of pure representation—ready-made icons and modules of standardized symbols that, being symbols only, don’t permit any deeper level of involvement. . . . This hyperworld is a parallel universe that exists on-line, and only
there. Yet it has taken on the aura, and the authority, of reality as it spins into its own orbit, increasingly cut off from real life in all its challenging complexity. (pp. 42-43).

Menzies specifies some of the costs. One is the depersonalization of human relations: “Everyone has a name tag but they might as well be nameless. All that matters is meeting the specifications” (p. 33). The banality of drive-by shootings, one suspects, is but one, albeit an extreme, outcome of the general devaluation of human life inherent to the depersonalization and abstraction of human relations in modern modes of production.

A second detriment, Menzies believes, is the rise in ADD (attention deficit disorder). Harried parents in the digital age spend little quality time with their children, and some associate this parenting lapse with the rise of ADD. Menzies confesses that in her own pressure cooker of multi-tasking, she too can suffer from attention deficit: “I’m still here—my finger on the keyboard, my eye on the screen—but my attention is so scattered that my perception is trivialized” (p. 91).

A third casualty in the digital age is the environment. Concluding her interview with Suzuki, she reflects: “We love nature abstracted from the warp and weave of life in which all living reality is embedded, including ourselves. And the more we experience it that way, as a symbol to be possessed and consumed, the more we can trample the real nature to death. . . . We go with the flow of signs and symbols, oblivious to the fact that in the real world . . . so much is being turned into a desert or dying” (pp. 118-119).

Yet another concern is the waning of democracy. Reliance on specs and performance indicators necessitates reliance on experts, bureaucrats, and technicians; important decisions come to be based on abstractions, not on lived sensory inputs, and hence decision-making tends to be far removed from democratic life. As Menzies offers, for instance: “There is little discussion of technology as social practices that can become rigid systems, imposing compliance; there is also little sense of technology as environment, a second nature with the power to condition adaptation, at least to some degree” (pp. 242-243).

It is in the context of democracy and technology that Menzies reviews the Walkerton tragedy, and it is useful to spend some time on this, for this case study displays a certain inconsistency in her argument. On the one hand, Menzies intimates, the tragedy is attributable to Mike Harris’ Common Sense Revolution, which entailed among other things slashing 900 jobs in the Ministry of the Environment, including 42% of the staff monitoring drinking water (p. 204). On the other, it was also a consequence of Stan Koebel, general manager of the Walkerton Public Utilities Commission, for whom his own sensory experience was more important than abstract data: “Stan Koebel didn’t understand the significance of the knowledge that was lying on his desk. . . . He didn’t really understand the biochemistry involved in clean drinking water. If it still looked okay and smelled okay and tasted okay, that was good enough for him” (p. 219). Here is an instance, it would appear, in which abstract data is to be much preferred to sensory input and lived experience. Examples can be multiplied.

Harold Innis made a plea for balance: a balance of time as duration and continuity versus time as measured by the clock and the accompanying concern for the present; also a balance between space as local, and sacred versus space as geographic extension and as so much real estate. To be sure, Innis not only pleaded for balance, he also made “a plea for time” as duration, so far had the pendulum swung in the opposite direction. But that is not to deny his insistence on balance; assuredly he was no advocate of time-bound hierarchy and stagnancy. In her book Menzies implicitly takes up Innis’ plea for time, but if I had any criticism it would be that she omits balance—the benefits of the other side of the dialectic.

That having been said, No Time is a richly provocative and rewarding book of critical synthesis, bringing together many literatures and personal observations to make a case that
is too seldom heard in our era of information speed-up and simulations. We must indeed try to recapture the other side of the dialectic of time.

Robert Babe  
University of Western Ontario